

Meryl Trimble Johnson, teacher activist, from *Women's History Project*, compiled by Roslyn Talerico, July 31, 2012

Meryl Johnson is an African-American teacher who recently retired from the Cleveland school system after 40 years. She is also an actress who has performed at the Beck Center ('Hair' in the 1990's) and at other venues in the Cleveland area. One of her favorite roles was portraying Maggie the Cleaning Woman in Studs Terkel's 'Working' at the Cassidy Theater in Parma. She is a singer who enjoys performing with the Prayer Warriors. She also loves leading 'Solidarity Forever' at meetings of the North Shore Federation of Labor's delegate assembly and at the Ohio Federation of Teachers' annual conferences.

Meryl serves on the Executive Board of the North Shore Federation of Labor and has many times addressed that body, speaking with expertise and passion on issues affecting public education. She ran for President of the Cleveland Teachers Union in both 2004 and 2008, and has achieved recognition from many organizations as an outstanding leader of her union and in the community. She was first appointed Director of Community Engagement by former president Richard Decolibus and reappointed by current President David Quolke, and has served in that capacity for about 16 years.

"Who Am I"

By Meryl Trimble Johnson

When I was a child, my mom, who was a school teacher, would come home and tell delightful stories about the 'rascals' in her classroom as we sat around the dinner table. Her love for teaching was evident in every word she spoke. She is my biggest inspiration. I always loved English, and I enjoyed helping her grade papers. It made me feel so important. So, I just naturally flowed into the area of teaching. And I'm so glad I did.

There wasn't much talk about unions in my household; my stepdad was a Cleveland sanitation worker, so he would sometimes mention his union. I didn't really become involved with unions until I became a teacher; my mom told me to get involved with my union immediately. Then I really began to blossom politically.

I attended Kent State as an undergraduate. I wasn't really politically active there. But I began to reevaluate my life and my need to be more tuned in to causes when four students were killed and eleven students were wounded on campus on May 4, 1970. The weekend of the tragedy I was in Washington D.C. on a field trip with my class. I remember seeing the front page of a D.C. newspaper. It had a huge picture of our ROTC building in Kent on fire. It said, 'Kent State Students Burn ROTC Building.'

When we returned to Kent on Sunday afternoon, the town, which is usually bustling, was shut down. On any other day, all the fast food places would be open and everybody would be hanging out. I'll never forget. It was like riding into a ghost town. All the stores were closed. I saw a Jeep with some National Guard soldiers sitting on the corner. I went back to my dorm and found out about the protests that were going on at the Commons. But I didn't go out there. I just went to my dorm.

The next day, about 11 o'clock, while sitting on the side of my bed, I heard on the radio that shots had been fired on the Commons. A little later, I went to my boyfriend's dorm. I'll always remember the uncomfortable feeling I got when I saw National Guardsmen standing in line, watching me as I walked across campus. Around 1 or 2 pm, it was announced over the PA that all students must be off campus by 6 o'clock. It didn't matter where you were from. Everybody had to be out of there by 6 pm. After scuffling around trying to find a ride, a friend of my boyfriend said he'd take us back to Cleveland. It was the strangest thing, because nobody could

call into the campus. All the parents with children on campus were left wondering if it was one of their children who had been shot. All the phone lines were down. There were no cell phones, so communication was out. As we left Kent, cars were backed up for miles and miles with families trying to get on campus. When we arrived in Cleveland, my mom and dad were so happy to see me. My father gave the young man who drove me home \$20 to show his gratitude. Later that day, I went downstairs to look for my bag and I found my dad crying. That was the only time I ever saw him cry.

Years later, when I told this story to my students, I was the one crying.

In 1996, I was acting in the play *Hair* at Beck Center in Lakewood. In order to get the cast to understand the mood during that period, the director gathered all the cast together and asked me to tell this story. Again, tears sneaked their way to the surface. I think that helped the cast understand just how devastating the whole situation was back then.

