Donna McCrea: Today is June 4 of 2018. My name is Donna McCrea, I’m the archivist for the University of Montana [UM], and today I’m interviewing former Montana Commissioner of Higher Education and former Interim President of the University of Montana, Sheila Stearns. President Stearns, thank you very much for participating in this interview today. You were interviewed by us in 2006 as part of our University of Montana Oral History Project, and so we have some information about your experience as a student at UM, and also a bit about your early experience as Montana’s commissioner of higher ed, as that experience related to UM, especially. So I’d really like to focus, today in this interview, on your personal and professional activities since 2006, and in particular, on your term as the University of Montana’s interim president from December of 2016 to January of 2018.

I’ll begin by asking you to share some information about your decision to accept the position of our interim president. So, for example, what conversations might you have had with Commissioner Christian [Commissioner of Higher Education Clayton Christian], and what were the Commissioner’s expectations for an interim president at UM?

Sheila Stearns: Thank you, Donna. I’m glad to be here, and I think it’s good to do this now, instead of waiting a couple more years when memories get blurred. So I appreciate it. The call came from Commissioner Christian to see, would I have time for a cup of coffee the next day. He was going to be in Missoula, and I can’t remember I had...if I did or not, but I’m curious. I said...You know, I haven’t talked to him for three or four months, and we are good friends. Or, good, you know, good colleagues, certainly. But I said, “Well, what’s this about?”

He said, “Well, I’ll tell you when we get together.”

Then, I called him back, and I said, “No, I want to know, what’s this about?”

He said, “Well, are you sitting down?” He said that there was going to be a change at the University, and the Board [Board of Regents] and he wanted to explore, with me, the possibility of stepping into the presidency should that decision become final, final in the next couple days. Well, he didn’t mean for it to be on the phone. I sort of insisted, just because I’m curious. He said, “Now do you want to meet with me tomorrow afternoon?” [laughs]

DM: And when was this?

SS: It was, give or take, November 30, 2016. It might be November 29, but it was a Thursday, I think. Anyway, it was the week after Thanksgiving. Toward the end of the week after
Thanksgiving, I believe. So I said, “Well, that gives me something to think about.” And I said, “I will come and see you tomorrow. That’ll give me a chance to visit with Hal tonight.”

Later, Clay even told the University in a public setting, in one of my first addresses to them, afterward, said, “I knew that when Sheila said, ‘I’ll talk this over with Hal,’ that I was golden. That she would probably say yes, because there’s never anything Sheila undertook that Hal didn’t think she was going to do well and ought to be the one to do it.” So that’s one of his laugh lines. But it’s probably true. I would say, it was not a hard decision. I knew the moment he said what it was about, which was a huge shock to me...I had had a dinner party at my house four days earlier, where the Engstroms and other couples were there, and we are good friends and always...and have been for years. So while I certainly knew, as everyone else did, that there were troubled aspects about his presidency, I had no idea any more than you did, or anybody else...I was in no sense, in any way, an inner-circle person.

So I thought about it through the afternoon and told Hal about it over dinner, and he smiled and said, “I feel...we feel badly for the University, in terms of the turmoil that this both reflects and will really shine a hot light on, once it’s announced that President Engstrom will be stepping down.” But, if he is, for whatever reason or whatever way, then I should do it. We both thought that. There’s no question in my mind that I was qualified, and that it would be a huge challenge. Not to sound immodest, but I would be as informed and prepared, and perhaps the right person for the situation, as anybody else. While I had certain things I wanted to do in the following year that...nothing that couldn’t be probably deferred. So, in that respect, it was not a hard decision.

What was hard relates to, maybe, a second part of what you asked. That was, to think about, with what sideboards. With what parameters, with what expectations from the Commissioner, as well as the Board. Interestingly, I said, as you might expect, “How long will this be? Is this an interim presidency?” Which I, personally...Maybe it’s a matter of semantics, but we’ve always laughed that most of us in our professional lives are, at the University, are out...we have until June 30. You know, you can tell us in January that we’re no longer...So, in that respect, we’re all potentially term-limited.

The Commissioner said, “Well, probably June 30. We’ll start a search right away, we promise. We’ll start a search right away.”

