

Dorothy Crook, 2007

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Interview of Dorothy Crook. Interviewed by Francesca Davis & Joshua Jeffries, of The Crossroads to Freedom Project, Rhodes College.

Ms. Dorothy Crook is currently the Director of AFSCME Local 1733, the Memphis chapter of the nationally known labor union. She began working with the Memphis chapter in 1969, the year after the Dr. King was assassinated while aiding in the Memphis Sanitation Workers strike. To this day, Ms. Crook continues for just and equitable treatment of working class citizens in Memphis.

This interview was conducted on May 21, 2007 to be included in the Rhodes College Crossroads to Freedom Digital Archive Project.

The transcripts represent what was said in the interview to the best of our ability. It is possible that some words, particularly names, have been misspelled. We have made no attempt to correct mistakes in grammar.

Francesca Davis: We are very grateful that you've been able to take time out of your schedule and interview with us. It's a great pleasure to have you here, so thank you for that.

Dorothy Crook: Thank you.

Francesca Davis: All right. So we're just gonna begin. So can you tell us your name and your current occupation?

Dorothy Crook: I'm Dorothy Crook. I'm the director of AFSCME Local 1733.

Francesca Davis: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised?

Dorothy Crook: I was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi.

Francesca Davis: Okay. And you grew up there?

Dorothy Crook: Yes, I did.

Francesca Davis: You did.

Dorothy Crook: I attended Jackson State University for a scholarship. My parents were basic sharecroppers. I had one sister and she went to Oklahoma State. We were always rivalries because Jackson State would always beat up on footballs games. We'd come in the house and go in separate ways to our bedrooms. So it was a lot fun when I grew up there. Then I came back and I didn't finish. I had three and a half years there.

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Dorothy Crook: Then I got married and had a son. He finishing Jackson State. Then I came back to Vicksburg when my parents were getting ill. I worked at the high school that I graduated from as a secretary. Then I went back to Jackson State and worked as a secretary there in public relations.

Francesca Davis: Okay. So can you tell us about the neighborhood you grew up in?

Dorothy Crook: A lot children, a lot of close friends. My mother was a cafeteria manager and my dad was a laborer. The school was like a block from my house. It was just always fun. We just – it was just a neighborhood of fun loving children just playing, having a good time. There was not any anger. There was not any murdering going on.

[00:01:59]

Dorothy Crook: Your parents could tell me, “Don’t go here. Don’t do that.” “No problem.” But it was a warm, comfortable atmosphere. I guess that’s the best way – everybody was full. People had their gardens. If you came over and borrowed a tomato and ate right then and there – ‘cause my father always had a garden that I never participated in. I’m just not an outdoor person at all. He didn’t have any help with the girls ‘cause I went fishing only one time to learn and I was just totally afraid of worms. My sister made so much noise. I caught all the fish and was afraid to get them off the hook. I _____ of _____. We weren’t any help to him in the boy lane at all.

We had a dog that we would just stand on the porch and play with them as long as he was tied up. When he got – if he snapped the whip and got loose, we’d run in the house ‘cause we didn’t want him to do that.

[00:02:59]

Dorothy Crook: We just wanted to stand on the back porch and play with her. But once he got away and playing all of the kids in the neighborhood, we never could retrieve her back, so my dad would always have to do that. Just a fun loving – we grew up with very minimal, but it was a well-developed community and we were happy.

Francesca Davis: It was a very rigid community-type feel.

Dorothy Crook: Oh, yeah. Always involved in all school activities. I was more involved in school activities than my sister. She loved to dance.

But I was always involved in something going on at school. So parents had to take the girls to wherever they had to go. If we were gonna get there, that was gonna be fine. So we were known as the “Thomas Girls,” and “Mr. Thomas is gonna take them.” Then pretty soon when other parents didn’t bring their kids, then my dad was the chauffeur for the rest of the girls getting home. So it was that kind of era. It really was. But it was fun.

[00:03:58]

Dorothy Crook: I was not embarrassed by the fact that it happened. We were a little – what’s the word I want to use – not anger – we were a little concerned ‘cause we couldn’t talk to the boys like we really wanted to. The man was watching, right? ‘Cause he’s watching his girls. But we had fun. We went to all the activities at school, all of them, all the time. So it was a joyous. It was really joyous occasion.

Francesca Davis: What were your favorite activities growing up?

Dorothy Crook: I loved the music department.

Francesca Davis: music?

Dorothy Crook: I was always singing in the choir. My music teacher was a graduate of Jackson State. So I knew I was gonna get a scholarship. I just knew that and I did. But we really had fun because we would do concerts and that kind of thing. I was always interested in that. I never liked PE. I just played volleyball to be doing something, but I hated basketball. I did not like that exercise at all. But volleyball was the only thing I participated in. The rest of it; didn’t like it.

[00:05:05]

Francesca Davis: What was school like for you in terms of academics or the social scene?

