**UMBC Course Cultural Documentation in Participation with Communities (AMST 358)**

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**Steelworkers United Union Hall Local 9477**

**Dundalk Ave., Baltimore, MD**

Interviewer: Michelle Stefano (**MS**), Maryland Traditions / UMBC

Interviewee: Darlene Redemann **(DR)**

Transcriber: Meg Davis, AMST 358, UMBC

[00:40] **DR**: Yes, my name is Darlene Redemann…I worked at Sparrows Point plant for 33 years…I retired in 2008 due to medical problems due to my back…

**[00:29] MS: So, what brought you to Sparrows Point or Baltimore…or, where are you originally from?**

**DR:** Im actually from Baltimore City and I moved into the Dundalk area in 1970. At that time I worked at Marine terminals, and you know I was offered, I was told that Sparrows point was hiring which was one of the better paying jobs and better benefits in the community; so I applied for that job, and I was awarded the job. I started as basically a laborer and then I moved up into the cranes for twenty years. The way the pension system worked at Bethlehem Steel, they took your last 10 years and took your best 5 out of the 10 to get your pension. So at that point in time I moved to the floor and gradually moved to the top position in the mill as a roller… and worked a lot of overtime and everything to secure that I would have a really good pension when I decided to leave; and unfortunately in 2001 Bethlehem Steel claimed bankruptcy and we lost two thirds of our pension. My husband also worked there for 37 years, was only retired for 7 months when he lost his pension, medical benefits, life insurance he lost everything. So it’s really sad that this whole community basically was suffering and it’s still suffering, it’s only gonna suffer more cause there’s no more big industries in Dundalk. So I’m really saddened by the government hasn’t really stepped forward and secured some type of decision making in this loss of pension. I mean it was just so many people lost their homes their, their cars their they can no longer send their children to college; I mean it’s just a domino back flow effect on everybody. I mean Bethlehem Steel was one of the hardest environments that you could work in; I mean the hours that we worked the extreme heat and freezing cold you worked Christmases Fourth of July’s it didn’t matter. I mean you went through all of this knowing that one day you would be secure in this pension and your children would have the life that they deserved and it’s just very very sad and the last group I believe it was 180 employees that just flat out lost their jobs and it it’s just so sad, and you’re a person in your 50s and you’re gonna try to get a job? Get a job where? There’s no longer any industrials in the state of Maryland that can secure these people to give them the living that they reached to at Bethlehem Steel. There so many families had to leave the Dundalk area their moving to Pennsylvania to Virginia to Florida to North Carolina, everybody’s leaving the state of Maryland because there is nothing left in the state of Maryland for the normal working class to you know secure their income, and it’s very sad. I mean these 1800 people now are going through intense training. You know at an older age that’s not an easy task to do to change your career out of nowhere, and their and even after they get their training where are they going? There’s nothing left, I mean this community lost general motors’… fisher price was of course a part of general motors, Leaver Brothers, Westing House, and you also gotta look at the fact that Bethlehem Steel was actually suppliers for all these smaller companies on north point road. So there’s no longer, you know, suppliers in the community to supply them so these smaller companies now have to import the supplies from different states. So the state is just going downhill so fast and I don’t see anybody standing up and saying ‘this is what we’re gonna do’. Yeah you can raise our taxes till we’re taxed to death but if you don’t have no money ‘wel-uh’…its just its very sad that the government hasn’t stepped forward and secured these peoples income or you know; all the homes in Dundalk were basically owned by Sparrows Point workers and id say 90% of them were veterans from WWII, WWI, Vietnam War, you know and it goes on and on. So you have your VFW’s , your American Legions, your Mooses that are all going bankrupt as well because all these service men fought for this country, now just wanted to make a basic living have lost it all. And it’s very sad I mean where’s the security and you know ‘God bless America’ or ‘made in America’. I mean its…and I don’t see anybody doing a thing to say ‘we’re gonna bring this business to Baltimore, were gonna bring this to the state of Maryland’. Nobodies bringing nothin’ to nothin’. So all these businesses in the area are gonna be suffering, children are not gonna be able to afford college, that’s just gonna be somethin’… you know. So your either gonna have your higher class and your low low class. There’s no longer a medium class and somebody really has to step forward to make this happen that we get back our medium class citizen, you know, I mean were the ones that made the state of Maryland what it is and now it’s, it’s gone, so.