So I said, “So, in other words, this is not,” I mean, and I knew this. I had served an interim chancellorship at MSU Billings where the search was already well underway, they were getting close to interviews. That was interim, and I knew it would be. It was still a very important couple of months as interim, but that was interim. Because, in two months, you help solve problems, and keep leadership intact and positive and moving forward. But you’re not starting new initiatives, you’re not grappling with the same level of complexity of issues. So I said one of my first conditions was it would not be an interim presidency. I never called it...and he agreed.
He laughed, and he said, “Done. Fair enough.”

Because I said, “I predict it’ll be longer than June 30. I hope it’s not, but I bet it is.” And I said, “I suspect, if the way interviews go, that a new candidate will not be...candidates, will not be interviewed until campus returns to full activity in the fall. And then what if it fails?” That happens. Then it’s possibly...or, maybe it succeeds, but a person can’t come until the following summer. It could be a year-and-a-half. Not that... “Do you want me to proceed?” I asked him. “Do you want me to proceed as if I’m president? And if so, call me that.” So that was one thing.

Embedded in that question was, “Do you want me to act like I’m president and be what I think I was and am.” And that is decisive, and not act as if there’s anything, “Oh heck, this is someone else’s problem in just a short amount of time.” So, those were my conditions, and those were also his expectations. That I would help, if he needed it, facilitate the new...the search. But I would...my main job was to get a campus that was rocked a bit back on its heels, as any change in presidency—sudden change in presidency—will do to a campus, and to stabilize, lead, pump some air back in the tires, and move forward. We weren’t a lot more specific than that. Be realistic about our financial situation—transparent. Those are things that I like to think I am. So that’s what we agreed to.

DM: Good, thank you. When you then got here, what was your vision for your role? I mean, you knew the situation. You’ve mentioned the turmoil, you knew the situation that we were in. What was your vision for your role as our president, and how did that vision evolve during your year at UM?

SS: My vision was not complicated. It was to enable a university with great history, legacy, and achievements ongoing to completely recognize that about itself, and not be looking backward at the troubles and turmoil of the previous five to six years. To look forward, and to do what it does. Higher education, build futures in research and for students, and to find the joy again, and make that the predominant spirit on the campus. Just empower people to be, to get out of a fear-based mode, and into a “this is exciting.” We have to embrace change, we need to move forward. This will be challenging, but it can be interesting and it will certainly place us in a better position to compete in a really competitive, innovative world, if we do that. So my vision was to empower everyone to make the University its...live up to its potential.

DM: When you say “empower,” what does that mean to you? How do you do that?

SS: I think you empower people by consulting, visiting. It’s always about people. By visiting extensively with people who, especially those who are change agents, and making...and so that they know they are listened to and find where are all the ideas in common, where do they intersect, so that they feel free to move forward and put the fear aside. To empower people means to minimize fear without minimizing the facing of reality. And then, to build teams. Small teams, and the overall team, a sense of, “We are transparent, we’ll consult, we’ll converse, we’ll disagree, and we will...but we will move.” So it’s empowering people to get fear out of the
way. And not apathy, but, what’s the word? Inertia. Just move that out of the way. There will be movement. Priorities will be set, to use the passive voice here. So let’s do it together. To empower people to feel like, “Oh my gosh, if I go to that meeting,” meetings, meetings, meetings, in any organization, but especially higher ed. Not another meeting. That people don’t want to miss the meeting, because something really will happen. It will be...decisions are going to...that matter. It will be kind of interesting, because I have a voice in it. That’s what I mean by empowering.

DM: What tangible, then, either practices or teams or activities, did you put in place to help move the University forward during your year here?

SS: Well, number one, I think I included right away in cabinet, in a full way, both the head of Faculty Senate, but also the union leader. Because they have such a strong voice. I made sure that our, I think, that our cabinet was open. I think the first meeting I attended, I had some students come, and I think they expected to be told they had to leave. I said, “No, let’s rearrange the tables so that there’s room for people to be here.” So that was tangible. And that the agenda would be crisp and focused. I think I ran a good meeting, in the sense of, it’s conversational and there’s always room for a little humor here and there. But it proceeds, and it ends on time, and it’s not going to be two or three hours. I told people, “Ninety minutes,” and even that’s longer, really, than I’m comfortable with. But that’s still cutting it back. Let’s make some decisions and decide who’s responsible, and when they’re going to report back, and who needs to hear from whom.