Dorothy Crook: I made – I was on the honor roll the whole time I was in high school, yeah. Both of us were really. I graduated with honors. So yeah, did pretty good.

Francesca Davis: What were your experiences at Jackson State like?

Dorothy Crook: Oh, I had a good time. There was a federal case against the hall, the dormitory hall where I lived, Air Hall. The husband – there

was a desegregation case going on. Actually, I think it just really – the wife is still alive. It was a – I just don't remember all of the particulars, but when I went to school there, of course, it was Jackson State College and we lived in that dormitory.

[00:06:01]

Dorothy Crook: But it was the hall where the gentleman was named after. There was a desegregation case going on. I guess if you check the history of it, you could find out. It was just settled. I think it was last year. Yeah. But it is still on campus. I don't know if it is still a dormitory now, but it's sort of like an archive kind of place, but it was settled some time last year through his widow.

Francesca Davis: You mentioned discrimination. Did you ever have any experiences with that growing up in your neighborhood?

Dorothy Crook: There was a corner store that my father had – I guess you call it a _____ account. He would go there and if the mayonnaise was out and that kind of thing, we could go with him.

[00:07:02]

Dorothy Crook: It was owned by a white guy and his wife. He had two children. The little girls would – my dad would never let us go in the store without him. He would always have us sit in the car. Then the children of the owner would come out to the car and just talk – they're like eight, nine years old. They were just talking. My father's name was Andrew. The owner would call him "Andy." The little girls would say, "You Andy's girl?" I say, "Yeah." Just basic talk. But we got along. We never played with them, but I know as I'm getting older that we were shielded from that so that we wouldn't have to.

I was fortunate enough that a lot of our classmates would go to the convent in the summertime because it was how they would get the extra money. My folks – I never went.

[00:08:01]

Dorothy Crook: I went one day to my uncle's field with my mother's mother. It was her brother. He had his own crops and things. I was going because all the kids were talking about it. I wanted the experience. My mom said, "You're not gonna like that." I said, "(Mumbling) I'm really gonna go."

First mistake was getting up like 4:00 in the morning in the dark. I guess that's the best thing to say. And my grandmother was already up and she was gonna take her granddaughter with her. When I got there, the rows were like from this office to the – out to North Parkway, probably longer. So when I finally got up and went with her – there was another lady with her. About 6:00, I had eaten up all of my lunch, and there was not a tree in sight and I couldn't see what they were chopping because it looked clean to me.

[00:09:04]

Dorothy Crook:

But I soon found out that one day that I never wanted to do that. I couldn't figure out of the excitement from classmates who said that they went during the summer 'cause they were buying some clothes or what have you. But the first day I just said, "I can't go back anymore 'cause the sun was too hot. And I didn't like the outdoors. I sort of disappointed my grandmother, but my mother knew that I wouldn't have liked that at all. So I've always been on the inside of the house. She liked outside 'cause she dealt with the flowers. Didn't want to fool with it. I just wanted the grass cut. Didn't wanted to go there at all. That was it.

My sister was making fun of me because she was two years younger and she said, "Told you you weren't gonna like it." So first and last experience. That was it. But I think at that point when I heard kids talking about that each year in high school, that was just something I could not deal with.

[00:10:03]

Dorothy Crook:

It was just not – and then I understood then what my parents would always push for. You get your lesson and you do these kind of things. The honor roll was just a breeze for us. We just didn't have a problem with it.

My mother was – had an eighth grade education. My father had a fifth grade education. But our learning experience from him was sitting on his knee every day while he would read the Bible to us. I never understood how he did that, but he could quote it verbatim, so there must have been some kind of spiritual guidance for him.

We would always go to Sunday school. I don't say I hate it to this day, but I don't go now. I go to church every Sunday, but I don't go to Sunday school. But my mother made sure that we went to Sunday school every Sunday because my dad was superintendent

of the Sunday school, so the girls had to go. The fun thing about that was there were cousins that he would pick up along the way to take them because they were getting a treat after church.

[00:11:05]

Dorothy Crook: But it was normal for us to have ice cream and cookies and that kind of thing. I didn't know – I thought – they were just glad to be with us, but it was really the treat that my father was giving them for going to church. And then their parents would get them ready to go. It was a just a carload full of kids. We were just having fun, but we had to go to Sunday school. It gave the background of going to church. It really did.

I always felt that there was a spiritual being with him to actually be able to read and interpret the Bible better than anybody I've ever known, better than today of any minister that I've ever heard. But it was a good time.

Francesca Davis: So things like education and going to church were very much stressed in your home.

Dorothy Crook: That was it. Because of the fact that with their – my mother always said that she finished – she went through the eighth grade twice because her family did not have the wherewithal to send her on through high school.

[00:12:07]

Dorothy Crook: I don't know if there was a high school when she was coming up. It was never there. But she planned the meals at the school where we attended elementary. And very much a formidable person in terms of that what she learned, she knew what she learned and she shared it with us to the best of her ability. She could sew.

