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# *Worker Rights, Workers Write*

Stories from SEIU Healthcare Illinois & Indiana

real**conditions**

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***About SEIU Healthcare Illinois & Indiana***

SEIU Healthcare Illinois & Indiana unites more than 85,000 acute care, home care, nursing home and child care workers across two states in the fight to raise standards across industries, to strengthen the political voice for working families and for access to quality, affordable care for all families.



***About the Community Writing Project / Real Conditions***

The Community Writing Project offers writing workshops to people who ordinarily do not consider themselves to be writers and publishes their reflections on everyday life in the magazine Real Conditions. Because only the collective efforts of ordinary people can make a better world, we are particularly interested in the creative expressions and unique understandings of those who have been relegated to the margins of society, including the poor, the oppressed, immigrants, and those who risk their privilege to join them.

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# *The Writers*

Faith Arnold  
Flora Johnson  
Rebia Mixon Clay  
Rose White  
Verna Cokes

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## *Introduction*

The pieces you are about to read were written by members and staff of SEIU Healthcare Illinois & Indiana who participated in a writing workshop in the spring of 2010. The workshop was sponsored by the union and facilitated by the Community Writing Project (CWP). CWP encourages communities to recognize and celebrate the wisdom and creativity that reside within them, and to make heard in the wider world the voices of people whose concerns and struggles don't receive enough attention or respect in American society.

Every week for six weeks, the group came together to write, read, and share stories about important people and experiences in their lives. Despite demanding jobs with long work hours and family commitments, they willingly gave up precious weekend time to participate. Through their lively, insightful conversation they generated topics for writing. And as stories unfolded, they supported each other, responding with respect, compassion and understanding. As care takers by profession, they wrote movingly about caring for others and being cared for. As strong, determined women and union members, they explored challenges faced, risks taken, and obstacles overcome to improve their personal lives and the lives of others. As human beings, they shared their hopes for a better world.

Marsha Love, Joe Zaroni, Janise Hurtig  
*Facilitators*

# *Faith Arnold*



## ***Motherhood***

There is something special about mothers. Felicia is a crack addict with four children. Kena is a mother of two. One of her children is biracial, she's a prostitute. Karen is a crack addict and a prostitute and she gave birth to ten kids. Each one has a different father and each one was born with the desire of crack.

I admire each woman for the courage they displayed and the love of their children. None of these mothers raised their children.

Some would say they are a poor example of a woman. How dare they bring children into this world under such bleak conditions.

You are right-- however, as mothers they realized that their lifestyle was not conducive to raising children and as a mother love, they were able to let go.

That's what mothers do.

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## *Today Is A Good Day*

Well...let's see. It's 6:30. My first child will arrive at 7:30. What should I do first, Oh yeah...I forgot I need to take my vitamins and supplements. I take six pills twice a day, not because I'm ill. It's just part of my taking an active role in managing my health.

I've got to decide if I have time to shower or maybe I should do my 20 minute workout—it's 6:45. I can shower.

Well it's 7:00 I'm dressed---breakfast will be simple: English muffin, grapefruit and milk—Good I have time to exercise. 1 set, 2 set, 3 set—I'm done. It's almost time—7:30 (door bell rings)...I'm coming.

Today was a good day. It's 5:30 quitting time. But Ms. Robertson calls to she she'll be at work until 6:30. It is ok? Well no, it's not ok. "Sure Mrs. Robertson! I'll see you then." You see, Ms. Robertson is a newly divorced mother who has a child that has ADHD. She's from another country, Guyana. She has no family or support group in the United States. I'm her family and support group.

As she enters, she graciously apologizing, "I am so thankful for you...you see I didn't know I had to work late—I tell my boss I have to pick up my son, but they don't care". I say "It's fine. I understand, don't worry...That's what I'm here for."

I'm glad I exercised earlier... 7:00PM...what's for dinner?

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# *Flora Johnson*



## *Early Days*

I was born in Duncan, Mississippi, the third child of ten. My father and mother lived on my grandfather's plantation for 2 years. Then grandfather would say to my dad, "Son, it's time for you to rent you some land. Not share crop, but rent. Ask Mr. Cadge how much would he charge you to rent 50 acres of land for 1 year." His answer was, "500 dollars."

My dad said, "That's O.K." My dad got busy preparing the land for planting the cotton seed, using mules to cultivate the land that year, which was 1950. We had a very good crop. We gathered 50 bales of cotton, paid off his 500 dollar debt and purchased one hundred and sixty (160) acres of land for his family. We never had to share crop, because share croppers never get out of debt. The slave master always let their share croppers get groceries on credit until it's time to harvest. They could make 40 or 50 bales of cotton, and it didn't make a difference. The share croppers would always be told you didn't make enough to pay their debt, which was so unfair.

I am so thankful to God that my grandfather had a vision to buy land for his family and teach his children to do the same for their family. My dad would always tell us to use your head for more than a hat rack.

