

ATU's Nickum retires after long career

When Helen Nickum retired from Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 757 this month, she took with her stories of a lifetime of interest in politics, and 18 years of service to the union.

Nickum, 78, was born in Portland in 1928, the second of two daughters of Walter and Charlotte Nickum. Her mother was a homemaker, her father a union ironworker. Her uncle, Earl "Big Mac" McLenahan, was a business agent of the Painters Union.

Helen Nickum graduated Portland's Jefferson High School in 1945, and got a job in the Portland shipyard as a secretary for the son of ship and steel magnate Henry Kaiser.

She remained a secretary all her life, though the requirements changed over the course of 61 years. From dictation and ditto machines to faxes and photocopiers, she stuck with the profession, learning over a dozen word processing programs dating from the dawn of the personal computer.

In the late 1940s, she studied business and mathematics at the University of Oregon, and later got a bachelor's degree in secretarial science at Oregon State College.

She went to work as a legal secretary for the politically-connected Portland law firm Davidson & Nikoloric, and became active in the Democratic Party as a precinct committeeperson. She volunteered for the unsuccessful presidential



HELEN NICKUM

campaign of Adlai Stevenson, and for the successful campaign of Richard Neuberger. When Neuberger won election to the U.S. Senate, Nickum asked him for a job and was hired. That assignment began nearly two decades of life and work in Washington, D.C. She took a job with Oregon Congresswoman Edith Green. She worked for the Democratic National Committee.

After temping for a secretarial firm, she decided to form her own company and was one of the first women to get a

small business loan from the U.S. government. Over the course of 12 years that spanned the tumultuous 1960s, she and as many as 18 employees did temporary work and printing jobs for numerous government entities. In 1971, with the economy soured, she closed her business, packed her bags and her two cats, and returned to Portland.

She took a job at U.S. Bank, but after three years, left and joined a successful class-action gender discrimination lawsuit. She became active with the local women's movement, and with groups like Common Cause and Friends of the Columbia Gorge. Finally, after a seven-year stint at CH2M Hill, she was hired at ATU in August 1987, working first for financial secretary-treasurer Tony Bryant and then, for many years, for Ron Heintzman.

She was active in Office and Professional Employees Local 11.

Nickum liked working for the union, she said, because of the teamwork and because it meant saving people's jobs. And she liked working for Heintzman, who she described as a practical joker, but a leader who was always planning and anticipating how best to defend members' interests. After a lifetime working for people who were motivated by a passion for equality and democracy, Nickum retires with a union pension and health benefits, and expects to remain active.

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