So, starting with the president’s most important team, and that’s the full cabinet, those are both the constituent heads, but also the people the president, or previous presidents, have picked to be heads of major sectors in the University. To use, if you will, representative government effectively, to just do that. Then to present—not have sort of long reports about things that important—but brief reports on things, and where you can go online or to a Youtube channel to get the full thing. But whether it’s on our processes to make sure we’re addressing sexual assault, or whether we’ve really addressed the...had the tabletop exercises for safety in case of crisis—an earthquake or an active shooting. You know, who’s doing...We’re not necessarily...If we’re going to have an hour-long, or longer, half-day, whatever it takes for a training for important things, great. But not to consumer meetings where decisions are supposed to happen and where different points of view are supposed to be shared without fear, but with respect. So, I think that was...I don’t know how tangible that is, but it’s a process that I have used throughout my career and it always seemed to be appreciated. And to work. Then, the example was, it led us toward, we do need to set priorities, either that will happen in the time that I’m president or that will set the table for the next president. Which led to the building on the previous academic priorities project because I just hate to see work wasted, and good work, chaired by people like Andrew—

DM: Andrew Ware.
SS: Andrew Ware. To build on that, but to say, to do nothing is also to set priorities. It means
that whatever is happening now, it’s just, status quo. Do you really think, folks, this is how we
should proceed at this time, in our history with our situation, but really, at any university in the
country, in the world, with the innovation going on with online education, with development of
A.I.—artificial intelligence—with all the pressures, with the competitiveness in research for
students through our residential part of our university. We have to pedal harder and smarter,
and so I…”Let’s set priorities. I’m open,” and there are many people who say...I said, “You all,
I’m happy to sit down and design the process, but that’s a little bit, maybe, like asking me to do
the first draft on a CAD machine for building a new house.” There are smarter people to do the
first draft, but how about several of you come up with some drafts about how we would do
this? So, that was the most concrete process, the famous APASP [Academic Programs and
Administrative Services Prioritization]. Which others did most of the design, I signed off on it, so
where it had failures, I’m sure...and it did, I certainly share in the responsibilities for those.
Where it had success, and that is developing, trying out, test running if you will, some ways to
get better data about academic processes. I’m not going to use the word “productivity” but
academic processes. What really matters? Both qualitatively and quantitatively. So the
processes were designed. Provost Edmond [Beverly Edmond] was willing to lead some of the
most, sort of the active and insightful leaders on campus, again, such as Andrew and Liz Putnam
and Steve—

DM: Schwarze.

SS: Steve Schwarze. Steven Schwarze in Communications, right? Yes, John DeBoer. Stepped
forward and said, “Yes, we’ll help lead with this. We will, admittedly, find fault where it’s not
working.” I really think that that’s an example, where empower people, set deadlines.
Interestingly, one of the biggest raps was that it was too fast and, therefore, not credible. Some
of the data developed, some of the readers to have... weren’t maybe as well informed as they
could or should have been. Well, that could be. But, sort of test-running a process that would
be more inclusive was the goal. Ultimately, I, perhaps in a Pollyanna-ish way, believe it laid a lot
on the table, what to take and what to reject, so that an even briefer process could be used,
developed by the next president. So I think that’s an example of a huge project that we
undertook with some flaws, with learning, with data that remains there to be shot full of holes
or utilized, either one. So that’s one example.

DM: Good, thank you. Can you talk about some of the challenges that you faced at UM, and
how you addressed them?

SS: One of the challenges that I faced and that every, frankly, president faces is the daily assault
by the urgent, rather than the time to reflect on the important or to advance what’s really
important. So, in a university, in as much of a change mode as the University was, there were
huge personnel issues of...and issues with the federal government, in terms of the implications
being hundreds of thousands of dollars if we didn’t get something fixed or change something.
What would happen in the financial aid arena or some arena, if we didn’t...the urgent. Or hiring
a football coach or whatever. I mean, the urgent often is a challenge to, not distract, because you have to deal with those. Sometimes they’re life or death. Not to say life and death is not important. It is. [laughs] But that would cause you to...the challenge was to keep your eye on the horizon for the University, even if you’re a one-year, term-limited president. To make sure that, with all these balls in the air, that people are not getting consumed by minutia or by fear, and that they are, back to my word, “empowered.” They’re being their best selves to get that case solved, get this hire made, or don’t. Get it done so that we can move on collectively to change needed in the University—some of it unpleasant. A challenge, for example, we have too many employees. Shall we do the approach of VSO—voluntary severance offer? Or shall we be more strategic? Think about it. That was going to have long-term implications for the University. It did. It still does. That was both urgent and important.

