TM: After college, I worked for Catholic Charities for five years in a program called Food and Nutrition. It is kind of an equivalent of the WIC [Women, Infants and Children, a federal anti-poverty program]. I've got to thank Catholic Charities, because they kind of opened me up to different experiences. They were members of Long Island Congregations, Associations and Neighborhoods [CAN], an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation. I ended up as a manager for the inventory department and the mobile unit that provided supplemental foods to women and children and also seniors throughout Long Island. I liked it there, because I felt like I was helping people. But, at the end, it also showed me that I was just putting on a Band-Aid, because, in my five year there, I continued seeing the same faces I had seen my first year. They just had different kids. So I thought that I wasn't really changing the world much.

I ended up leaving Catholic Charities to work as an organizer for Long Island CAN. Then I worked for the East Brooklyn Congregations, EBC, another affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation. I think a lot of people know of Sol Alinsky [IAF founder]. But they also know of Mike Gecan. He's the regional director of IAF in the Northeast and just recently wrote a book, ***Going Public***. So I worked for the East Brooklyn Congregations and, through the IAF training, they teach people to reflect about their lives and to ask: "If you had the power to change something, what would it be?" That's a question that a lot of us don't ask and we should. And the organization, asks us to reflect on how we're doing as organizers. Are we managing our time correctly? Where do we want to go? All this reflection kind of made me reflect about what I wanted to do.

My grandfather was a carpenter and I have fond memories of working with him in the shop. I always wanted to be a carpenter, but family pressures were always on me to go to college, to get an education. You know, most parents want their kids to be doctors or lawyers, or accountants, teachers. They usually don't want them to be tradespeople, electricians, or carpenters. And so I ended up leaving the IAF, the East Brooklyn Congregations and went to work for a nonunion carpentry contractor eight years ago.

Q: And did you get your training to do that?
TM: I've always kind of like putzed around, but you never really know the trade until you really do it. So my training was there with this nonunion guy on the job. Good company: Verity Construction. I started earning ten bucks an hour -- a significant cut from what I was earning before. But I made a decision; I realized that I didn't want to be 55 years old or older and not have done something that I really wanted to do. So I worked for this company for about two years in Long Island, doing mostly high-end renovations, construction, houses.

Q: But there was no sort of apprenticeship, no formal training?
TM: No formal training.

Q: And that was common with this company, you think?
TM:

The Empire State Regional Council of Carpenters saw the influx of immigrants doing carpentry work here, and felt that they needed a Latino, Spanish-speaking organizer. Through people who knew me when I worked with Catholic Charities, with the Long Island CAN or East Brooklyn Congregations, my name surfaced. And so my two worlds came together. What a perfect story. I'm doing something in the memory of my grandfather, who was a good carpenter and did not have representation. And here I am doing something that I like to do: perhaps just a little change, not the world, but in our area.

And so I was hired in 2001 by the Empire State Regional Council of Carpenters. It covers all of New York State except New York City. I'm assigned to the jurisdiction of Region 1, Local 7, covering Nassau and Suffolk Counties. Local 7 is the only carpenters' local in Long Island. What happened, over the past 10 years is that it's been restructured. Our national president, Douglas McCarron, felt that there were too many little kingdoms. And it was true: there were five in Nassau County, about another five in Suffolk County. And what was

Q: Was more organizing one of the major issues that President McCarron came into office on?
TM: That's right.

Q: What kind of training do your organizers get these days?
TM: We have our core training and that's being revamped, so we're not going to have that until next year. We have quarterly or annual training in Atlantic City in different types of issues, like top-down organizing versus bottom-up organizing. We just came back from a training on how to put together an effective PowerPoint presentation. It's more and more geared to today's world. Things change; the old rules sometimes don't apply. And the carpenters see that and they understand that we've got to work together with contractors. Because, if the contractors are not profitable, then our men can't work. We will never be cheaper than the nonunion, but our product is a better product and that's how we've got to sell it. And our carpenters work safely, are productive and provide good quality.

Q: Do you use the COMET training system?
TM: Yes, we have used the COMET training system. I think that's changing; that's the one that they're revamping. I did not go through the COMET. I came up from outside, but the ten-day training I received from the Industrial Areas Foundation gave me a good foundation and I've done pretty well with it.

Q: Do you bring members into organizing very much or do you presently mainly rely on your core, full-time organizers?
TM: Oh, no, we are nothing without our membership. They're the ones who fight for everything, really. They're the army on the field and, without their support, you know, we'd be dead on the water. Our shop stewards are the Green Berets. They're the Volunteer Organizing Committee, the VOC. And they work not just in organizing campaigns, but also in volunteer projects and political action.