My sister and I were not twins, but we dressed – little girls with – they had – they were called petticoats. It's a slip full of starch. So your little nylon dresses would be just scattered all over the place and our hair was long. Both of our hair was long. And we had these three plaits and these big ribbons and things. You know, daddy's girl, so that's how we went. It was just a fun thing.

[00:13:03]

Dorothy Crook: I don't remember wearing any pants as much. We would wear shorts. And now what you guys call the "crop," it was – they were

called “pedal pushers.” Yeah. So we would wear those. I grew up being – your parents talk to you about the cleanliness and the daintiness for girls and that’s just a fact that I guess just stayed with me now.

My aunt used always say that I was just like my grandmother because I never wanted to go outside and dig in the dirt. I just never wanted to do that, mess up the fingers and your hand. Didn’t want to do it. But I could stay in the house and do housework and that kind of thing. But I was fortunate enough – and during the summer months, my mother worked in a kitchen where she worked in a home, private home, and she cooked. My sister and I would be at home during the day while they would be at work. People would be calling all day long.

[00:13:58]

Dorothy Crook:

We had a two-bedroom house. And my sister was always – she was kind of lazy. And a two-bedroom house. It was the living room and the kitchen was my house. The two bedrooms was her house. Well, her house was always clean ‘cause she made up the beds. Mine was dirty ‘cause she hated to wash dishes. We would get into it every day. So I had to whip her to make her clean up my – help me clean up my house ‘cause she never want – she never dried the dishes.

The rice pot and the grit pot, I think we must have bought four or five of those because she’d throw them away. She could not stand to wash dishes. She always said, even when she was a little girl, she – when she got grown, it was at where she was gonna have a dishwasher and I don’t think she really knew what it was. But she hated to wash dishes. So we’d call our mom during the day and she’d tell off on me that whipped her today, that I said, “_____.” I don’t know if she could whip both of us _____. You get _____ zoom, zoom, zoom, and that’s it.

[00:15:00]

Dorothy Crook:

My father only whipped me one time and I kind of sassed my mom about something. I didn’t think that he was gonna do that, but when she told, that man, he got me good and I never ever got a whipping from him again ‘cause that hurt my heart. But my father did give us a whipping. It was not a beating. It was a whipping. Because tree branches, they never got a belt. It was just the tree limbs. They were always ripe limbs so they never broke. When they come at you, they would start like that. You don’t want that.

It's a sting. You know what I mean? There was not a blister. It'd heal. Then you sit on his knee while you cry.

I never understood that. Why did they whip you? But it happened. He would explain to you what you should have done, what you should not have done. But it was a good, happy growing up experience in terms of learning the best that they had to offer.

[00:16:03]

Dorothy Crook: As I said, I was fortunate to get a scholarship. My sister was fortunate to have an academic scholarship. So we got to school. We just went to separate schools and had a lot of fun. Had a lot of fun.

Francesca Davis: You mentioned an experience at Jackson State University, or Jackson State –

Dorothy Crook: Yeah.

Francesca Davis: – College at the time. How did that experience with desegregation of the building that you stayed in – what was your opinion or point of view about that?

Dorothy Crook: Well, when I first went to school – you're all excited about going to college like you guys are, being away from home like you all. There were activities going on at college that I had really not been exposed to. And while I was in high school, I did office work in the principal's office and I liked it. I liked the secretary work.

[00:17:00]

Dorothy Crook: Going to college was a new experience. You just met all kinds of kids. But I found out one basic thing, some of them came from humble backgrounds and some of them came from more exposed backgrounds, but they were always – they stayed in trouble all the time. Okay. In our dormitory, the girls dormitory, was real – it was really the “what's happening” dormitory.

My dormitory room was five beds in it. Okay. We had two bunk beds and one single bed, but all of us was from Vicksburg. All of us – out of that group – there were three of us – parents – that we always associated with even in high school. The other two girls, we knew them in high school, but their backgrounds were different.

[00:18:02]

Dorothy Crook: They always looked nice in high school. When I say looked nice, they were always – outfits, bought outfits, and that kind of thing. What I didn't realized is that they didn't have as much going on in their home as we did and it showed very quickly.

My mom would bring me a box of food and stuff. She was an excellent cook. Then I had to share everything with everybody in the room. But their parents never brought them anything. They were just never there. Then you start borrowing stockings and we had some pantyhose, but they started borrowing stockings. They would borrow a lot of things. So then my grandmother would make sure that we had dormitory food, peanut butter and crackers. Okay. You had this big old jar of that. Every Friday night we had our card game going on. That was our little party night 'cause you didn't have money to actually go out.