I believe in people. Where possible, I will err on the side of respecting them to make their own decisions. I also believe, of course, in the University and the organization, and being strategic. Not to say I don’t. But, I didn’t, I really didn’t see that as a binary choice. I felt we will be, in the long run, a healthier university if the people...first and foremost, the people who are kind of tempted to leave for whatever reason. They have other opportunities, they have...that they’ve been thinking about. They want to start a business, or they’ve been close to retirement, or whatever. Empower them, through the voluntary severance offer to make that choice. There will be a short-term, especially, a six-month maybe even a year hit, when people have to cover their duties. But it empowers the people who remain. They will be somewhat disheartened when they have to absorb more work. But in the long-term, I felt...This is just an example of a challenge of an organization that has too many employees. You read about those, or you hear about them on NPR every day. It’s endemic in this world, where technology is outpacing our ability to employ every person who’s currently, either is or wants to be employed. So that was an example of a challenge, was how to begin to draw down. Not that mistakes weren’t made.

For example, with the union, and our interpretation by our legal team was that you really had to give notice first to lecturers. The head of the union warned me that we were misinterpreting that. Our legal advisers said no, but they made a good case after we’d done it. So that was one of those instances where you felt you had egg on your face. Honestly, I believe if you’re not...you’re a president moving forward, if sometimes you don’t get a little egg on your face or appear that way to others. I don’t have any pride, what is it, in the sense of having to be right all the time. It’s pretty hard to embarrass me. Oh, maybe that wasn’t a mistake. Oh, if it...whatever, move forward. Move on. So there’s those decisions of how to...Then, secondly, the biggest challenge was, as I mentioned early, was to energize our students—a sense of community. I don’t think you can really accomplish a lot. I felt that our research scientists in particular—not just scientists—our research scholars had a pretty strong sense of community, accomplishment, and achievement, and that was one of the islands in the university, that felt energized, excited, just proud. Had an esprit de corps. And that we needed to spread throughout the University, and to put in place the lines of communication and mechanisms, and to hire the kind of president that would, in the future, bring a real positive energy to that. So
that’s what I felt was the biggest challenge, was to foster this sense of energetic, proud community in what it is a university can do.

DM: Thank you. What areas do you feel you excelled at, during your term as our president? For example, what would you consider to be your greatest accomplishments?

SS: I believe that... [pauses] greatest accomplishment. [pauses] I do think that people who worked most closely with me, in other words, the vice presidents and the heads of constituent groups, came to their jobs every day a little more lighthearted, a little more...with a little more strength to do their jobs well, because I’m the kind of leader I am. I think that that is an accomplishment, because they could bring a little more joie de vivre to what was a daunting task. A university that had begun to turn in on itself too much and to look outward. That is not something I can measure, but I do know that, with rare exception, and for the...with a couple of those folks, they self-selected that they found more joy in their jobs, and as a result they did a better job, whether it was in administration and finance or whether it was in research or whether it was in academic affairs. All the complexity and all the hard stuff going on. So that was an accomplishment, I believe, and I think someone could do an anonymous interview of my cabinet and would find that. It led us to things that were not as successful as I would like, such as the setting priorities project, but that I believe absolutely laid the table for the next level of decisions and achievement that needed to be made.

I think that another accomplishment was communication, both in the city and across the state. And to a degree, beyond. That is, I was invited to speak or interact with principals and counselors and civic groups across the state. People would crowd up afterwards, saying, “That was so fun, that was uplifting, that was exciting. It’s so great to see the University coming back.” So, rightly or wrongly—but I think rightly—I was able to convey across the state to many constituents that the University really had a huge reservoir and wellspring of energy, confidence, and service to the state, and that is was bringing those back to the fore and looking more...there are next hills to climb, unless it...the next grave to dig. So I just really think that was an accomplishment.

DM: Anything else that you would want to mention?

SS: It was a long year.

DM: Those were good. I’m just giving you another opportunity to—

SS: Yes, I’ll circle back if I think of something.

