Bio: **Catherine Stanford** works for the local union that represents the faculty and other academic employees at Rutgers University, the Rutgers American Association of University Professor and American Federation of Teachers (AAUP-AFT). She began her journey into leadership in high school, being inspired by the civil rights movement in the 1960's. Over the years, her passion for social justice has emphasized multi-issue organizing as her experience and understanding have widened into anti-racism, feminist, peace and justice activism; then, into economic justice issues, health care reform, interfaith exchanges, anti-genocide, and immigration reform—all grounded in spiritual growth on her faith journey. Cathy is cultural anthropologist, completing her PhD at SUNY-Albany in 20 08. Currently, she volunteers as vice-president of the non-profit Who Is My Neighbor, Inc., a lay leader in the United Methodist Church, and board member of New Jersey Citizen Action.

An Interview with Catherine Stanford
Conducted by IWL Leadership Scholar Anna Zailik, Class of 2012
Edited by Nicholas Salazer

Anna Zailik: **What were you first visions of women?**

Catherine Stanford: Well I would say that my mother was definitely the beginning of it all. We gradually became friends so she's not my hovering mother criticizing me. I really have gathered most of my ability to reflect and everything from the conversations I've had with my mother. And then in addition to that, by just reading voraciously, I fell in love with biography very early on. As I'm coming of age in the sixties and the civil rights movement feels like it's all around me, even though we're in a conservative little place where there were very few people actually being a part of that movement, there were still people there, in Decatur, Illinois, a part of the civil rights movement that I was reading about, people like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, [and] Frederick Douglass.

During that particular seminal period where the people fighting for an end to slavery, there were women, white women also began to say, hmm, I think there's something wrong here in terms of how we're being treated; ways in which they were not able to use their leadership affectively because people said, you're a woman. You have no place speaking publicly, so that trajectory of women fighting for other people's rights and then beginning to realize, wow I don't have them either, and here the gender is impinging me. Those were very visionary things and I could see them happening in the second wave of feminism that I was coming of age within. Within the

civil rights movement there was the famous moment when Stokely Carmichael said, “The only position for women in the movement is prone,” and the women rebelled. Reading about it afterwards I realized, Oh wow, that’s part of the seeds of the movement that I’m a part of right now!

[My mother] was very worried about where I was going and I had to really come to terms with the fact that the racism in society was in me, my family, my mother, [and] the way people in my family thought. So beginning to think myself out of that meant desperately trying to find people who might also want to work on those issues. I think we had to re-dig up that history bringing it back, letting people know we won’t let this be forgotten. These are the threads of the shoulders of the people we’ll be standing on whether we know it or not and the more we’re aware of it the better.

AZ: Describe your childhood influences.

CS: Well I was born in Decatur, Illinois, and it is a blue-collar town that is predominantly white. But with the factories we had that were mostly processing corn and soybeans, farmers needed workers. So, we actually brought workers into Decatur from the south, people who were willing to work in the really dirty foundry. We had officially as a city, a sister city in Japan, but with the awareness of the Civil Rights movement and looking around in our town we’re going, Look I think Brownsville, Tennessee is really our sister city, because that’s where a lot of people were that happened to be African American who were now part of our community. There had been an earlier population of African Americans living there and there was tension between the two groups so I think—rather early on because of it being the 1960s, I had some of the most fabulous teachers in both middle school and high school who taught American history in a way that helped us begin to understand and look at the world with that kind of sociological imagination.

People made a good assumption about me rather than a negative assumption right off the bat. So, beginning to realize my experience was not the be all and end all of what was happening, I also began to realize my own class background, that my father was actually a poor, tenant farmer in southern Illinois. I was totally blown away that that was my father’s past because I lived in the city and we lived in a new development where it used to be corn fields; but not anymore and we lived a life of schoolteachers. My dad was speech therapist. He came to Decatur, Illinois, hired to set up the speech therapy program. He was the first and only kid in his family to go to college. So then, it was the assumption for me, of course you’re going to college. So in that respect, reclaiming that class background was really important for me. I remember visiting my grandfather and he was living with one of my aunts and she was on welfare and they were poor. I mean I felt like I was in Appalachia, and it was just in Salem, Illinois, and I was embarrassed. I was like, oh my god how do they live? It didn’t seem like they had a refrigerator they just left things out on the kitchen table and things melted and flies buzzed around and junk everywhere, and that was not the way I was living.