Q: In being volunteer organizers, do they get time off the job through contract agreements or something to organize?
TM: No, no. This is all on their own time. And we have union participation where members have two or three days a year that they are giving to their union. But it's their responsibility and there's a mechanism that they can ask somebody else to do it for them. But, those shop stewards are there all year 'round.

Q: Could you describe briefly the carpenters' major organizing drives now on Long Island?
TM: Sure. I'll go through the one that we just completed. Now it's kind of got a life of its own. Then I'll explain to you where we're going now with a different type of campaign. When I first started, we already had a prevailing wage campaign, in schoolwork, fire departments, police departments -- public works. "Prevailing wage" is the rate of pay for specific trades in a specific area. For example, right now, in Long Island, for carpenters, the prevailing wage is $57.53. That's $33 and change in wages and the rest in fringe benefits. Other trades have similar rates, based on the bargaining agreements of the unions. On public jobs, it is required that these prevailing rates are paid. The reason behind that is so there is a level playing field. Everybody's bidding apples to apples. It depends on your overhead and much you really want to make.

So it's to have an even playing field. Because you're paying the same amount for wages and benefits. Material doesn't change much either, unless you're a big contractor and you buy a lot of, let's say, metal studs like the carpenters use or sheet rock. Maybe you'll get a penny of savings, but really the material and the labor is the same. So it all depends on how good your numbers are, and so that's the prevailing rate.

So what was happening in the prevailing rate, especially in the concrete industry, was that these rates were not being paid. And our contractors, we work very closely with our contractors, our contractors are saying, "You guys gotta do something, because, otherwise, we're going to go out of business." And we ended up putting together a campaign, a concrete/prevailing wage campaign, because it has not just been concrete, it's been other -- you know, dry wall, ceilings, etc., contractors that have been doing that kind of work.

And what was happening was that a lot of these concrete contractors were hiring undocumented workers. We don't have anything against undocumented workers; I'm an immigrant myself. Neither does our council nor the international. Our mission is to organize all the carpenters, to elevate the standard of living for all carpenters. They're all brothers. In 2001 we started researching and finding out specific companies that were not doing the right thing. We were interviewing the men, using salting tactics. Salting is when you put a union worker to work in a company to get some information back. And what we were finding was that, instead of paying the guys the prevailing rate back then – it was like $52 and change -- they were only paying $16 an hour! That's getting rich off the sweat and blood of the worker.

TM: Why? Because I think they learned, at the end that, yes, it is cheaper to work with the union. Also, my boss gives this analogy: you can go on the LIE every day at 85 miles per hour. But, one day, somebody gets stopped and then, the following day, you know that someone got stopped on that specific area and you're going to slow down and look around and see if the cops are around this time. Some people just decide to change their ways and say, "You know what? Perhaps if I'm going to be around in this business for the long haul, perhaps I can work well with the carpenters' union."

And we show them how they can work well with us, because a lot of them have a lot of worries that $57.53 is a lot of money. And they don't just do prevailing wage all the time; they do houses, too. So we tell 'em, "Well, listen, we have different rates. We have different agreements and that can work for you. You can be working on a prevailing wage job one day and then you can go pour a foundation for a single house another day." So sometimes what happened in these areas when all these cases were going on, some people started asking, "Are you looking at me? Are you looking at me?" And they said, "You know what? Perhaps you can show me how we can we work together."

Q: What other approaches have you been using to organize the unorganized, besides the prevailing wage campaign?
TM: The other one has been the housing industry. We ended up going into the residential area and that's the campaign we've been doing for about a year now. And it's been mostly a combination of top-down, bottom-up.

Q: Can you describe what you mean by "top-down"?
TM: Top-down is talking to the contractors themselves as business, from a business perspective. But, at the same time, working from the bottom with the workers, gathering information, letting them know about the carpenters, what the prevailing rate is, etc. In this case, you have three parties. You have developers, the contractors and the workers. We feel that the developers are the ones who are allowing some things to happen on their jobs.

You see, in the residential industry, it's -- the prices to build a house haven't changed since the late '70s, early '80s. And what's happening is that in this area there's a whole abuse of independent contractors, 1099 issues and also cash.

