



Fast

Facts

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

November 8, 2020

Shirley Lord: Activist, Mentor and Organizer

A lot of important work gets done by extraordinary people who never appear in the spotlight. Such people might be fundraising for political candidates and running their campaigns, organizing events for non-profits, volunteering on boards, mentoring other women in the labour movement and even working overseas doing community development work.

Their names may not be household names; their faces do not appear in the media. But make no mistake: they have a profound effect on our work.

CCPA Manitoba and the Errol Black Chair in Labour Issues Committee has chosen to honour a woman who has inspired so many with her dedication, intelligence, kindness and willingness to do the heavy lifting that all social and political work relies on. That woman is Shirley Lord.

In the 1970s Shirley was working at the Municipal Hospitals which was a City of Winnipeg Facility (now Riverview Health Centre.) Her dad encouraged her to get involved with her union which at that time was a bargaining unit of CUPE Local 500. She wasn't sure what unions did, but she decided to follow her dad's advice and went to her first union meeting.

With the election of an NDP government in Manitoba legislation was enacted around pay equity. The Municipal Hospital Unit, with the support of CUPE 500, was going to take on this issue, and as a single mom with two kids, it was a topic that grabbed

Shirley's interest. She let her name stand and before she could change her mind, found herself as chair of the pay equity committee which sued the City of Winnipeg and CUPE for failing to negotiate an agreement for nursing aides and orderlies who did "substantially the same work" as described by the new legislation, meaning that they should receive the same pay. After a two year battle - the City finally accepted that "nursing assistants" should be paid the same as orderlies.

This was the beginning of a life dedicated to social and labour justice - one that allowed Shirley to develop her innate talents and interests. She speaks fondly of the tremendous support she got from her union when she started out, providing her with the skills and training to take on this and other issues. She never fails to pay back that support when working with others.

Over the years, Shirley was granted leaves-of-absence from the City of Winnipeg to work on a variety of campaigns - both electoral and issue-based. Her exemplary work caught CUPE's eye, and in the 1990s Shirley was hired as a "receptionist". Once on CUPE's payroll, they then released her to work on a number of issues, including the fightback against the City of Winnipeg budget in the early 1990s. Later she was seconded to work for the Choices Coalition.

The camaraderie Shirley so values was

there is an alternative.

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an important element in Cho!ces, and was no doubt part of the coalition's success. Another reason the group was so effective was Shirley's tireless backroom work: stuffing envelopes, making phone calls, keeping lists, preparing press releases: in short, all the operational work that any movement needs. She even braved an interview with CJOB's Charles Adler and laughed – on air - at his simplistic way of connecting the dots.

Shirley co-led the ground-breaking work Cho!ces undertook on alternative budgeting and was on the team that went to Ottawa to help CCPA National do the first alternative federal budget.

It was through Cho!ces that Shirley met George Harris. George had a long history doing community development work in Africa and Shirley began a new chapter in her life working for social justice there. Recruited by Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO), the pair went to Uganda where she worked with the Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda for three years. Later they worked in Ethiopia, Zanzibar and Moshi, Tanzania, with Shirley doing organizational development and fundraising and George doing financial management on other projects.

When Shirley returned from Tanzania she wasted no time taking on the organizing of CCPA Manitoba's fundraising event with Stephen Lewis. She has remained a constant supporter of CCPA Manitoba, working on several more fund-raising events including the first three Errol Black Chair brunches.

A long time NDP supporter, Shirley was president of the Manitoba NDP in the early 1980s when the Pawley government was battling to get its French language legislation passed. She ran for the provincial NDP twice, and to this day can still be found working on political campaigns, whether it be municipal, provincial or federal. She has worked on campaigns across the country, including Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Toronto. In 1979 she was part of Bill Blaikie's campaign team for federal office. In 2003, and in subsequent elections for the City of Toronto, she was a campaign

organizer for Paula Fletcher's successful bids for city councilor. Most recently she worked on Leah Gazan's campaign as a fund raiser, helping Leah take the seat.

Shirley's latest exploits have her working in the co-op sector. She worked tirelessly to get the Peg-City Car Co-op running, and put in many hours on the team that successfully pulled the Old Grace Housing Co-op together. Shirley also volunteers for the housing co-op where she and George currently live.

Shirley has never forgotten her first union meeting when as a young, inexperienced woman she was thrust into her first leadership role. What has stayed with her is the memory of the support she got from others, how they had faith in her and showed her the ropes. That was an important lesson for Shirley, but it should be for us too.

CUPE opened the gates for Shirley, and she's never looked back. Her experience shows us the tremendous benefits unions provide when they support smart, hard-working people like her, and how those benefits come full circle to help us all.

In realizing her own potential and dreams, Shirley has greatly advanced social justice in Manitoba, Canada and the world.

Lynne Fernandez holds the Errol Black Chair in Labour Issues.

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