



Kathy Blay (wearing tiger print jacket), retired after 38 years as office secretary for Floor Coverers Local 1236 and Glass Workers Local 740. Blay has worked for nine business managers. Her most recent bosses threw a surprise party for her on her last day of work.

After 38 years, Blay retires as secretary for Locals 1236, 740

For 38 years, members and visitors calling on Floor Coverers Local 1236 and Glass Workers Local 740 have been greeted with a warm welcome by office secretary Kathy Blay. Those callers discovered what a wealth of information Blay possessed, as she efficiently handled their requests.

"That's what it's all about," she said. "You're a member. You pay your dues. You should get service. That's what we're there for."

Blay retired Dec. 1, 2011.

She returned for a few weeks in February to help train her successor, Trisha Kasch. On Feb. 10, colleagues and friends threw a surprise retirement luncheon for her at a restaurant near the union hall in Northeast Portland.

"I started out as the youngest person working in the building; now I'm the oldest person in the building," said Blay, 61.

She was a 23-year-old receptionist at a union insurance company in the Portland Labor Center on Southwest Arthur Street downtown when — in October 1973 — a job for an office secretary opened up at Floor Coverers Local 1236.

In those days, most union locals had their offices at the Labor Center. Blay's father, the late Bud Barnes, was a business agent for Asbestos Workers Local 36, which had an office on the third-floor next to the Floor Coverers. He put in a good word for her with the head of the union, Don Long.

Fast-forward 38 years — and nine business managers, just as many business agents, organizers, and other union staff — and Blay is ready to clock out for good.

"That's a lot of guys I've had to train," she quipped, naming Joe Snedeker, Dick Olsen, Bill Wilkerson, Kelly Ferderer, Dave Winkler, Ben Johnson, Cris Baugher, and Jerry Fisher.

But it's true.

Business managers are elected, so they can come and go. Oftentimes it's the office secretary who helps show newcomers the ropes.

The Portland Labor Center eventually shuttered, and in 1981 the Floor Coverers, Glass Workers, and Asbestos Workers locals moved to a building on Northeast Sandy Blvd., along with Painters and Tapers Local 10 and District Council 55 (now D.C. 5). There, the Floor Coverers and Glass Workers shared an office.

In 1986, with the advent of computers, Blay was reassigned as secretary for both the Floor Coverers and Glass Workers after the locals computerized their offices. For the last 10 years of her career she had help from a part-time assistant.

The secret to her longevity? "I've always been treated as part of the team, not as a 'girl,'" she said. "I feel fortunate that I've been able to work in a place with such a congenial atmosphere. They treated me well. They made me feel appreciated."

Nothing can illustrate Blay's value to the locals more so than what took place during the two weeks prior to her departure. As she was spending time training her replacement, the business manager or a union rep would help answer the phones, but members would always ask for Kathy. When the union officer identified themselves, the member would still want to talk to Kathy.

"It became a running joke in the office," she said.

Blay has been a member of Office and Professional Employees Local 11 throughout her working career.

Several dozen people — ranging from past business managers and Executive Board members to vendors and other professionals — attended the surprise retirement party. Blay was presented with a wristwatch, cash, gift cards, flowers, and lots of well wishes.

In retirement, Blay, a widow with several step-children and grandchildren, plans to travel. She's booked a cruise for August and will visit her brother, a retired member of Insulators Local 36, who lives in Arizona.

"There's still lots of things I want to do," she said.

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