**[6:48] MS: You bring up so many points; I have a lot of questions. Let’s go back a little bit…**

**DR:** Sure

**MS: What was being a roller like?**

**DR:** Well, you stayed on your feet for 8 solid hours and you got a sheet of steel flying past ya at 2,500 feet per minute. So it was a very dangerous job, the environment was very greasy, and like I said in the summer time your look at in the higher hundred degrees, in the winter tome you’re looking at freezing. There was no lunch breaks you know they called it, you eat on the fly. So here you got your sandwich with your hand full of grease. There was no breaks, if you had to go to the bathroom, well your just gonna have to wait I mean. As far as the swing shift, that was just insane. You would work two daylights, one three-eleven four midnights, it didn’t matter if it was Christmas Fourth of July it didn’t matter; you had to be at work. I mean there was no ‘I can’t come to work today, my child is sick’ it didn’t matter, it didn’t matter what the situation was at home; you showed up for work or you didn’t have a job. It was very simple. So with all those ramifications that’s when, why I got involved with the union a year after I started at Bethlehem Steel. And I had a long history of being just about every type of union representative that was needed at the point so.

**[8:24] MS: and from what I understand you were the first union, female union representative. Could you talk about being a woman at Sparrows Point and also within the union?**

**DR:** I was the first zone committee person for the Sparrows Point plant, and… the men and women respected me highly because I really fought hard…I represented 1200 people at that time and we had a very young employee you know list at that point in time so there was a lot of problems with drugs and alcohol because you didn’t have a life, you know Sparrows Point was your life, you know. And it was really hard especially like being a mother I mean, I mean I worked 16 hours Id go home well my son has a baseball game. You have it support your children in their sports, so it was like when did you sleep, you didn’t. And it was like there was no sitting down at the mill. You stood up for your eight hour shift, twelve hour shift; we eventually went to twelve hour shifts, you know. And then we had to worry about your pensions, securing that when you left Bethlehem Steel that you were gonna have a future. So you worked all the over time you possibly could to secure that fact that that’s the money you had to live with when you left. And we left and we lost all our money; and that’s one thing that I’ll just never ever understand how can you say ‘this is what I’m gonna give you’ and when I leave you don’t give it to me. You know, so… it’s sad, it’s just really sad. Especially losing healthcare… I mean like my husband worked there 37 years, I worked there 33 years we don’t have any healthcare, come on. I mean we paid the taxes, I mean big amounts of taxes for the state of Maryland and the federal government so now can you tell me I don’t have anything.

**[10:31] MS: What was it like working with your husband at the point? Did you see him or…**

**DR:** As…not as often as I would have loved to (laughs). No my husband was a crane mechanic so when I was still in the crane I would see him now and then, as far as the crane. But I mean like, we really suffered for the fact that I’m workin swing shift he’s workin daylight plus he’s workin three- eleven; we have a young son at home…he’s involved in every type sports you could possibly think of; and somebody had to be there to secure that he was gonna be able to do what he would have loved to done. So like I said there was no like ‘ok it’s time for dinner everybody sit down’ that just never happened, unless you were on vacation and that’s if I got vacation same time he did because you vacations went by seniority, you know. And then in 1998 they decided to make the new mill, which we all thought was you know like winning the lottery cause we knew now we were really gonna have a secure job. And fortunately you know, I became one of the rollers with my seniority and my ability you know to do the job and so that was, we just thought we had it made and three years later…well 2001 is when Bethlehem Steel went bankrupt so that was just…the saddest thing. I mean we had people, you know I hate to say this, but we had people committin’ suicide, that’s how bad things got for a lot of people, I mean and that should never ever be, being an American I mean we welcome people in this country to become somebody and here we are Americans and just lost everything so.