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## *My Move to Chicago from Shelby Mississippi*

I moved to Chicago in 1954 to live with my Aunt Pearl. She lived at 6140 S. Indiana. After I was here for about a month my aunt took me looking for a job. I was blessed to get hired at Montgomery Ward and worked there for 6 years.

I met a young man, David Johnson. We got married and to this union 10 children was born, 6 boys and 4 girls. I was stressed when I learned that one of my sons had brain damage (cerebral palsy), but God let me know that He would not put anything on me that I could not bear. He had already prepared me for that task.

In 1975 after 21 years of marriage we parted and divorced. My husband left me with 10 children to support, and I didn't know what to do. So I had to think about what my parents had told me, "There is nothing too hard for God". And He would never leave me. I started looking at my problems in a different way. My life began to fill with happiness. The problems that I thought was hard became light. I had a relationship with the Lord. This may seem crazy to some people, but I am for real. God is the answer to my problems.

I didn't believe in Public Assistance, and so I went looking for a job again. God blessed me to get a job at Jewel Food where I remained until I retired after 23 years of service.

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# Rebia Mixon Clay



## *Taking Care*

I became a personal care attendant really by chance; let me explain. In the 1990's my mother's health started failing her and we decided that I would help her take care of my brother Ceasar who was born with cerebral palsy. This was only a part time position because my other brother and his girl friend were also helping out. This lasted about 3 years. Then I started working as a property manager where it took up almost all of my time. I loved this job. I was given an apartment overlooking Lake Shore Drive, a great salary and everything was wonderful for several years. Then the most horrible thing that could happen, did.

My momma died from cancer; she had told me previously that she was afraid that when she died, she did not want Ceasar to be a burden on any of us and she was going to make arrangements to have him sent to a nursing home. I had never openly spoke out about anything to her until then, so I told her that I was going to take care of him. She looked at me and said I had a life of my own. I stated, "You are right", and this was what I was going to do. On December 22, 1999 about 1:15 in the morning she gave up the ghost. Two of my sisters decided they were going to take care of Ceasar, and they did for awhile but I saw they were not taking care of him the way Momma did.

So without much conversation I left my job, my beautiful apartment and got my brother on December 7, 2002.

It is a challenge, but we manage. He has taught me that life is truly what you make of it. He don't complain, he always has a smile and he let me see I don't have the right to complain.

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## *A Battle We Fought and Won*

When I was in Washington DC I was impressed at how the union was always on the Hill or participating in press conferences or supporting a common fight. There became a day when I myself was able to contribute to such a cause.

I was asked by my team leader to tell my story to Congress at a hearing on "Work Friendly Workforce". I said sure I would talk about my issues. So I along with the team leaders prepared for the hearing: I told my story to my team and learned as much as I could about what a work friendly workforce meant. I found out that so many companies do not have benefits for their employees and do not plan to make any available for their employees. I learned that there are government officials that are for and against this issue. And so, since I am for a work friendly workforce and have never had that on this job, I had to think about how when I worked for other companies I took for granted paid time off for holidays, birthdays, sick days and so on. I remembered working for companies and getting nice bonuses, being told that I was appreciated for the work I did. So I wrote down everything I could think of why this was so important. I also thought and shared that since this was the first job I ever had that did not have any benefits when I started working for DORS I realized that I was blessed and fortunate to have known how this felt, because there are still people that don't even get paid for the work they do, not to mention benefits.

On the day of the hearing it was cold and I over dressed with hat, scarf, boots, the works. When we arrived we went into the ladies room and I looked at my hair. It was a mess. The heat from the hat made my bangs stringy and this made me self conscious. We walked down the hall and I saw some of the other members and this made me feel better. We entered the chambers and I was introduced to so many people that looked to be important, I could not remember their names or titles.

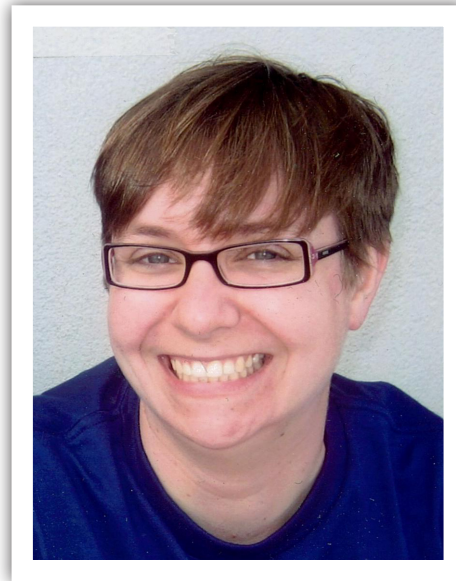
Then it was time for the hearing. We went inside of the chambers and there were many photographers, some standing and some down on the floor from many angles. Of course I was nervous, but I know that I had a chance to share my feelings and let others know just how bad things were and how our government had a chance to step up and change things.