I taught at East Technical High School from 1972 to 1975. Even though I was just starting and had the usual beginning teacher issues, I enjoyed it because I was the Drama Director, and the students were really committed. I'll never forget. In one of the plays I directed, the cast was so committed that we would rehearse on Saturdays at Karamu Theater. It was so heartwarming to see all those students show up for rehearsals on weekends. I directed four plays at East Tech: *The Mousetrap*, *Five on the Black Hand Side*, *Day of Absence*, and the *Bad Seed*.

I was at East Tech for three years, and then I went to Charles Eliot Jr. High. I became a Building Chairperson/Union Steward after teaching at Charles Eliot Junior High for about 4-5 years, and held that position for 18 years. A building chairperson is a union member who is the leader of the building, who keeps the members informed, makes sure they are treated fairly, and mobilizes them when it's necessary.

I was at Eliot for 33 years, so I taught two generations of children. It was so cool to teach the children of people I had taught!! I remember a father whose daughter was having trouble with the English teacher. I guess they weren't getting along. So he said, "Put her in Ms. Johnson's class. She taught me and she's a no-nonsense teacher." They put his daughter in my classroom and everything was fine. She said since I taught her daddy, she had better behave.

While at Eliot, I noticed my girls' future plans were limited to "girl only" careers. So I contacted an organization called *Hard Hatted Women*, an advocate for women in non-traditional jobs. Their speakers' bureau provided women who were telephone linespersons, eighteen-wheeler truck drivers, construction workers, etc. My students, boys and girls, really received a reawakening to life's possibilities.

The Northeast Ohio Jazz Society, under the leadership of the late Larry Glover, provided subject-based Jazz Weeks for schools that were interested. I was able to expose all of Eliot's students for many years to a week of Jazz through their different disciplines. Pianist Eric Gould discussed decibels in Science, John Richmond did a great visual/audio history of Women in Jazz through Social Studies, and the late Mar'Shell Baxter Beckley's powerful voice exploded with songs of history from slavery to the present. There were also art jazz projects and math innovations. The students and teachers loved the experience, especially Mar'Shell's *call and response* songs.

Then, in 2008, the school district decided that teachers who were certified in grades 7 through 12 had to teach at a high school. It's cheaper to have teachers who are certified K-8 to teach in middle school, because they teach everything. I believe that's why test scores are so poor in Math and Science, because students do not have teachers who are certified experts in a given subject. Also, the older students end up being kept in one room (like elementary children). At many K-8 schools, seventh and eighth grade students actually go to the bathroom in lines, all at the same time. So, when they get to high school, they go crazy because they finally have a little freedom

and independence. I consider the district's treatment of children, in this sense, abusive. As a result of the district's poorly thought out decision, I was transferred to John F. Kennedy High School; this happened to many 7-12 certified teachers.

I filed a grievance about my transfer and probably would have eventually won. But, when I got to John F. Kennedy, I was seeing students from Charles Eliot that I had taught and they were all grown up. They were running up to me and giving me hugs, and I was getting so much love that I decided I would stay at Kennedy. So, the following year, when my students I had taught in the eighth grade at Eliot arrived at JFK, they came into the room and there I was. I said "Surprise! You get to have me again." That was so funny. So that's why I'm at Kennedy, because the District made one of their many ridiculous decisions that was not good for children. Older children should not have to stay in the same room all day. It's just not right!

I've always taught English. All my years have been in Cleveland. I went to Cleveland schools - Miles Standish, Empire and Glenville, and had some wonderful English teachers. My goal is to get my students to love to read as much as I do. I spend a lot of money out of my own pocket (just like many of my colleagues) purchasing books. All I read is young adult literature. If I read something that I like and I want all of my students to have the experience, I will spend my own money to purchase a class set so I can teach the book. Ordering from the district is filled with red tape and lengthy waits. I have a lot of books in my classroom, and students read every day. I often ask my students, "Do you like that book.?" If they say "no", I tell them to get another book. I say, "You will not sit there and suffer. I want you to enjoy the book you are reading."