**[12:29] MS: So you said you’ve played a lot of roles in the union. Can you talk a little bit more about that, what you did?**

**DR:** Well I started off, actually the first year I was there I became the shop (?) which you took care of your department only. And then three years later I became the zone committee person; and then I’ve held a lot of titles as far as safety committees, bug bank committees, I went to a lot of the international conventions. One of the conventions that’s when we started The Women of Steel and we brought that back to the Sparrows Point Plant…because a lot of the women back then were really discriminated against big time; not as much as wage wise as you know they’d say they have to pick up 75 pounds to remain in the mill well you had men that couldn’t pick up 75 pounds. So we fought that, I fought that really long and hard and finally won that case. I believe that was in 82’ that I won that case that was discrimination because if a man can’t pick it up how do you expect a woman to pick it up? But all the women down there I mean really suffered as far as a family life so they could have security when they left and that was lost. You know the union job towards the end really got rough because that’s when we were going through all the job eliminations and I was trying to make the best grievance possible to secure some type of income for the people that were losing that position but it was a no win situation; because if you helped out the junior guy now you screwed with the senior guy, if you helped out the senior guy now you screwed with the junior guy. So that was just a catastrophe trying to deal with that making everybody happy, but…I made it! (laughs).

**[14:36]MS: And where did you live while you were working at Sparrows Point, or where do you live now?**

**DR:** I was living in Dundalk and I still reside in Dundalk… you know. But like I said I can see the surrounding areas in the communities that were once owned by steel workers that had to leave the community. I mean it’s like you can’t stay in the state of Maryland when there’s no job to go to, no, you know there’s no industrial jobs whatsoever that are big. I mean we had Crosom Black Well, we had McCormick, Dominos, well Dominos is now owned by foreigners and the pay is way way less; and so there’s really nothing for the people that survived working at Bethlehem Steel. We had, if you know right here on Dundalk Avenue we have the big memorial with all the names of the people that were killed at the point and…I was there for four of them that I was a union rep at that time and I had to investigate it and that was nothing more horrible then you know, to see, you know, what actually happened for a man that’s comin’ to work to support his family and never makes it home. It’s very sad, I mean the the safety issues, we try to cover everything humanely possible, but the the place you know was just enormous ad the jobs that people held were so dangerous, you know, so when somebody came home from work, you know. And then theres the Asbestos issue. I personally have phase 2 Asbestos, my husband has phase 1 Asbestos. I mean it was just crumbling around us, and…it just amazes me that no environmental people knew back then what that Asbestos was doin to us. You know, and then I can remember times being in the crane when they were rollin the mills they were using the palm oil. Well with the palm oil mixed with another mixture and then it got to its its hot point, you know that fume would come in the air and we broke out something horrible; I mean we had rashes and you know, so it was like…it wasn’t healthy to work there. And when you made it out you wanted your pension then you didn’t have one (laughs). You know, but there was a lot of issues we fought in the mill the secure the safety of everyone, like free gloves. You used to have to pay for your gloves, you had to pay for your shoes, I mean that’s insane you know. So we did win that then we were getting a longer vacation that was shortened. 1983 our pay, our wages were cut back; and they cut all our wages back, our Sunday premiums back, our incentives back, and a week later they gave all the foremen’s raise; I mean this kinda nonsense that was goin’ on, you know, so. But the Steel Workers of America really fought hard for the members down there to, you know, to secure them but evidently nobody knew that the pension would have dissolved you know, so.

**[17:54] MS: When you look back…what are the positive things that remain in your mind about Sparrows Point, about working there, good things?**

**DR:** Makin money (laughs). I mean I did make good money but I worked for it too. I worked a lot of overtime like I keep statin’, you know. But, you weren’t just like, the guy next to you wasn’t an employee, he was your best friend. You knew everybody’s children, wives, I mean because if you weren’t family down there and stuck together, you are gonna get hurt. So you had to watch out for one another so…that was the saddest part about leaving Bethlehem Steel that I had to leave all my friends behind. But I, you know, said ‘oh that’s no problem, you know we’ll all get together at Christmas parties or Christmas function’ but now that’s gone…how can you take a company that once had 39,000 people, the largest Steel Mill in the United States and it’s all gone. I mean it’s…just flabbergasts me that, that this was allowed to happen, you know. But that’s basically the fondest memory I have is the is the men and women that I worked with, you know. Because…when did you see your husband or children you know (laughs) I mean sometimes you only had 8 hours to go home, make it back to work. I mean you slept, you tried to…do the house keepin’ and the laundry and your parental obligations and your wifely duties and (laughs) you had to cram everything into a small time span.