Then it was time to tell my story and I did. I told of my job history, my brother and his issues, how my employment did not have any type of benefits, how I could not afford a pair of prescription eye glasses and that it would be nice to have a mammogram. They listened attentively, and when I was finished others on the panel for and against the issue spoke. What stood out in my mind was this woman that was against everything we stood for. She spoke about how she did not believe in giving all the benefits because she supplied her employees with enough salary that could afford their own insurance. And then she said that she would refer me to a program that gave free mammograms. And then she said the strangest thing. She asked "Am I my brother's or sister's keeper?" You may know this is a quote from the Bible. I was lost with that statement but one of the judges spoke out and stated "yes, if your brother or sisters ask for your shirt, not only should you give the shirt but also your coat." She said nothing else...

About a week later we won on the issue of the work friendly workforce. I thank SEIU for all the work they do to help the people that think they have no voice, because there are many that think that way. I thank God for putting me into these situations and positions, so I may have a chance to do what I do.

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# *Rose White*



We decided to move to Philadelphia in 2006. I had been away from the union for over a year, and my new work and co-workers were frustrating and depressing. My girl friend, Jennifer had a job offer at 1199-P, and asked me to move with her. I was ready to get out of my job and out of that house, so we rented a u-haul and gathered friends who helped us make our way north. It was about two weeks before I got a job offer, which were two of the scariest weeks of my life—I had never been out of school and without a job, and knew my savings wouldn't last long. I can't even remember what I did over that month—I remember trying to register the cars before we got too many tickets, and dancing in the kitchen with music in the background. No, I'm not a dancer, but I was so happy to be making this home with Jennifer, as adults. One of my favorite things about our first home together, which we've continued in our subsequent two homes, is a collage on the wall of photos of our families and friends. We intentionally intermix our photos—there isn't my side and hers; it's a tangible melding of our lives together.

And I remember when they called to offer me a job at one of the SEIU locals in Philly, I was so happy I almost cried. Knowing that this new job and new life were exactly the right decision.

Now, four years later, I am so glad that I was invited to change my life and take a better path. It might not be perfect—it's not—but now I know it's okay to re-assess and start a new path, and that, odds are, the way will open.

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Today, International Workers' Day, we're marching for immigration reform. It's interesting to listen to the debate. I feel like this debate has been going on for so long, people are stuck on their slogan and aren't listening to each other at all. Five years ago we'd never heard the term "illegals", but now it comes up again every few months. What are we even talking about anymore?

I'm thinking about three perspectives. Mine, as an activist for immigration reform; that of someone who opposes immigration reform; and the perspective of a member's husband who went to the march in Washington a few weeks ago.

From my perspective, we need immigration reform just like we need reform for rights of all workers in the U.S. Right now employers are hiring undocumented workers and not paying them a fair wage, or not paying them at all. People will always pay as little as they can get away with, and until these jobs are regulated, immigrant workers will be abused. And there will be fewer jobs for people who can work legally and who can therefore stand up for their rights; they will not have access to these jobs, because employers will choose the workers they can pay less money. We know there are millions of people here who aren't working legally, but are working. Just imagine the tax base if those jobs were regulated...

From the perspective of anti-immigrant activists, people who came into the country illegally broke the law and don't deserve to be rewarded with citizenship, simple as that. A lot of people are un- or under- employed, are angry, and are looking for someone to blame, and take this anger out on immigrants.

Finally, the third perspective. In March of this year our local filled two buses with members on a trip to Washington, DC for a march for immigration reform. Sure, some people were on the bus for the free trip to DC, but one conversation stands out in my mind. I was talking to an older couple—a union member and her husband, and I asked why they chose to come on the trip. The husband explained to me that this migration isn't too different from when he and his family, and millions of other black families left their homes in the South to make a better life for themselves. He told me these people are doing the same thing, and I agree.

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# *Verna Cokes*



## *Circle of a Child's Life*

If I've learned nothing else, I do know that I need to stay focused. There are so many thoughts that can enter the mind, but I get to choose which ones to focus on. For example, today little Tabria; I could see the hurt in her face. Mom and dad are not getting along, and it's affecting her behavior in school. Today I asked Tabria to go and stand in the circle of life because of her behavior. Tabria looked me straight in the face and refused to go, and waited for a reaction from me, which I choose to ignore because of the other children I was attending to. This behavior is not normal for her, and I know something is going on in her household. Do I add to the misery or make life a little better at school for her? I think I will make life a little better for her, while she's in school.

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## *Life As It Goes*

I've already been told that unless I become ill I do not qualify for a medical card. After 17 years of working for the Board of Education where I had had good medical insurance, I'm now without that security. I've taken two jobs now to compensate for the income that I'm used to. One is a child care provider and the other one is a home health aide. Neither of these jobs provide medical insurance or enough money to live on. I could say a lot more about this... I would love to go and address some issues that need to be checked out, but as for now, all I can do is pray that my body stays in good health.

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## *Thank You!*

The Community Writing Project would like to thank Myra Glassman and Rose White for embracing the workshop, for creating a warm, welcoming environment (Love those scones, Rose!) for our meetings, and for their enthusiastic participation. Special thanks to Sandra Wickerson for her commitment to the writing project idea and her efforts to recruit co-workers and other SEIU members. And to Sadie Kliner for her hard work in putting this edition of Real Conditions together!