One of the reasons I enjoy teaching so much is the opportunity to show my students the importance of activism. It's so easy to sit around moaning "Why me?" instead of trying to make a difference in your life and the lives of others. During the Senate Bill 5/Issue 2 campaign, my students got a real education about the power of the people, and the importance of collective bargaining and unions. And those conversations always lead in to other topics, because my students are naturally curious.

I made up some songs about SB5 and taught them to my students. (I do that on other issues too.) The song I made up goes like this. It's to the tune of *Are you sleeping?*

Governor Kasich, Governor Kasich, shame on you, shame on you.
The budget can be fixed. Just get it from the rich. No on 5. Keep jobs alive.

During an evening at home, one of my girls saw SB5 ralliers on the news singing that song and she sang along. Her mom asked, "How do you know that song?" I just thought it was so cute that she carried the song home and actually was able to sing along with the TV when the news broadcasted the story. The students retain an understanding of the issues through music.

I remember a discussion I had with my students about merit pay and pay-for-performance. Those concepts are so unfair because there are so many components that go into a child learning. My students mentioned the following problems. If a child never comes to school, if a child doesn't have any place to do homework, if a child doesn't have a computer, if a child doesn't pay attention in class-all these factors affect learning. You know, one teacher may have 10 students who are brilliant. I may have a class of special needs students. Where's the fairness in paying the first teacher more than the second?

One of the goals of Senate Bill 5 was to get rid of seniority and just have teachers paid based on merit, but they never defined merit. When I talked to my students about it, one of my students said, "But Miss Johnson, that could open up the whole system to racism, because if you don't have any way to evaluate somebody fairly a teacher could be fired just because she's African-American." I acknowledged that student's creative thinking.

Public education is constantly under attack. The system uses a lot of taxpayer dollars to function; since the profiteers and big money CEOs messed up at Wall Street, they see public education as a way to recoup their losses. But the money grab started long ago. Take vouchers, for instance. All of the research has shown that children who receive vouchers to go to a private/religious school do not get a better education than those who attend public schools. It's really a way to subsidize the Catholic schools (thanks to Governor Voinovich). When vouchers first surfaced in 1995, they were largely used by David Brennan of White Hat Management. He just happens to be one of the biggest contributors to the Republican party. There were complaints that vouchers weren't enough money (they were worth \$2,500) so the law changed to benefit Brennan, and the amount was raised to \$5,000.

We (Cleveland Teachers Union, NAACP, People for the American Way, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, and many other organizations) fought very hard against vouchers, and we fought on the grounds of separation of church and state. Ninety-nine percent of students who were getting vouchers, public tax dollars, were going to religious schools. The issue went all the way to the U. S. Supreme Court. I organized a busload of parents and community members to protest in front of the Supreme Court. We lost the case because there were people there saying how awful the Cleveland schools were. It wasn't based on anything other than peoples' biased opinions, taking isolated cases, looking at the issues of test scores, and so forth. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5-4, saying that it was OK for Cleveland to have vouchers because Cleveland was such a terrible school district.

Then charter schools entered the picture. I give credit to Al Shanker, the late great President of the American Federation of Teachers, my national union, because he was one of the first ones to start talking about charter schools. But his idea was that if some teachers and parents wanted to do something different and wanted to start a school, then they should be able to do that. As happens so often, profiteers took an idea that started as something positive that would be good for public education and turned it into something negative that, in too many cases, is really harming school children. There are a few good charter schools, but this experiment is not fulfilling promises that were made. Charter schools must be held accountable the same way that public schools are. The playing field must be leveled. For example, charter schools receive a big lump sum of tax dollars. There's no itemized way to see how the money's being spent. Traditional public schools must account for every dime. There was an excellent report from Policy Matters, an Ohio think tank, called *Authorized Abuse*. What was especially interesting was that a national proponent of charter schools stated that Ohio has one of the worst charter school laws in the country. The *Akron Beacon Journal* did a very thorough report on charters and vouchers back in the mid 90's when they first started, and the *Journal* wrote that the laws were changed to allow David Brennan to make more of a profit.

