Tonia King spoke up for fairness and it sparked a passion. After a decade of working in an administrative role in the Massachusetts Nursing Association (MNA), she was sitting in on a meeting and heard what seemed like an unfair contract negotiation between nurses and support staff. Afterwards, her colleagues thanked her for her courage to speak up and be an advocate for others. She then began to gain confidence in knowing she could make a difference at the union and started hearing from others like Deb Sullivan, and Donna Kelly-Williams, there was a program at UMass Boston in Labor Studies that may interest her. Sullivan is the Associate Director and Kelly-Williams is the President of the MNA and National Nurses United. They are both alumnae of the Labor Studies program. The Certificate in Labor Leadership Program at the Labor Resource Center was the credential King knew would set her on the career path as a union organizer. Once her curiosity was sparked, Tonia sent an email to Wally Soper, Administrative Coordinator at the LRC stating her interest in the Certificate program. Soper responded immediately to her inquiry, encouraging her that she had found the right place and walked her through the process of registration. There was no going back for King, knowing the timing was right to begin a new venture in her life. After ten years of working at the MNA, the largest union and professional association for registered nurses and health professionals in the state, being in an educational environment "ignited a fire." King felt a certain comfort level right away when she met the fellow students in the certificate program and discovered the diversity of their experiences and perspectives. With class members from a variety of unions and undergraduate students at the university, she was neither the youngest or oldest member of the group. She started learning more about adults "outside of her realm." A sense of camaraderie developed further in the classroom among a cohort of students and instructor Jeff Crosby.

With the skills Tonia has gained from the Labor Leadership certificate program, Tonia is now confident that she can impart change in her union, to a wider state audience and beyond. She now works as an organizer for the MNA. She cites a model of leadership that empowers cooperation through knowledge. Once citizens can be educated on the complexity and importance of an issue, she feels, they can then teach others to unite behind its cause. Regardless of gender, class and race, coalescing for a cause will help rally people together. At the Massachusetts Nurses Association, King articulates her mission to others who may have a wife, mother or friend who is in the profession and who understand on a personal level the importance of keeping nurses healthy and supported in their workplace. For instance, King is now in the process of gathering signatures for the Patient Safety Act. In both 2006 and 2008, the Massachusetts House of Representatives passed the Patient Safety Act by overwhelming margins. King is helping organizing efforts to have legislation passed in the Senate. A major component of the bill will limit the number of patients under each nurse’s care. Though previous iterations have improved the work environment and quality of life for nurses, King feels this bill will be a major win for the nurses and the MNA. With her organization and passion, they are on their way to success.

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