

The following article was written by Kathy Gregory, WEA Board Member from Pasco.

I remember clearly the day I joined the association. It went something like this:

Local President: You need to fill out this form to join the association.

Me: You mean the union?

President: The association is your professional organization.

Me: So it's not a union?

President: It's an education association.

Me: So it IS a union!

President: Are you through with that form?

It never ceases to amaze me the number of members who scurry from the UNION. Why do we shrink from the concept? Is it the image of knuckle dragging goons attempting to intimidate oppressed workers and the eat that you may be called upon to confront such overwhelming odds? Is it that we are elitists who believe our education (as well as the fact that we're just plain nice) sets us apart from other organizations and other labor workers? Or is it even deeper? Could it be that deep within each of us is the certain knowledge that, if pushed far enough, we would not hesitate to behave like Norma Rae herself and stand defiantly, with only a cardboard sign for protection, against a system that threatens all we work so hard to preserve?

My guess is that it's more of the latter than the others. As union members -- yes, I said union -- we have an obligation beyond just professional ethics. While our paramount duty is to the children we serve and strive to protect and educate, we also have a moral imperative to stand for each other. While we'd like to think of ourselves like the American Medical Association (white collar workers in nice air conditioned offices with little participation in public debate), we are, of necessity, more like the blue collar labor groups (hardworking, low-middle income folks who tend to be one paycheck away from the streets).

I was raised in a conservative home that did not support unionism. The lesson of my home was that if you go to work everyday and do your best, you will make a good living and others will respect your professional integrity and skill. My parents discouraged me from teaching. They said, "You'll never make a living at it." So far I've done okay. I'm not rich and when I look around me at the teachers who are preparing to retire, I am saddened that they are not going to have the security promised to them by the public they have spent a lifetime serving. Teaching is an honorable profession that has been dishonored by those in power who disregard the will of the people. Teachers, historically have never been flush, but they were able to count on being taken care of (family medical plans and sound retirement that included health care). But time and culture have eroded those promises to the point that today we must fight for every scrap.

Unions? Unions are groups of people who have been dismissed as unimportant and who organize to demonstrate to the world that they will not go quietly. Union members take care of each other. When one member is injured, all are injured and rush to protect and defend that one member. If a member takes a stand for the good of all, the others do not turn away, they stand behind that one -- the one with the courage of his/her commitment and a willingness to stand in the gap for those who cannot stand. Without our union, how can we hope to prevail against the constant and extreme assault on our profession and our members?

WEA has about 80,000 members. If each of those members talked to 10 people about public

education and its importance to our future as a free society, we would have 800,000 VOTERS impact public policy for our schools and our children, not to mention our members.

Don't just talk to the folks in your building. Unite with others to make a difference. Pick your spot. Hold your sign. And when asked, say, "Yes! I belong to the teacher's union!"