DM: Okay, that sounds good. Is there anything that came to you as a surprise? Anything that you, even though you live in Missoula, you’ve been associated with the University in many different ways for many years. Anything that, once you got here as our president, that came as a surprise to you?
SS: I’ve just been talking about it. I was surprised at the level of anxiety that seemed to permeate the University, and I’ve worked in a lot of colleges and universities. There’s anxiety in our DNA. DNA—“A” could stand for “anxiety” when it comes to a university, because it’s part of what makes a university, a college, so exciting. Is because we are curious. We’re full of curious people, pushing at tough barriers. But I was surprised at the negative level of the anxiety. There’s a good anxiety that keeps you on your toes and keeps you a little bit from being complacent. So that surprised me, at how widespread. I think, enervating, as opposed to energizing, this anxiety was. That was a surprise, and it quickly made...one of my biggest challenges and goals was to energize and help people feel what I’m doing is appreciated, understood, valued, no matter what I’m teaching or what I’m doing, and that it’s...the complexity of what I’m doing is understood. Somebody who has the power to make big decisions, that the person in Main Hall really gets that this is not easy, but that they will do their best if I do my best. So I think that that was my biggest surprise was that the level of anxiety and how negative it was. So I wanted to turn it to be positive.

DM: This wasn’t a question that I had been prepared to ask you or gave you in advance, but I’ve been listening to you talk about all the different things that you do as president and the groups that you talked to—the going on the road and presenting at high schools—and then having cabinet meetings and meetings with other entities across campus. How do you, as a president, find the balance between working on the campus and working off the campus?

SS: That’s a tough balance, especially in any organization that’s been in a rocky mode and whose senior leaders feel off-balance. So, one of my first tasks, and I didn’t, sort of write this down and say, “My first task is,’’ but that I could just sense, was to—back to that word “empower”—to communicate in such...I don’t know, relaxed ways with each of the senior officers in the University, such that they felt confident that I would have their back. That it was okay to make mistakes. It just wasn’t okay not to do something. Because if they’re feeling like a team—they’re not lone rangers—and that they’re really feeling kind of confident and like, “You know, is there any more interesting place to work than this?” then, you can leave campus a lot, if your team feels that way. If you’ve kind of inspired them to...I mean, there are plenty of times where we’ve have a ten-minute, what I’d call, “huddle” in my office in the morning, any member of cabinet, any senior person, if I’m...drop in. It might be five minutes and it might be 20 minutes, but people in the outer office would say, “You guys have way too much fun.” Because there would be so much laughter and comradery, and frankly, it led to teamwork. It led to confidence. When I sensed that, when their urgent questions could be gotten out of the way, and the legal person could say something really fast, like, “Oh, everybody, I’ve got to deal with this today. Can’t wait for a cabinet meeting or agenda.” Somebody in research had some experience with it or perhaps in administration and finance, and they could say, “Oh, my gosh, don’t forget ‘blank.’” Then, they’d say, “Oh, geez,” and everyone would kind of laugh or they’d tease or whatever.
But, the communication, if it’s frequent enough—without being non-transparent—if it’s frequent enough, then you can get off campus, and do that kind of communication farther afield. You just have to do both. At first it took a little longer, build that sense of teamwork, and kind of fun. If you don’t have some fun in your job, I mean, why do it? That was one of the things I wanted to convey. That I’m not coming into this with a black hat, like the world is...I am here to bury some bodies, or maybe even to kill some people first. Oh my lord! Just the opposite. We are good, interesting, well-intentioned, smart people. I mean, I never gave any lectures like this, mind you, of course, but I think that’s the attitude I just feel about people and that they got it. So, when they got it, then I could be off campus a lot. They trusted me, and I trusted them.

DM: Thank you. So based on your recent experience at UM, and then also on your many years of experience in higher ed, what area or areas do you feel need the most attention at UM in the coming years?

SS: The University needs to embrace change. That’s the biggest challenge, and it’s not just for the University of Montana. It’s easier to embrace change, or it may appear easier to embrace change when resources are growing. For example, whether it’s from expanded enrollment or expanded research or expanded whatever. Wherever. Expanded philanthropy. But the biggest challenge is to be a university that expects and absorbs change in an energetic, positive way. Not easy to do. I know that sounds like such a generality. But, as an example, with students, I often would stop and talk to students around the Oval or just anywhere, going around on my scooter. What I looked for was, to what extent were they feeling kind of upbeat. Maybe scared—maybe a little bit scared—in the good way, about the exam coming up, but boy, they liked the challenge of blank—of their class, or the play they were about to help produce, or the art project they were completing.

