

## **Workers Organize for Educational Opportunities**

*by Beatrice Boansi*

I came to the USA from Ghana, West Africa, in 1990. I work in two nursing homes in Connecticut as a certified nursing assistant (CNA). Kettlebrook Care Center is my full-time job, and I work part-time at Haven Health. Kettlebrook was not unionized when I got there, but Haven Health Care was in the union, District 1199, when I began there.

### **The Training Fund**

In 2002, I decided to go back to school because I wanted to further my career in healthcare. At Haven, I overheard some of my co-workers talking about our union's Training Fund, and how it helped them get their high school diplomas. I asked for the number, made a phone call to the Training Fund office, and found out how to start class. A year later, in 2003, I graduated with an American high school diploma in hand. I was so excited. My pictures from that day tell it all!

The Training Fund was set up for union members to help pay for their continuing education; it is funded by employer contributions. Classes at the Training Fund were made enjoyable by wonderful and patient teachers. They took me through the subjects in small steps, building up my confidence and my desire to learn. One teacher told me that, if I could come in at her lunch time, she would do one-on-one tutoring with me.

Without the Training Fund, I probably would not have my high school diploma, or the motivation to continue my education. Knowing I was in class with other 1199 members was very helpful. I was not alone; we were all there together for one reason — to work hard to get our high school diplomas. There were times when I thought of quitting, but other members in class encouraged me.

### **Bridges**

In 2004, after I got my high school diploma, I attempted to enroll in a local community college. The process seemed very daunting, and I just gave up. Then I found out about the "Bridges to Health Care Careers" program, which was similar to the Training Fund. The "Bridges" program is a partnership between Capital Community College and several other organizations, and it allows students to take needed noncredit courses in preparation for credit courses.

The "Bridges" program has given me a road map for success. Without it, I do not think I would have been able to persevere at college. With "Bridges," we have our own case manager who helps us find the right path for us.

It feels exciting to be a college student, but it has been very hard balancing a full-time job and attending college. There is just not enough time to study, and sometimes saying "no" becomes appealing. Then there is this small voice that keeps telling me, "Beatrice, you cannot keep lifting people in a nursing home for the rest of your life, so keep going. Do not give up."

### **Organizing**

After I had worked full-time at Kettlebrook for a few years, I helped to organize the union there. I

had seen the benefits of union membership at my part-time job. Being an organizer was difficult and dangerous. The

boss could not fire you for supporting a union, but if he caught you trying to form the union, he could make your work life difficult. He harassed those he knew were involved or tried to find a reason to fire them. It



took us about six months of organizing in secret to get a majority of union cards signed. Then we declared to the boss that we wanted the union!

Negotiating was difficult, time consuming, and discouraging. We went face-to-face with the boss for a year without coming to an agreement. He resisted giving us the Training Fund and refused to ensure our rights to a pension, decent wage increases, fair treatment, respect, and the right to speak up without fear of retaliation. What at first seemed like a dream became a nightmare.

My co-workers and I were fighting hard to get the Training Fund into our contract to make sure that every member, especially CNAs, kitchen aids, and housekeepers, had the opportunity to get the education they needed to move up. We do not have to stay at the bottom of the ladder. I wanted everyone to get the opportunities that I had had, especially the young employees. For me personally, it breaks my heart every time I see young adults with their full lives ahead of them doing odd jobs and feeling like there is no way out. Advocating for the Training Fund was a way of telling the young kids that there is a better path, that they can choose education.

Finally, when negotiations were deadlocked, the boss took us to the Labor Board to have a decertification election to try to have the union voted out. From that point on, the boss began his rehearsed campaign of empty promises. Six of us were on a committee that countered that the boss did not have our best interests at heart. We reminded the members that if he meant all his promises, he wouldn't have waited until the end to make them. We asked why, if employees wanted a union, did the boss have to go to such great lengths to fight it?

Our strategies paid off. When we voted again, I could not stand in the room to wait for the count because I was afraid that we would lose. I waited upstairs, and suddenly I heard shouts of victory. We finally had won! The boss could not file for a decertification again. I ran down to the first floor, picked up something white to wave in the air as a sign of victory, and sang my thanks.



*Beatrice Boansi earned her high school diploma through the union's adult education program in 2003.*

If not for the brave acts of 1199 members from our sister homes, we at Kettlebrook would not have had our contract signed. Management owns nine nursing homes, and Kettlebrook was the only one where the boss fought so hard to keep the union out.

### Future Plans

Once the Training Fund goes into effect at Kettlebrook this summer, I am going to tell people how I got my high school diploma and into college. If I can do it, they can also do it.

Working and going to school is very tough, but I do not regret my decision to go back to school. I would like to advise anyone who is thinking of going back to school to make the first step and the rest will follow.

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