Charter school teachers need a union. Over the years, there have been substantiated reports of some unjust treatment. The Cleveland Teachers Union was able to negotiate and get into the contract with the Cleveland School District that if the District opens up any charter schools, we have the right to go in and organize teachers.

But when you talk about organizing, the first thing that people think about is that having a union means more money. That's just a part of it. The most important thing is for teachers to have a voice. Teachers represent what's good for children, and we know what works. And since we represent what's good for children, we represent what's good for parents.

If we don't have a union, only a small handful of people are making decisions for the schools. And since the charter school law is so weak, quite often people making decisions in those schools are not educators. Having a decent wage and raising the quality of life is extremely important, but that's not the only reason that all teachers

should be organized.

I must share one of our proudest moments as a union. The CTU took on tax abatements in 1997, which was a colossal goal. And it's a huge issue now because of the conditions of our schools and the lack of funding. It was President Rich DeColibus' idea. Since 60% of a property tax is allocated to schools, when businesses have their taxes abated, millions of dollars that could help our school children are lost. Rich put me in charge of the campaign, since I was Director of Community Engagement.

Our plan was not to stop tax abatements. We said you must 'limit tax abatements.' Go ahead and give all the tax abatements you want, but you've got to make the schools whole some kind of way. Between the city or the business, somebody has to make sure that schools are made whole and receive their fair share.

Our story appeared on the front page of the Washington Post and page two of the New York Times. The Times had a picture of a huge hole that was in the wall at the Cleveland School of the Arts. People were calling from all over the country, because no one had ever done this before. As a part of the campaign, I arranged for three students from Beachwood High School and three students from the Cleveland School of the Arts to visit each others' schools. The looks on the faces of the Cleveland students when they walked onto Beachwood's campus was heartbreaking. And the Beachwood students were shocked that students actually had to try to learn in such horrible conditions.

We circulated petitions and got enough signatures to be placed on the ballot. But most of City Council was against the issue. Mayor Mike White spent city money to campaign against it, frightening people into believing that businesses would flee the city and go where taxes were being abated. But remember, we never said to get rid of tax abatement. City Council put the issue on the ballot in August, and only 13% turned out. But we won the absentee ballot- and that's my pride and joy. That was because people had voted before Mayor White used tax dollars for the big scary TV ads. The absentee voters were the folks who really understood the issue, and were not swayed by tricks. So we won the absentees, but lost the big one. Another problem was, people had to vote 'yes', agreeing to change the city charter. Later, many told me they voted 'no' because they didn't like tax abatement.

My community involvement has always been done with my students in mind, whether it's fighting against high unemployment rates, poverty, cutbacks in school funding, tax abatements, vouchers, for-profit charter schools, or what-have-you. I have taken students to Columbus to lobby legislators. I was an adviser with the City Club Youth Council for about five years. The group members plan and implement City Club forums for high school students throughout the county. I have trained student leaders on voter registration and community advocacy. Every year, my students make their voices heard through letter writing, interactions with various speakers, surveying school and community members, participating on panels at conferences, and sharing what they have learned with their peers and students at other schools.

I have organized conferences for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren, a subject very dear to my heart because of the constant cries for help from my students' extended families. While at Eliot, I organized a grandparents support group called Heart to Heart. I transported a grandmother to Columbus to lobby for more financial help for all grandparents.

My career goal - my students must understand that education is the best way to gain the freedom to make wise decisions about your future. And service is a way to give back. I live by Shirley Chisholm's quote: "Service is the rent we pay for the privilege of living on this earth." I believe that in my heart.