[00:18:59]

Dorothy Crook: So we had the bidwiz party on Friday nights and listened to the music and talking to the fellows hanging out of the windows. And if any activities on campus was going on, then we'd definitely go there. But they would always go outside of the campus. And all the time they would always be beyond the curfew. Then we had to pull them in the windows so that the matron dean of the hall would not catch them and that kind of thing. Some of them like, "We don't to be bothered with this." As a result of that – and they caught a couple of times, got a couple of detentions, but there was a different upbringing once we knew.

Then the three of us that went on a scholarship, we were – all three of us were in music, so we had the same kind of activities going on. We made the concert choir the first and was something for a freshman to do that.

[00:20:03]

Dorothy Crook: There were already upper classmen who were from Vicksburg that was already in the choir. So you know, we were just like in because we had – we were concentrating on something else as having fun with it.

When I went back to work there – I think it was in '67 – yeah, '67 and '68 – there was a whole different atmosphere of young people there. When I was there in the '60s, we had fun, basic fun on the

campus and that kind of thing. There were a number of professional football players who are now – then Willie Richardson and William Burnett. I think he played for the Detroit Lions. I can't remember where Richardson played. But there were a number of those. So we sort of looked up to those guys.

[00:21:02]

Dorothy Crook:

When we went back during the '60s, I guess the civil rights movement was sort of just starting for us because you were like young adults on your own on a campus that the main goal was supposedly getting an education. The teachers and the professors were always sharing information with you.

Coming from a high school background of real concerned teachers and real concerned efforts to make sure that you obtain what they felt that you could do, I had some good high school teachers. As I look back on it through the years, there were several of them that really train you for the outside world. We didn't know it then.

[00:22:00]

Dorothy Crook:

And I got this English teacher who's still alive and my mom could cook good cakes and that kind of thing, and if I brought two or three slices of cake, she had to have a slice. But at the same time, if she knew who your boyfriend was – we had this dramatic class and that kind of thing, you had to repeat these poems and it was always by – what was that – Henry Longfellow – several more – if they were love poems, she made you bring your boyfriend in and say the poems and that kind of thing.

I'm still a little frightened about that woman today, really. She's just – and she knew you weren't gonna get it right. But she was an English teacher, but she really taught you beyond that. You didn't realize it then, but she was trying to make you overcome the fear of what you may face later on in life, to sort of tackle that. It was a real good educational experience.

[00:23:01]

Dorothy Crook:

So when I first went to Jackson State, you felt the same kind of thing going on. When I went – and I got married and that kind of thing. Had a son. But when I went back to work there in '67, the whole campus had changed. It was integrated with professors. They were mostly from New York, which was good. I still

participated in the choir. I'd go and practice with them and that kind of thing.

But you also as the – I was the secretary in public relations. Everything that was going on on campus came through our office. So then I found myself doing some mentoring to the younger people then, but it was a different kind of group of people. They were ready. They were pushy. And they didn't understand the patience of enduring some things on campus.

[00:24:00]

Dorothy Crook: Because again, the civil rights movement was beginning to get elevated and I guess their parents at that time were younger adults and maybe some of them were educators and that kind of thing, so their rationale was different than when we came through school there. I found myself talking to a lot of them during the week trying to help them find jobs because they were harsh at that point. They were actually harsh. Of course, when the assassination of Dr. King came out and you heard about the marches and that kind of thing, we would always be in the discussion about that all the time. It was a difficult period. It really was. And the assassination was just – I think it was just devastating. It really was. I have to tell you, I burned some books myself on the campus because we were angry.

[00:25:00]

Dorothy Crook: And to show that concern, out of that anger, it was just all we could do. We had to do – help them do that, so to speak, rather than talking about burning a building.

I went to school with James Meredith and his first wife. She's passed since then. I think he's been married a couple of times since then. But he was in the midst of that era in terms of – we were just angry. I was angry with the students. That was just it. Could not explain why. Didn't know anything about a union. Didn't know anything about a strike 'cause I had participated in a couple of sit-ins at the school, but they didn't really go anywhere 'cause the president was _____ and I thought that he needed to understand how the young people were feeling and we did that.

[00:26:00]

Dorothy Crook: But there were never – and there was never the kind of influx of fighting. Drinking was going on. Drinking did, yeah. Everybody

drank the cheap wine, that kind of thing. Couldn't stand it, but it was there. But the guns and that kind of thing, it was not there. But the anger was with the system itself.

All black kids had to go to black schools in Mississippi. You only went to Tougaloo College, which was a private liberal arts college. You had Alcorn State University. It was Alcorn College. You had Jackson State College. You had Mississippi Valley State College. So there was no question about if you were going to school. The question was just where, but it had to be a black school. And it was a wonderful thing. It really was.

[00:26:58]

Dorothy Crook:

But once I came back to work there, and the professors, as I say, most of them came out of New York. That was a – partnership is not the word I want because students were able to interchange and go to the State University of New York. The professors were interesting and they had not been in a southern setting before, so their livelihood was really centered around campus because they could not venture out to go to places within the city because they were being called “nigger lovers” and they were not accepted in those sites.