Q: Could you describe what you mean by 1099 issues?
TM: A 1099 is a form by the IRS that says that it's miscellaneous income and it's usually given to independent contractors. For example, on a job site, you could have independent contractors. You could have, on a job site, a contractor that comes in, sets his own time, takes orders from himself and gives orders to another person. This contractor can get a 1099, but he has to pay his workers. They h(j)-2(ob)-2-2(ob)-2-2(o5p-1(.)-30((4(y)30( )-)-2(s)-1(

This cash system doesn't work for anybody: it hurts legitimate contractors who cannot compete; it hurts our municipalities because taxes are not being levied, and yet they have to provide services to these workers; and, most importantly, it hurts the worker who cannot claim unemployment benefits and, if he gets injured, has no workers' compensation or disability insurance.

We've been using the 1099-cash issues as a selling point to everybody, and we tell them that it's best to play by the rules. Some Long Island developers and contractors are feeling the pressure and we are beginning to see some results. We're on the cusp of building two residential projects, because of all this political pressure and education of workers. My colleague, Omar Lopez, is actually the key guy in that area, working with these projects.

The residential construction industry is a mess. We have found that many "contractors" are just paper contractors -- they sub out the work. For example, a framing contractor could be getting $6 a square foot to frame a house, but he subs it to a subcontractor, maybe an immigrant subcontractor who pays his employees in cash, because he can't carry payroll, because he's framing the house at $2.50 per square foot. So the contractor is making more than double the price on a guy that's hurting his own workers. The subcontractor doesn't want to do it, but that's the way it is – the contractor is the guy with the connections.

It's like a modern-day indentured servitude. That's happening here! But, these guys that are getting $2.50 want to be this guy; the subcontractor wants to be the contractor. We're working with these contractors down here that see the injustice that is going on, with an understanding and a commitment from them and us that they will organize with us.

Q: So you're talking to the men and then you're talking to the developer too?
TM: Oh, yeah, we bring all these issues to the developer. A perfect example, in today's ***Newsday,*** is the National Home Builders are here in Long Island. They have a presence now in Long Island and are competing with the local homebuilders. We went to sit down with a major developer whose stock is like $70 per share. And we went to sit down with them because of a concrete contractor who was doing their work. We did a lot of research and found that under Workers' Compensation, they were showing that said they only had ten

There's no one watching the store, in other words. It's not a level playing field. Everybody's going to continue

Q: Another approach that's been, I know, controversial within unions has been with "funded market recovery" -- where you sort of subsidize a job for a union contractor. Is that something that has been useful at times?

TM: Sure it is. And it sure infuriates the nonunion sector. But they create job competitiveness. So, sometimes, we just come in and help a contractor for a specific project. It has parameters that we must follow because, otherwise, we're better off just lowering our wages.

Q: But what do you say if members were to say, "Well, wait a minute, you're sort of using our dues money, in a sense, to subsidize our employers?"

TM: It's not really to subsidize the employer. It's really so the employee, the carpenter continues getting his

TM: We tell them that, first of all, they can't fire you for talking to somebody from the union. That's an unfair labor practice. There's 35 things your contractor can't do, and we explain that to him. I will also say, "If you feel very uncomfortable right now, but you really would like to talk, can I give you a call?" And we get a name and phone number.

Q: What about dues? When I talk about unions with young people, someone always says: "Well, wait a minute, won't that cut like a dollar an hour off my wage?" How do you talk to them about dues?
TM: We tell them: "This building has electricity, mail's gotta go out, phone's gotta be paid. A lot of people join gyms and pay dues because you want to have a place where you go and work out. Well, this is a place that provides you with the training, the safety, the jobs. So you have to contribute to your union. Everybody pays it; it's like part of doing business. Our dues are $114 a quarter; that's $38 a month. When you earn $57 an hour and change, you can pay your dues from three hours that you've worked.

Q: Another issue is always strikes. Do you get many questions or worries about that?
TM: No, we don't get a lot about that, or about dues. Most ask, "Will I work steady?" A lot of people that we speak towant to be in the union. Their issue is working steady. "Will you keep me working 52 weeks of the year?"

Q: And what do you say?
TM: No. I can't keep you working – you've got to keep yourself working. Because, in our industries, the more you know, the more you work. No corporation guarantees anybody full employment year-round either. The nonunion doesn't provide them. The reason why he's been working 52 weeks out of the year with the contractor is because he's making money for the contractor. If he was not producing for the contractor in this job, then he wouldn't be working all that time.

Q: Immigration, obviously, is a very controversial issue across the country and certainly in the building