**[19:42] MS: What would you want people to know about Sparrows Point? What is, what’s the story that isn’t told, the legacy of it?**

**DR:** Well, like I said when, a lot of people don’t realize you know, I mean we were making really good money; and a lot of people looked at that like ‘what are yous crying about’ you know when we had to take a cut back you’re making good money but nobody will ever ever realize the environment…that you were workin’ in I mean like I said there was no such thing as a lunch break or you know in the, the locker rooms were horrendous I mean because everybody’s filled with grease. So you got to sit down to change and then the next person behind you is, you know so it’s like you’re takin’ a shower, which mainly was like just ice cold water, you know, didn’t have enough lockers in the locker rooms for the amount of people that they had. So, but we all roughed it. But like I said we’re all family and that what held us together. You know, that’s what gave us stable in our minds that the guy next to me has my back, you know, so.

**[20:53] MS: One of the things that’s been surprising me when I’m learning more and more about Sparrows Point is how massive this complex is. Do you feel you had an understanding of, not everyone in particular, but all the different departments, and mills, and did you feel like you knew what was going on, or were there places that were completely foreign to you and you didn’t really interact with those people?**

**DR:** No, well I’m…more knowledgeable than the other person because since I was a union rep I went to different parts of the Steel Mill to find out you know, how their environment was, how their wage tier was, tryin’ to help with women’s rights because a lot of women really had to fight hard for the positions that they held. But there was places that you never even knew existed, I mean we’re talkin’ about a monstrous, you know property. In fact when I was union rep they told me that, you know I was goin through my list and I see this guy’s name I said ‘where’s this guy at’ you know, and he said ‘oh he’s at the creek’, I said ‘the creek’. What they did, they had like a real fine net that would try to catch the sludge before it would reach the Bay; and this guy would have to get down on this little tiny rail and scoop this sludge out of this net (laughs) before it it hit the environment. I mean, it was insane what this man did, and he’s out there by his self; you know and I didn’t even know the guy existed until. But it, jobs like that that you know that would like the unknown that were actually, you know helpin’ the environment and this guy, nobody even knew he existed you know that’s and it was like the lowest paying job you could get done there and it was dangerous, especially in the winter I mean this little tiny rail is solid ice; and this guy has to balance on this rail to keep bringing this net up filled with sludge. And then he would put it in 55, you know gallon drums, it mean it just amazed me. But everything, you go back to the, to the earlier part of the years before the L Furnace came in they actually had a neighborhood there. The neighborhood was lost when the L Furn, they placed the L Furnace in. But this, they had their own schools, their own grocery stores; the women would wash the clothes hand them on the line, only for them to turn bright red. You know from the air you know so, just amazes me that these women that worked there had to do everything you know there was no modernization back then. But the gentlemen lived right here. Ed Bartee’s family lived in this neighborhood as well as Lou Blackwell, they can really really enlighten you with the history of living at Sparrows Point and growing up in Sparrows Point.

**[24:03] MS: Were there any favorite spots in the community? I know I’ve heard a lot of Micky’s a lot of people are bringing up Micky’s, are there any other places that were real community hubs other that the union hall?**

**DR:** Well, Micky’s was basically where everybody would go to cash their checks, this was before the direct deposit days. Costas, you know on pay day, you know the people would just, north point road was just so many bars and restaurants, sub shops, donut shops, coffee shops, and on pay day you know you would have to fight your, we you got to think about it there was 39000 people; not that we were on the road at the same time but, and everyone of them places became triple in size but now they’ve lost everybody. Now nobody is riding past there, so all these companies are folding; I mean all these bar businesses and restaurants are folding. But yeah on a Tuesday you know if you worked the right shift you know everybody would get together. We had softball teams that we created, which was really hard since everybody worked swing shift, you never knew when you were working. We had bowling teams that we had to get the bowling alleys to accommodate us like at 4:00 in the morning so we could get our score in, you know things like that; just so you could be human cause you know your life was so tangled up workin’ there that you had a schedule everything around you know your pleasure as well as you know your workin’ you know, so.