So you develop a relationship with the working people on the campus, which was always interesting because there were a lot of interesting interchanging going on between the professors and the faculty at Jackson State at that time. It was helpful.

[00:27:57]

Dorothy Crook:

I had always felt that they were there because they really wanted to do something meaningful to help kids understand the other side of life, if you will, from a northern state.

Joshua Jeffries:

We talked about sort of the anger arising during the civil rights movement, how you did sit-ins and even burned books. What were some of the other ways that people were getting involved on some _____ that you were around during that time period?

Dorothy Crook:

We were doing voter registration on campus.

Joshua Jeffries:

Really?

Dorothy Crook:

Mmm hmm. We were doing voter registration. I can remember my grammy saying how she couldn't vote. I couldn't understand

that. But as you – as you live through that experience – and because she couldn't read that well – and she would always tell us about some experiences that she had when she was younger that I could just not imagine, but it did happen to her. I can't remember all of them, but voting she could not do.

[00:28:59]

Dorothy Crook:

So our parents instilled in us that you must always vote if you want to make a change. There was always a picture of John Kennedy hanging on our wall as well as Dr. King. You just sort of kept up with the news and you sort of read things in the paper and that kind of thing. So you knew were in a period of – something was happening that black folk were being able to understand and educate themselves on what was happening in the world. And voting in the south was it.

We were always taught that you must vote every opportunity you get a chance to. And I have to tell you, ever since I've been a registered voter, I've never – there was never a time that I didn't vote. My son's the same way. When he was in school and I would send the absentee ballots to him to make sure that he understood how important that was. I think, to this day, that's the only way you make a change in anything.

[00:30:00]

Joshua Jeffries:

During that time period were you involved in any organizations that were sort of involved with the civil rights movement?

Dorothy Crook:

No. I was not a member of the NAACP because I wasn't that strong in _____ at the time. But the church – my church at that point was a Methodist church and there was always an aspect in terms of the importance of voting. That was the most crucial thing from the south is to vote. You go to these meetings. After you leave the church, you go to these meetings and that kind of thing to hear somebody talk about something. Our parents were always pushing us to that kind of event.

Joshua Jeffries:

Okay. Can we talk a little bit about the development of the sanitation strike in Memphis?

[00:30:58]

Dorothy Crook:

I think I told Francesca, yeah, that I was not here in '68. I didn't come until August of '69. I was working in the office of public

relations and I had finished business school here. The guy came in the office. He knew my boss. And everybody calling me “Crook.” So they say – he says, “Crook, there’s a job opening at the union.” I says, “Mmm hmm.” So he – and I didn’t anything about the union. He says, “Why don’t you go for an interview? So we’ll fly you up.” I said, “Oh, you will.” So I’m excited about being flown up ‘cause I’m thinking about my friends that I’ve met here and that kind of thing. I said, “Yeah, let’s go.”

I went up like – I came here like a Wednesday and worked all day long from the time they picked me up from the airport. And I’m like, “Why kind of place is this?” Here I am on a college campus. You got friends.

[00:31:56]

Dorothy Crook:

I did – I was the representative of the secretaries. It was not a union. It was called the Secretaries Association or something like that. We were trying to get a raise. I became the spokesperson. I forgot about that. I was selected to go talk to the president about getting a raise for the secretaries. I already knew that he didn’t want to give us one, so I was directed to one of the deans. Anyway, he was the president of the system.

I’m gonna brace myself to talk to him. You know, you pass these folk on campus and that kind of thing. He wanted to know why I was at his office and was sort of abrasive. I said, “We need to talk about increase for the secretaries.” “Why do you think you need that?” I said, “Because my food costs the same thing as your food.” I had no idea. I probably shouldn’t have said it like that, but I really did. I just snapped back like he act to me.

[00:33:02]

Dorothy Crook:

It’s like, “We create avenues to make your work better, to make you look good.” And we had a real frank discussion about that. Apparently, I wasn’t as abrasive as he was because we started laughing about things. He said, “Nobody’s ever come to me like this.” I said, “Well, I ain’t been here before.” We just kept right on talking, really.

We didn’t get a substantial raise, but we did get a small raise. Then shortly after, I left ‘cause I sort of left him high and dry. When I came here for the interview, it was like that Friday; they were moving me back to work here. I almost didn’t catch my plane going back to Jackson because I really did have fun and I

couldn't imagine. It was so much chaos at the office at that point. It was so much traffic, but I liked the involvement.

[00:34:00]

Dorothy Crook: People were in need of some guidance even from the union and the community. Our union has always been a community union because of the assassination. Everybody that you know was a part of that march and that movement.

You probably heard Dr. Harriman say he marched with Dr. King. I never marched with him. I didn't know him because he was already assassinated when I got here. But it opened up so many doors of understanding and so many doors that were closed to young blacks at that point.