So, for a while, especially as a kid, I was just embarrassed and never mentioned it. And then later I began to really reflect on it and think, wow. We benefited from public policy because they changed the law to say we should do programs for GIs that come back from the war, that my father was able to take advantage of it. That kind of influence is really important to get grounded [with] where I'm from and what those things were. Those kinds of class, gender, and race things that formed me, I was trying to address because those were the social justice issues that really galvanized my leadership from high school on.

AZ: Did you feel at an early age that your mother and father pressured you to choose between a social justice career or family? Or did they think you'd be able to do both?

CS: In some respects, I think they thought I sort of could do both. But they didn't really realize how far you could go with social justice. I think that Margaret Mead said it the best, actually. And her being an anthropologist and talking about women's issues, I think all of that really helped me to understand what my new place was in the new world and trying to come out of the old into the new world and become an adult. Because she was basically saying that we have this contradiction in the United States. We say, Women you can be anything you want to be. Just name it and go do it! And yet it was hidden actually; the kinds of ways in which you were constrained and not able to do that.

I did not get any kind of real discussion with my parents about what I would be when I grew up —what sort of career would you follow. I did a degree in English and Afro-American studies at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Illinois. And so, because of the social justice I was like, of course I'm going there. I'm the whole, everything about the social justice movement of course I have to be there. It was just getting off the ground, and there were some fabulous professors and it was absolutely wonderful. So, I picked English and not really with the idea that I was going to teach. I wasn't thinking how are you going to support yourself? And my parents never really asked that question. I think they thought I would go to college and meet a nice college guy and get married and have kids, and I could have some education I could fall back on.

But I really feel that I wasn't really prepared to think about those tough economic questions because, in my mind, there was absolutely no question that I was going to college. When I did a little bit of work after I graduated, it's like oh, there isn't anything, just looking at the want ads. And then applying to things, it was like, well, I'm not sure what I want to do anyway. It's like oh well maybe I should have thought professionally. Maybe I should have gotten a degree in journalism. But who knew, it never even crossed my mind.

AZ: How did all of this lead you to become a pipefitter?

CS: After I graduated with my undergraduate degree thinking, I don't know how am I ever going to put a roof over my head, I read a lot of really great feminist work, especially about Sheila Tobias that was "Overcoming Math Anxiety." I feel that her message being given to women was, math is for boys, and girls don't really have it, so just forget it. So, I went back to community

college and started a refresher, and began to look around for what other kinds of work I might be able to get, and I read a little bit about surveying. There [were] actually two women in the whole state of Illinois who were licensed surveyors. So, I visited [one] and talked with her, and I began to think in that direction. And then, because I was a member of NOW, they got a letter from the national pipefitters and plumbers apprenticeship program. And of course everyone was under some pressure from affirmative action that you had to reach out to women and minorities because people knew that I was searching for something. I had never heard of that kind of [pipefitting] before. I called up the director of the apprenticeship program, went out and talked with him, got a tour of him. He explained what it was all about, and I thought, wow, what an idea; a four year apprenticeship where you get paid every day until you graduate. You get classroom instruction; you get graded opportunity on the job to learn the trade. All you had to do was when you applied to the program was take a test of basic aptitude.

There were guys that took me seriously, and took me under their wing like they're supposed to do with apprentices and teach me those things. [One guy] was very patient with me, and didn't yell at me. There were some times when he got a little frustrated with me because I feel like I really didn't have experiences, that as a girl growing up, that would have helped me with that. My mother was like, my god, blue-collar work. She just thought that the guys would not really be the right kind of people to be hanging around with, and she was right. Some of them were not the right kind of people to be hanging around with. But, a lot of them were absolutely fabulous people, and really worked well with me.

I spent ten years working as a pipefitter, but it was beating me down, day, after day, after day. If I didn't have feminist grit I don't think I could have stuck at it. It's a negative work environment anyway; you don't often hear you're doing a good job. Its just hurry up, get out there, get it done, don't refuse overtime because we have to have you out here getting it done. And of course, I had all my activism to do and I needed time for that, so, in some respects it was [a] very, very hard, male chauvinist wall that I was beating my head against day in and day out. It was like war. Every day, somebody would say or do something to say you don't belong here, and so it was very, very tiring.

AZ: Why did you choose to leave the pipefitting profession?

CS: At a certain point, a whole bunch of us got laid off because they finished the nuclear power plant that we were building in Clinton, Illinois. So, more than half the local was out of work, and the union did help me get a totally different job just to put food on the table and keep the roof over your head and things like that. Then, I was able to work for the secretary of state of Illinois doing records management, which was so funny, because suddenly the fact that I could read and write mattered, and they really didn't think a pipefitter could do it. I certainly didn't think it was worth anything, the fact that I could read and write when I first got out of undergrad. But I did have those skills, so, I felt very privileged actually that I could really do different things.