But as school was about to start in August of ’17, I actually felt it was kind of a blessing that there was too much smoke in the valley, so that we could...we had to move into the Dennison Theater. Because it compressed 1,000 people—don’t tell the fire marshal—into the theater. The students, and they marched in with the drummers drumming and the esprit de corps from different residence halls and people who lived off campus, too. A student-produced film with music and energy, and that capsulized it for me. A lot of people said afterward—it’s a ninety-minute event, if that—and said, “We haven’t had that much fun with that many students in one setting for a long time.” It kind of encapsulated that challenge universities have. How do you, in this era—this digital era—how do you still bring in the humanity? The human...that sense that you’ll get, some people will get at Grizzly Stadium on a Saturday? Or that those students got? Or that some classes I would go to, and you could just sense...might even be a small class, but because of the nature of the atmosphere that the professor had inculcated that there was learning. But there was kind of an underlying joy to that. How you do that in an online era, that is our biggest challenge. To embrace change, to...
Frankly, we are partly a residential university. That’s a big challenge. I think, for a generation. We’ve lost the connective tissue that we used to only get, anyway, in the ‘50s and ‘60s, for about 15 to 20 percent of our enrollment. But it was through the Greek system. It was a hugely influential subset, who are today’s philanthropists by and large, because of the connectivity it gave them to, give or take, a hundred other students. It is that connection that the best online teachers build this sense of community, and maybe, if you build in the weekend, or the “come to commencements.” You know, the different ways that they build some connective... the whole world is full of really good Facebook friends and bloggers, so you know it can be done. But that’s the challenge, is to embrace learning change, but infuse it with humanity, energy, and connection. We’ve got work to do.

DM: So I’d like to shift a bit, at this point, to focus on leadership, and especially on women in leadership. As you know, this interview is part of a women in leadership at the University of Montana series, or oral history project. You are our first female president, and I’m just wondering if you would talk...You’ve already mentioned your leadership style, and that was one of my questions for you. Would you say that there are ways in which your leadership approach differs from males in similar positions?

SS: I think my style is maybe somewhat unique to me, to the extent of course it is. Is it unique to me because I’m a woman? Are there aspects of that? Yes, probably. Undoubtedly. That the...I don’t know. The balancing, from the time you’re little, that boys and men have not have to do as much of. The balancing of competing interests, the compromise, there are expectations over the years, right, from grade school, if not preschool on, was more of a...Women have had to be more collaborative. The other day I went to the memorial service of one of our alums who died age 102. One of her kids said, “Boy, she was as tough and smart and strong a woman as you ever ran across.” Even she got to compete in competitive tennis when the rest of the...women a lot younger that her didn’t get to unless we took up something in high school like...which just wasn’t there. Yet they said there were so many things she wanted to do, and as soon as she could convince her husband that it was his idea, then off she’d go. I thought to myself, “Damn.” That’s the story of too much of our lives. But nevertheless, it does give you skills...maybe not...I’m not real excited about that, and I’m proud that more women—young women in this day in age—have not had to be quite as, what’s the word, deferential to male decision-makers. But because of that, you do absorb some skills that a lot of male leaders in your circle, at least at my age, didn’t absorb. I think, in many cases, it gave me communication skills, Machiavellian skills, decisive skills, that men in my...of similar skill, backgrounds, just didn’t get. So, I think, in that respect, being a woman in some ways helped me a lot. Be a change agent, and a surprising kind and refreshing kind of leader for my groups—my organizations.

DM: Good, thank you. While you were president, UM also had women serving in interim capacities as interim provost and vice president. Or, interim provost and vice president for academic affairs, that was Beverly Edmond, and interim vice president for administration and finance, and that was Rosi Keller. I’m wondering if...that, I think, was unique in the University’s history, and especially to have the three, sort of, top positions, or top positions be women.
Would you care to comment on that working relationship, and whether it was...you think it was influenced at all by the fact that it was three women there?

