



# GINA STRICKLAND

## First Vice President

### Teach Them Young as They Will Be Our Next Leaders

I've been involved with unions since 1985, first as an Office Aide with the Department of Finance and then as a Principal Administrative Associate. Unionism has been a part of my family for decades. By joining Local 1180 when I started working for the City, I knew I had a strong force supporting me. I met with many of the Union's leaders and representatives who made it known that if I had a problem, they were there for me.

It was this camaraderie that I found unique and valuable. I talked about it with friends and coworkers. And I discussed it at home as well. Having Local 1180 standing up for me was like finding a new best friend. Although my son was young at the time, around seven years old, he heard about my new-found union at the dinner table and whenever I had an interesting story to tell. He didn't pay much attention because let's face it, video games and sports were much more exciting.

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But he heard it. It was as if I was planting a seed for something larger but I just didn't know it at the time. Eventually, as he started to get older and understand more, he even began to ask some questions. They were age-appropriate questions, but questions just the same. He was showing some interest. I was excited. After all, Local 1180 was becoming a larger part of my family.

In 1993, I was elected as a Shop Steward, representing more than 100 members, and seven years later, I became a full-time Local 1180 Staff Rep. If 1180 was a large part of my family before, now it was taking over. As my husband became more interested by default, so too did my son.

After 11 years as a Staff Rep, I was promoted to Supervisor, and was then elected as Second Vice President. In 2014, I was elected as First Vice President — and now Local 1180 and I were (and are) virtually married. It's like having a real, honest-to-goodness second family. Now my son was much older

and understood how important a role unions played in my life, and therefore, his as well. He took real pride in knowing his mama was able to help someone keep her job, get someone retroactive pay, and assist someone else being mistreated by her boss. He was interested and engaged.

He was part of a younger generation who happened to grow up in a union home but who didn't really need to take a stand in order to make a difference. In the back of his mind, he knew what unions were about and he knew that unionism existed.

That's how it was then. Now it's a different story. Our younger generation *needs* to get involved in order to make a difference. It's no longer just a matter of asking questions. It's about activism.

Just look at the March for Our Lives in Washington, D.C. that was spearheaded by today's younger generation sick of school shootings and violence. Hundreds of thousands of people crowded together just as they had been crowding legislators' phone lines and email inboxes after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas massacre in Parkland, FL.

Shooting survivor Cameron Kasky delivered this proclamation: “To the leaders, skeptics, and cynics who told us to sit down and stay silent, wait your turn: Welcome to the revolution. It is a powerful and peaceful one because it is of, by, and for the young people of this country. Since this movement began some people have asked me, do you think any change is going to come from this? Look around, we are the change. Our voices are powerful, and our votes matter. We hereby promise to fix the broken system we've been forced into and to create a better world for the generations to come. Don't worry, we've got this.”

While this statement was obviously about guns, it holds true for just about anything. We need our younger generation to “get it.” We need them to step in and learn the system today so they can be the new system tomorrow. If something isn't working, fix it. Today's youth are growing up in different times. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and even the world wide web didn't exist when we were growing up. It took days and even weeks to get out a message that today gets disseminated in five seconds flat.

According to an article in Portside Labor, “Young people are at a tipping point. They are frustrated by a system whose cracks were etched into place by preceding generations, but have only fully metastasized for theirs. They experience suffocating levels of

student debt alongside declining wages and income equality while watching companies monopolize entire industries, and sometimes even nationwide elections. Representation — actual representation — feels more like theory than reality.”

Young people's activism to fix a broken system is getting noticed by our generation of leaders. We see in our children and grandchildren a spark, an enthusiasm, an energy that didn't previously exist. Hashtags have created a way for hundreds of thousands worldwide to band together on an issue without ever seeing each other face to face. #BlackLivesMatter. #MeToo. #NeverAgain. It's never been this easy to create a movement — and the younger generation has the #PowerToDoIt.

Young people, frustrated by a political system and an economic system that do not benefit them, are turning to outside outlets to effect change — outlets like unions. For the first time in decades, union membership is on the rise among young people who historically have not been unionized. According to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), in 2017, there were 262,000 new union members in the United States with 75% of this increase coming from those 34 and under. A large part of this increase, according to EPI, is that “unionization campaigns often center around not simply better wages or benefits, but a sense that your voice will be heard.”

That “voice” is not simply ONE benefit of joining a union, it IS the benefit. When unions are strong, workers have a voice. After all, that is the basic tenet of unionism. This is especially true for the younger generation who now firmly believes that with a strong voice, they can actually make a difference. If business leaders won't listen to them, and if political leaders won't listen to them, they know where their voices will be heard — unions.

And that's what my now 40-year-old son learned as he was growing up, too. He learned that in numbers there is strength ... he learned that a union family is a great family ... he learned that if you get behind the issues, you can make a difference. And he learned that belonging to a union is one of the best ways to make a difference. That's why he now belongs to a union himself. ■