It's a difficult thing really, to be a pioneer. I have to agree with my mom. Sometimes I wonder why I always do take the hard way. Because I did want to put myself in that position, I wanted to test myself to [the] very limit, and I learned so much. I came even more out of my shell as a bookworm being in that environment and realizing just how different other ways are that people are living and other perspectives. I did ten years of participant observation in a blue-collar, nontraditional trade. I was the first woman indentured as an apprentice in my local union, and there were a few after that and I always tried to help along. I did a lot of leadership in that program.

Being the first woman, I said we have to have a program that when women apply, we give them coaching about what it means to be a pipefitter [and] what you have to do. Here's how you can practice something to be able to do as well as you can on the aptitude test. Things that are important to think about in your work experience that might be applicable to show yes, I can do this work, and I really do want to do this work. I was able to be an instructor in the apprenticeship program. Even in that environment, as negative as I think it is and it was, my leadership skills were being recognized, and so I had some advantages there that really come from some people whose hearts were in the right place. They might not have agreed with me entirely, they might not have really supported affirmative action, but you take your victories where you can get them and build on them as best you can. The more people get comfortable with somebody doing a job, despite of them being a woman, then [that] can really plant seeds that will eventually, really bare a much better fruit along the way.

AZ: What was the most difficult struggle you had to overcome in that profession?

CS: I would have to say the thing the discouraged me the most was how I couldn't really translate that leadership into the politics of the union as well; because as soon as I was out of my apprenticeship, I wanted to be actively involved in the union.

You were a member of the union, as soon as you were done with your six months probation. So that was like thrilling to me. My first union! I really get to be a member of the union. And then I realized how conservative this union is. But start where people are. A good organizer gets close and you'd really get to know people and try to pull them along a little. So, as soon as I was a full-fledged journey woman, and I always insisted on calling myself a journey woman, not a journey man, I went to a union meeting, and the president of the union said we're beginning to bargain a new contract, we have to put together a bargaining team, anyone who wants to volunteer to be on the team, come forward. After the meeting I went up to him and said, I want to be on the team. I thought he was going to faint right in front of me. So he put me on the team.

The president of the union, asked me to read the minutes at the next meeting. All holy hell broke loose on the floor of the meeting that night. Guys standing up saying, who in the hell is she to be on the bargaining team? I never really expected it; I probably should have, because they weren't ready for women being publicly leading. I mean I could see those things I was doing; there was probably a little bit of "feminist-ghetto" going on there. Of course, we're all so great in

affirmative action. We can let our first woman in the apprenticeship program help with this little thing to help women. But that's not really leadership. I lost my role as secretary. I was still on the team as an alternate, just going to sit there on the sidelines. Couldn't really do much of anything and of course they didn't need me. There was no vacancy at some point that I could actually be on the team. I learned so much from that kind of thing. You have to pick your battles. I had to figure out how I was going to lead. And I just began to realize that I was never going to be able to publicly lead these guys. They were never going to accept me because I was the pioneer, and I came with a lot more radicalism than any of the other women that followed me. And I was surprised too; all these women that followed me were not feminists. I'd say not one had any real values that you could say are coming up out of feminism in the same way that I did.

AZ: What drove you to be so involved in working for social justice issues?

CS: I was at a point where I was so burnt out with this particular work environment, and just the struggles, that I got really discouraged. Thinking that some of my other social justice work was calling me and I really wanted to do that kind of stuff. So, I was really trying to bring those things into the union movement as well. I brought a labor leader who was in the United States from El Salvador to talk about the situation that he had. I was representing my union to the trades and labor assembly in the town.

You get that kind of sense that you're looked on as somewhat dangerous by people higher up so you're onto something here and you just have to continue to figure out how you might do more of it. But I would have to say that when I was laid off and had free time, I began to realize that I was probably suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome almost. At that point I don't think I had even heard of that terminology. That has more to do with people in war coming back and after all the horrible atrocities they've seen. But I do think there was a way in which working in that environment and trying to bring social justice issues to bear and sort of cross lines. It was dangerous place and a place where you can sort of feel very alone and have things happen that are traumatic. I mean I've never been to war so I have not the foggiest. I shouldn't even probably be using that analogy because it's so mild, the trauma I might have felt in that circumstance. But I do think there are ways in which it was very difficult place to work. I never really had any mentors, not until actually I was in grad school where I was a part of a women's in leadership program. When I was at SUNY-Albany then in the 1990s, I was in a program where they were talking about women in government and civil society.