So I couldn't imagine what the union really represented. Because as a secretary, the work has always been good. It was always good for me. I just enjoyed it. When I – they moved me back that night, I said, "I don't know if I want to go to Memphis to work." And I was kinda – says, "We'll move you." Oh, you will?

[00:35:00]

Dorothy Crook: It was a couple of hundred dollars more, which was fine. So they moved me that night. I started working. I went to a – let me back up a minute. I think that was in '66 or some time when I was business school here. There was a job opening at Lane College. I worked there for six months for the science department. I can't think of the gentleman's name at this point, but he was very close to Hubert Humphrey. Hubert Humphrey was on the campus and that kind of thing.

I had to go home because of my mom was getting ill. She was a diabetic. I only worked there six months. It was okay. I just didn't enjoy Lane College as much as I did Jackson State. I just really didn't, and nowhere to go and nothing to look at, view at, none of that, and that bothered me.

[00:36:03]

Dorothy Crook: I enjoyed the students. I had a good relationship working there, but it was just not good as Jackson State was. I didn't enjoy the work there.

When I came back here, in terms of working for the union, it was total chaos at the union office 'cause everybody had marched with Dr. King, so everybody thought that they would be employed by the union. I didn't realize that they wanted somebody outside of who didn't know the community people who were capitalizing on the union. 'Cause everybody standing up saying that they support the sanitation strike, didn't really mean it like that because they didn't work for the city. The only city employees were the workers and the union at that point.

[00:37:04]

Dorothy Crook:

There was people who worked in the parks and public works and sanitation, that group of employees. It was just interesting. I've always, even to this day, have always approached working people as I would my own parents. I figured that they deserve their respect and the courtesy. Not always meant like that, but then you do that because everybody wants something more nowadays.

When I came in '69, it was formed and I had an opportunity to be a part of that history that actually formed this union to greater heights. And I moved from office secretary to office supervisor, just names that they give women who basically are secretaries.

[00:38:00]

Dorothy Crook:

It was a PR job at the same time. I didn't know the involvement of the union in terms of – to the national level, but we are an umbrella – excuse me – under the American Federation of State, County, Municipal Employees Union, which is in Washington.

We now have about 1.3 million members across country. We have about already 4,000 members. We're one of the largest in the city. Of course, we've added more people, entities, of the union, but it's always been that union of community and participation. We built our building in September of '78. It was built with union dollars.

Most folk thought that there was a pile of money over here and everybody just gets some money. You had all kinds of stories. If a member of your family died, you'd come and ask for money to bury your folks and that kind of thing.

[00:39:03]

Dorothy Crook:

And my boss at that time as was Jesse Epps. He lives in New Jersey now. If you came up with a sob story, you didn't have

enough money to pay the undertaker rather than paying the funeral home, you can give that money to the individual, so you don't if they buried them or not. And I thought, "_____ this is interesting. Give away money like this."

But when I called the Washington office, said, "No, that's not supposed to be. You're supposed send that money here." You have to pay a per capita tax on each member of the union. So each year our union dues goes up. Over half of that goes to the International because the union, that's how you're paid, by union dues. And when the union dues go up, that means the per capita goes up on each individual. Then you have to send that to Washington. So it's not like there's a whole pile of money. Like sometimes the managers want to say that to discourage people from being in the union. And they do.

[00:40:06]

Dorothy Crook:

Cohort is the best word, which is illegal to do that. I think the union does important work for the people in the community who work at these areas because there are so many people as well as managers tried to discourage workers from being a part of the union 'cause they want to treat them like they want to treat them. They want to pay them how they want to pay them. Tell them when to work and how to work and all that kind of stuff. Our union is a vehicle to help safeguard, first of all, their rights as an individual and certainly make them be treated with dignity and respect.

[00:40:57]

Dorothy Crook:

And that's where the "I am a man" slogan came from, just little men that wanted some decency and respect making a dollar and a quarter an hour in '68. They had to work whenever they were told to work from morning to night without any breaks and without two 15-minute breaks or lunch breaks. They just worked as long as they were told to work. That's why they didn't want them to organize. It's sad to say here we are in the 21st century, but we still have some managers that feel the same way.

Francesca Davis:

You mentioned earlier having an appreciation for the working class and also the importance and significance of that "I am a man" slogan and campaign. Something that I rarely hear about that I'd love to hear about and learn in the classroom was what was the role of women during the civil rights movement here in Memphis,

especially you being new to AFSCME? Could you talk a little bit more about the role of women during that period?

[00:41:56]

Dorothy Crook:

I'd have to say it was a struggle, and not in the sense that you had to fight every day, but in the struggle because "the men felt in charge of everything." And it was only when the movement came from the north in terms of women gonna take a stand on certain issues, that trickled down so that working class women would have an opportunity to vie for these jobs and to be a part of an industry that was totally for men. I think that, I don't know, maybe it was done because of the fact that they had dominated the spectrum for so long.