**[25:41] MS: One of my, I guess my last question, how are you doing now after the Point?**

**DR:** Well, like I said unfortunately I left there with a bad back, just about every single disk I have in my back theres somethin’ wrong with it. So the health wise issue was really a long battle you know; tryin’ to recover to where I could walk walk. You know I exercise constantly now to keep the strength in my back. Theres no operation possible since I have a tear, a bulge, a rupture, a disintegrated Sciatic nerve, and then in my neck I have two vertebrae’s that were broken; I got hit by a crane one time. So, but I made it, you know and I learned that the mighty dollar can be really stretched if you really really put you mind to it; because that’s what had to happen, you know. But just before my husband retired we bought a home in Virginia and figured that’s where we were gonna retire to and everything and just crumbled. I mean look at the housing market, you couldn’t sell your house. What are you gonna sell your house for? What are you gonna give it away? Theres nobody out here that has money to buy it (laughs). You know, so it…I keep hate sayin’ the word sad but it it’s very very sad that when Bethlehem Steel shut down that all the bosses, the golden power shoots as they call it you know got millions. And they’re the ones who destroyed the companies you know. We had a plate mill that was bringing in $1 million a month. They shut it down…and then turned around and bought another plate mill that wound up going bankrupt and that’s how all this bankruptcy stuff actually had the domino effect is when we got rid of the plate mill and bought another one that was worthless. You know, I mean its…I just don’t understand the person that’s supposed to have all the knowledge made the mill shut down, and he’s the one that gets rewarded. How can a judge in the United States say ‘well this is ok’ you know, I don’t understand it…I really really don’t. I mean we had marched for so many different things that you know as a union for you know solidarity and for family issues and wars and what happens to the veterans when they come home? I mean the steel workers have really been instrumental in, you know helpin’ out the people in the United States but especially us in the state of Maryland. We created Harvest for the Hungry food bank. We gave out the, we have the most donations in the state of Maryland. The Red Cross we gave out the most donations. United way, and unfortunately now I have 1800 people, I say I because I’m so involved in everybody being union, that are on the street that now has to depend on these things that we we were instrumental in developing, you know.

**[29:06] MS: Is there anything else you would like to add?**

**DR:** Yes, I would like to add the fact that Maryland, the state of Maryland really has to wake up and secure these industries that we have left in the state of Maryland. They have to make sure that we get a lot of these industries back; I mean because our youth is what is most important. These children are not gonna be able to have a college education. And if they do have a college education, where are they gonna work in the state of Maryland? Where? At a casino? I mean the casino was supposed to be helpin’ everything, I don’t see no help. The lottery was supposed to help our streets; it took me an hour to get up here and I only live two miles away because of how messed up everything is so somebody in Washington has to wake up and tell these governors what their plans are supposed to be as far as securing their states. Somebody’s gotta listen or our youth is gonna have nowhere to go. It’s that simple.

**[3:18] MS: Thank you so much.**

**DR:** Thank you

**MS: Nirjal do you have any questions? Kristen?**

**Kristen: Well, just one tiny one. Just, what made the clothes turn red? I just, I never heard that part before.**

**DR:** From the smoke stacks from, I can’t remember which plant it actually was. You never heard that! I’ll never forget it, I grew up in Orangeville and a gentleman had a white Cadillac but it was red from (laughs) from the smoke stacks. Do you know what plant that was Addie? (laughs) But it was steel dust that created this red red, deep red smog you know. And like I said I mean you know you talk about cancer and nobody’s really really ever investigated you know like I said with all these sludge’s and oils and environmental issues you know it’s like, I mean we had so many people die from cancer and at Sparrows Point that it’s amazing and it’s no wonder cause nobody’s really ever ever investigated you know what was, well now they do they have labels on every little thing you look at. But you know, but that red dust you have to investigate that with someone cause I can’t remember which mill it was; but it…it was amazin’ (laughs). All the guys walked out blood red. So, so you, that’s what I’m saying, then you had that pollution in the air. I don’t know if you ever heard anybody like talk about kish(?). You know they came from the the stacks. When it landed it was like, like little tiny chunks of cement, you know called kish. Everybody that lived along the water line was getting’ this all in their pools and that’s why I said the environmental people should have stepped in years and years ago, you know. We finally got our water filtration system right next to the new mill I think it cost millions but it filtered all the waters at the Sparrows Point plant before it went out in the bay. And that should of, that could have been done years and years ago. Except that one little guy on the rail catching that sludge off a net (laughs) so.