AZ: Do you think it's important that women encourage each other to lead?

CS: I feel like it's a struggle even in the women's movement to realize the depths of change we have to go through to really help women be leaders. And that's one of the things that I've really drifted away from the more secular women's movement. I haven't been a part of the National Organization for Women in years. I think part of it is that my faith was growing more and more, and I was moving into some other issues. And I partly did it to make room for some of the other women leaders in my chapter, because I was single, and because I was on fire for social justice, I

spent enormous amounts of time doing anything with the chapter. I feel like in most of my life I've been too dynamic for most people. I scare a lot of people away. I was thinking well, I'll do the background stuff, like I'll do that childcare and let other people be leaders of the meeting and leaving a vacuum for someone to fill in. Leaving more room for the women who are now the new leaders of my local NOW chapter, I [thought], I've got to be active; I've got to be doing something. I've got to find another group to be a part of; that's when I moved over into doing peace and justice work.

The movement was moving along, as it always does, nothing stays still. I got there through feminism, because the women's movement was talking about women in other countries and however we define feminism in the United States, it has been too narrow. We began to see that there were feminisms and then they had a more and more global perspective. The conditions of women in other countries are very different also. I just felt like it kept expanding, and expanding, and expanding. But my mind was already set to the idea that everything is interconnected, you just have to figure out how and in what way, and then figure out how you can do your little part of the puzzle without just thinking there was only one, simple, little issue and you can easily compartmentalize, and take care of this and it's like all there is to it. I've always challenged myself to think very broad.

AZ: How has your personal life been affected by your activism?

CS: There was a very important point of being able to both study and think about activism and bring them together to think about where I was at that point, which was the state of New York. I could bring all of the experiences that I've had to bear and so there I began to have more people that were as radical as I was and even more. I had my "multi-issueness" challenged by being pulled by other people and all of that. But, it began to help me because I had become so burnt out actually with my social justice work at home in a very conservative place where it was such a tiny handful of people who were willing to work on things, and then just the work experience of being so negative. But, all of it could be then reflected on. I think I've gone back and forth between that kind of bookishness where you read and study and reflect, and activism. And so I took sort of a break from activism and then was able to recharge and then go back into the fray so to speak. And I think those kinds of things are very useful for anybody wanting to be a leader. To always realize that you've got to feed yourself. You've got to nurture your own inner person, and then you might really be of some value to other people. Because probably my stridency might sometimes was with not really dealing with all my stuff, which was probably very obvious to a lot of other people but no obvious to me.

I would say that I really, really got a lot of inspiration from a woman, who became one of the first women that was an Episcopal priest who was actually ordained when the church as a whole didn't accept it. Her name was Carter Haywood and she wrote lots of essays and so she put together this book that was very inspirational to me. So, her way of looking at it was you act your way into knowing. I really thought that that was very, very true. I could read about things and reflect on them, but it was only when I began to try to do some of these things and I didn't

always know exactly where I was going or should be going or how it should be done. You understand it in some imperfect way and you get a sense of yes, I have to be there. We have to be there when labor leaders in El Salvador are being murdered. The archbishop of San Salvador is murdered and the women who are the secular women that were working with the nuns and all these people were being killed. You've got to do something. You cannot sit back and yet you don't always know what you need to know. You can't ever be perfectly knowledgeable.

But if you act your way more and more, you get to that proverbial place of saying the more I know, the more I know I don't know. But you're bringing together the thinking and the doing, and it's just a continuous loop of being out there trying to be a part of what's going on the world and always striving to figure well what are the right relationships. And that's where I feel that faith became gradually more and more and more important to me.

AZ: How has your faith played a part in your activism and leadership?

CS: I really felt that without God, without, faith, I didn't have a prayer. The stuff out there, the stuff in here, was just sometimes too ugly, too horrible. How am I ever going to really be able to do anything? Who am I to think I can make the world a better place? And I felt God was saying, go find people, go be with them. If you think something doesn't seem right, say so; you have a responsibility to that. You are made in my image and I don't like what I see happening in the world. When I find that kind of inspiration is so much deeper than just an abstract of ideal of equality, it's the kind that keeps challenging you, making you really do things. You're acting your way into knowing until suddenly you are in some place where you have been transformed and you don't always know that every problem is solved. Everything's in a neat little box right now, and everything is fine; it just always seems that you keep finding there's more stuff and more problems in different ways. We succeed, we win something, but it's only a partial victory and so then you see all the other things that we weren't able to deal with.