I think that it's always a struggle. I think it's always gonna be a struggle for African American women. I really do now more than ever because they're in the echelon of the brackets for monies as men folk and they don't really want to accept that.

[00:43:05]

Dorothy Crook:

Very few men who are managers really accept the woman on the same level as they do. They still think you're supposed to carry their briefcase and that kind of thing. I don't mind carrying a briefcase, but I want to be paid the same amount of money. That's just not happening.

I share this information with some young folk at my church. It is not one of those things that's gonna change rapidly. What the young folk do, they don't worry about making a change. They just step out of it and go to another job. So that's not happening. The so-called have-nots who can't do that. We stay on our jobs based on the fact that you want to see a change that you were a part of that didn't happen.

[00:44:03]

Dorothy Crook:

So you work hard to try to make a change within the time span that you're there. It just moves into the years. Then you get the struggle with some women are jealous and some women are envious of how you do things or how you say things. So you're gonna always have that. It's just gonna always be. It's gonna be in your time when you go for a job. It's just the way it's gonna be.

I felt the same way. It's not gonna change. So you stay on at some point to keep working on it. And if you enjoy what you're doing, then you are gonna stay there. But it's gonna – I don't think that – and there are different kinds of struggle. I don't think that it has changed. There was a – Judge Sugarman was being honored the other week by Diversity Memphis. He made those comments that Memphis have not changed since he growing up.

[00:45:05]

Dorothy Crook: You look at it that it's bad to hear, but it's actually the truth because being in the court system, he's seen so much of it happen. So you saw displacement. I'm sure he saw that. You saw unequal treatment. That's still going on. It hasn't changed a great deal. You guys change in your age group because you say, "I got to leave this. I'm going somewhere else." And you continue to do that until you land something or you land a family and say, "We got to settle down." But it still goes on. So I don't think – it's a constant struggle, if you will, not fighting every day. And then some time there's a little fighting going on, but you got to keep at it. I was terminated from the union in June of '98 because the president of the union at that time decided that he could not control me in terms of telling me what to do.

[00:46:05]

Dorothy Crook: *(Clears Throat)* Excuse me.

The board of the union hires the director. The constitution of the union is very clear in terms of who does what. The president presides over the membership at the membership meeting and they are in charge of the board meeting, but the day-to-day activities is really my purview. But if you get an evil kind of person being a president and they get confused, so you struggle to try to keep the climate, if you will, equal. It don't work out that way, but you still – you're there. I was terminated in June of '98 and I went through the grievance process of the union, the constitution of the union.

[00:47:04]

Dorothy Crook: One of the guys had a board of 19 people, 18, 19, whatever it was. Nine folk voted against me and eight of them didn't. So one of the eight person would say, "You were just done wrong." He went to court with me and the judge ruled in my favor and said, "Until she finishes all of the process, pay her." So I was at home getting rest for about two and a half years waiting on the postman.

Once I went to – it was all kind of combined because once I went to the International Union before the executive board, they ruled in their favor. So when I came back to court, the judge said that, “I’ve known this woman for a long time and her stand in the community. I want the membership to be able to hear what actually happened.”

[00:48:07]

Dorothy Crook:

They didn’t want that. So they appealed it to – his ruling to the courts. That’s how the politics play in. The courts was mad at the judge, so they said, “Well, you didn’t have the right to do that.” Then I appealed it to the state. The state – it wasn’t a serious case because this is a right-to-work state. That means that the judge could say whatever he wants to say and the courts can say whatever they want to say. So if your politics ain’t like it ought to be, you may win or you may not win. Whatever the law clerks gave them, that’s what they ruled on. So they had done so bad in terms of keeping the union up. Folk were moving monies around and hiring cousins and uncles and all that kind of stuff.

[00:49:03]

Dorothy Crook:

They just took union so bad. So the former president lost. And a lady won, the first time we had a lady president, and she called me up and she says, “I want you to come back to ____.” “Hmm, okay, right.” I had a little small job. It wasn’t a small job. I was working for the ____ of the National Black Churches as the – I was the community director, I believe. That was a grant dealing with going to the black church to deal with drug abusers within the church. Of course, knowing Memphis like you do and living in Memphis, the preacher say, “Oh, I ain’t got no drug addicts in my church or no drugs.” “Yes, you do.” So we would go and put on conferences there. Yeah, I liked the work.

[00:49:58]

Dorothy Crook:

It almost the same kind of thing because there was an issue with people that it’s a social illness and it certainly exists more than ever. They acknowledge that. And when she called and I knew a number of the preachers and that kind of thing, so it was like, “Okay.” But when I came back, the only thing I really changed – this time I wrote a contract. I wrote it up myself.