AZ: Why is the AAUP important to the student population at Rutgers?

CS: Right now I work for the union that represents the faculty and teaching assistants and part-time lecturers, a lot of the academic workers here at Rutgers. I think this union is very important to undergraduate students here. In part because, as we always say, in our literature, that the teachers working conditions are the students learning conditions. And by that we mean that if the people who teach you don't have basic economic justice on the job. Fairness related to their employment, then there is a basic injustice built into your education. Professors very infrequently say anything about themselves impersonally in the classroom to say we're struggling with some issue in the administration. For one thing, they're passionate about whatever they're teaching and then the other is that I think they feel enormously privileged to be in the positions they are, which they are. They have higher education; they are making better salaries than someone who has just a high school education. In some respects, they have a hard time fighting for their own

interests and would rather help students. They would rather help a low-wage worker if they were going to do anything.

There's been some really radical stuff that's gone on at Rutgers that's just fed the social movements just awesomely. And I know my history isn't deep enough to actually understand really the roots of all the good stuff at Rutgers. If there were not a union backing up faculty so that there is this legal document that says these are your terms and conditions of employment, the administration could walk all over them, and make all sorts of arbitrary changes. One of the really key powers the faculty has to defend is academic freedom. The ability to actually be in the classroom explaining that research that does under grid social justice, and some of the stuff doesn't. But that whole concept is really under attack. If we can't even defend something as simple as we sat down as reasonable people and bargained a salary increase, which basically, right now because we are under this freeze that's been illegally imposed by the administration on some of the faculty.

For people to begin to realize that the kind of equality we can create in a contract is really important. The notion of an across-the-board raise means everybody gets it! We're not singling out anybody; we're saying everybody works hard here. And we have worked together. We have come together, elected our representatives; we are looking at this as a group as a whole. And everyone needs to have their voice in the union as well. Unions have had some difficulty, but we have a representative democracy everywhere. We need to create something that's good for everybody. And that's where I think that we have to always challenge ourselves to talk about economic justice as a part of the labor movement. That's what the university is here for. It helps us figure out things, like things to save lives, but it also helps us figure out how to really understand what an equality consists of. That kind of research is absolutely essential. And if the faculty is basically without any academic freedom and without any economic support under them with a having a union contract, then it is even more difficult for you to get the kind of education you need to be the leaders of tomorrow. You're the leaders right now actually. We're very aware that it's really the student movements that have led the faculty. There's some radical faculty that are out there doing stuff right now. And they will be at a picket line, or they will be at a rally and a march, but they're really kind of sprinkled out there. But to really get a movement going again, it'll have to be like the sixties.

AZ: What's one piece of advice you have to offer me as I set out to accomplish my goals as a future leader?

CS: I would say youthful idealism is awesome. And try your damndest not to lose it. A lot of the stuff that's going to happen to you, whether you want it or not, whether you're looking for it or not, will hurt. And it might cause you to doubt your worth as a human being because that's happened to me. We need the passion and it's the world that beats it out of us. It's not because you just get old. I am really so happy actually that my mother who is now 84, has become more progressive as she got old, and she attributes that to me. And I think it's that kind of conversations between the generations that is so important.

Also, women talking to women about their history and where they've been, and where they want to go and everything; That's the cross-fertilization that our society is really fighting against. [They] want to put us in our age compartments and have people say, well those are old people, they just talk about the past all the time. I'm always pushing towards to the future; to analyze the past is so critical to know where you've been. And for me, it's totally inspiring to realize how many shoulders I'm standing on to be even where I am. And if I feel like what I do is such a drop in the bucket, then I think everyone is feeling that too. We're not alone in that discouragement. And then just to say if I'm discouraged, feel it, but don't let it stop; don't let it really defeat you. If you're really feeling defeated, then go find some really positive people who have faced brutal realities and lived to tell about it, because that's the only way I think human beings have made progress. I think it was George Burner Chaw that said, it's the unreasonable people that get something done in the world by being somebody who pushes on certain things. We have to live up to our ideals whether you think of them in a secular sense or religious sense. It makes people uncomfortable that you're talking about that.

And cynicism, that's the worst thing. That's why I say hang on to that idealism. We need it because when I'm flagging, maybe you're not because you got the freshness of seeing things and we just need to keep being there together for each other. People are trying to be the people we want to be, along the way to justice. Peace is the way, not the end. Justice is the way. Forgiving each other, while still holding each other accountable. I think that's a really important piece of it. And to just keep on keepin' on.