I was a little abrasive about that. Came back to some of the same board folks who released me and they going _____; said, “You got one of two things to do. You either vote it up or you vote it down. You ain’t got no choice. You ain’t got nothing to say about it. This is it.” So they signed it. It’s a four-year contract. It’ll be up next year. So if I decide to write something else too, I’ll do that. If I don’t, I’ll be gone.

[00:50:58]

Dorothy Crook:

But I felt good in terms of the fact that they had abused the office so bad, abused the union so bad – of a building that I had helped create and it’s certainly paid for – and to come back and roofs and things were leaking and that kind of thing.

They were misusing the little folks’ money. So I take some time to do that. Not quite where it ought to be now, but at least we know where we are, how we’re going. We’re able to put some formation in place. Having done that in the beginning, it was like you just went on a break and you came back ‘cause you had to reprogram everything to make it sort of run smooth. It ain’t running smooth as I’d like it, but here’s what they got.

Francesca Davis:

In wrapping up and thinking about your involvement during the civil rights movement at Jackson State and here in Memphis, what do you think in terms of what we can do in my generation to kind of keep the torch moving along?

[00:52:06]

Francesca Davis:

You mentioned that Judge Sugarman didn’t think that a lot has changed, but what can we do to – or what do you think we can do to start some of that?

Dorothy Crook:

I think that you should be more – first of all, voter registration is a must. You must encourage folk in your community to vote. We have a political action arm of our union that’s very important called “Get Out to Vote.” Every time there’s a candidate running, we interview every candidate, republican, democrat, non-political person. We just interview all of them. Based on where we are with the union, the kinds of questions we asked them is germane to working people. I think that you should – your generation should make sure that you register, make sure the folk vote.

[00:53:01]

Dorothy Crook: That's a very hard task to do 'cause a lot of folks, well, they're gonna do what they want to do, but they gonna do worse if you don't vote. That's a constant thing and that's not only for African Americans. It's for whites too. Because I think that as you go to school, the integration is so prevalent at this point, you're able to understand there are folk that are prejudiced against everybody.

It's important to do that. It's important to know the candidates. You may want to be one yourself. But be honest about the office that you would be looking at. Don't just get it for yourself. You got to be – you're a part of a community and you have to think about the class of working people in the community, just the class of people within the community. So you have to continue to do voter registration.

[00:54:01]

Dorothy Crook: You have to continue to educate the community in terms of what's real important. And their vote is real important. You've seen the apathy with some politicians and that kind of thing. You got to make sure that you understand the real ramifications of that. You got make sure that you understand the necessity of a good candidate who is interested in working people. You're gonna have children. You're got to make sure if the latter is not here, how you gonna support your family? How you gonna send your kids to school?

So Memphis does not have good jobs for working people, first of all. Nine-dollar jobs, that's an argument I have with management all the time. We can't send our kids to school. We can't buy a house, a car, just be comfortable in your home on \$9.00 an hour. It's just not enough.

[00:54:59]

Dorothy Crook: So you have to always keep working at those entities that produce jobs, companies. We're the distribution capital of world and yet people are not being serviced. So now you got all these gang activities going on and that kind of thing. There is no accident that that happened.

They saw an area that was just a closed mouth, if you will, about society here in Memphis and they drove in. So they have more control of our communities than we do.

So I think that voter education is really the key.

Francesca Davis: Well, I guess this will be our final question. What do you think that we can learn and take from the civil rights movement and Dr. King, and even from people like you who were very involved and very active?

[00:55:56]

Dorothy Crook: I think that understanding who you are, understanding the struggle that goes on within our lives. (*Clears Throat*) Excuse me. It's just like a girlfriend/boyfriend. There's certain sexual activities that you will do and certain you won't do. It's that kind of inner struggle that you're gonna have to have. You have to make a decision as what's important for you. If something somebody doesn't want you to do will destroy you, or will it take something away from your dignity, as long as you can maintain a respect and dignity for your – you as an individual, and then your appearance, I think you gonna – it moves in the right direction. It's only when you forget who you are. If you do that, you'll do anything.

So it's always important to just know who you really are and don't forget who you really are. I'm sure you've heard that at home. Probably not in the same format, but you've heard it.

[00:57:02]

Francesca Davis: Well, thank you for coming in and taking time out of your day. It has been a great pleasure to be able to interview someone of your caliber and who's done so much for our city.

Dorothy Crook: I thank you. Let me really officially thank you. I don't know if I've answered any of your questions as you have expected or that it's material that you could really use, but I felt that I've been open and honest with you.

Francesca Davis: Thank you.

Dorothy Crook: Well, I appreciate the opportunity.

Francesca Davis: Thank you.

Dorothy Crook: And you probably won't ask me back again. But anyway, I had fun. I didn't hear the phone ringing or that kind of thing, so it was fun.

(*Laughter*)

Francesca Davis: We will ask you back again. This is great. Thank you so much.

Dorothy Crook: Is this mine?

Francesca Davis: Yes.

Dorothy Crook: Oh.

[End of Audio]