SS: It was just a wonderful working relationship, and both in their case. I guess we weren’t sure with Rosi. She was one I appointed, and had no idea how fast that change might occur but that same definition of interim, Beverly believed she should do the job. Did the job. So she was the provost, and that’s how I assumed she was and treated her. Shortly after I got there, she agreed to extend another year. So she was it, and decisions had to be made. Then when Rosi came and I selected her that was pretty open-ended, as we now know. So I chose her, partly because she was...but I could easily be using the word “he.” This was a person who was smart and hardworking and faced...a pragmatist. Let’s face reality, however tough it is, let’s get it out there. So, I think, we just had a wonderful working relationship, but...Oh clearly, it was...We were probably a little closer because we were all women. We could kind of tease in some ways that maybe my lead groups in other...at other universities. But I’m one who kind of has some fun with my lead groups. Whether they’re men or women, it’s not really much different. That said...at all. If we can’t be hardnosed and decisive, and yet laugh at ourselves—men or women. So, that’s always been kind of characteristic of the groups—leaders—that I worked with. That said, when the door was closed and it was just Beverly, Rosi, and me, that’s sometimes when the laughing was the loudest. To the people in the outer office, like, what in the heck is so funny? I don’t know, just, there’s a simpatico from our life experiences, of often being second, often being underestimated, often being over the course of a lifetime, and not getting all wrapped up around the axle about it. That’s the way it’s been. And never sitting around commiserating about that. I’m just talking about the common life experience. Made us more simpatico, perhaps, than we...than if one of the guys had been sitting in the same meeting. The conversation might have been not quite as hilarious. I don’t know, we just...It was a wonderful working relationship, completely full of trust and admiration. Loved it.

DM: Nice. Would you care to comment, in general, on women in leadership at the University of Montana?

SS: Oh, there’s not enough of it. Just as there are not enough women in the legislature or women in leadership in so many organizations. I think that’s primarily a pipeline issue, and that’s changing with the numbers of women, frankly, are so surpassing men in terms of their higher education credentials. I, obviously because of my career, believe higher education matters. Not just the credential, although that too. But what you learn and the challenges you face as you achieve that learning. So I think that we don’t have enough women leaders. I don’t think women should ever be appointed as token, but as the pipeline changes, as more and more wom...I do think there needs to be...We need to foster a more inclusive approach in terms of searches and, sort of, expectations of what is this, what’s our unconscious bias as to what this person will look like who takes this job.

Let me give you an example. Twice in my career I hired senior vice presidents in fields that had been always held by men in those colleges and universities prior to that. In the search...
committees, they would bring here are the two or the three acceptable. But the chair of the
search committee, in two cases, were male. They said, “But really, as you can clearly tell, the
best one is the guy from Kansas,” or, “the best one is the guy from that department.”

I said, “Oh, really? And why would that be?”

They’d say, “You can just sense it. You can just tell.” Kind of their life experience and whatever.

I just thought, “That ain’t so.” The success of my leadership depended on picking the right
person, so believe me, I wasn’t going to just pick a woman because she was a woman. But it
was clear to me that in these two examples, and they were about ten years apart—two
completely different places—that the woman brought more intelligence of every kind, I.Q. and
E.Q., and more humanity and more, in some ways, guts, and sense of situational awareness
than what I perceived the male candidate did. Enough time has passed. I’ve seen both women
succeed brilliantly, and had the chairs of those search committees come back to me years later
and say, “Boy, were you right.” Isn’t it funny, “Boy,” were you right? “You were right.” So, it’s
that having women in leadership begets more women in leadership, as that example attests, I
believe.

DM: What recommendations would you have for the University to foster more women in
leadership? Is there anything that you’ve seen that we should be doing differently or could be
doing differently?

SS: I think President Engstrom’s Women’s Leadership Initiative was hugely important. I say that,
even though I didn’t, sort of, allocate funds to, or bandwidth, to really re-upping it or renewing
it or revitalizing it for a second or third year. But I hope it gets revitalized, because I do think
here in this Treasure State, that women like the Jeannette Rankins of an earlier generation are
all around us on campus and their talents are just ready to burst forth in leadership roles.
They’re happy to do a great job where they’re doing a great job. But they’ve got so much
potential, and if not here, when and how? So I do think that finding ways—fellowships, mini­sabbaticals—to invent our own, to enable those women...Even if they end up having to go
away, or get stolen away by...President Gamble [Geoffrey Gamble] of Montana State University
used to say...He used to allocate funds for really outstanding, especially women, deans or
department chairs to go off to those high powered summer programs. He said, “I know that
they’re going to...” which they did. One after another, they were getting snapped up as
presidents, not just provosts. Presidents. A small college or medium sized colleges and
universities in other places in the country. He said, “I’m not worried about it.” Actually, I had a
colleague who was a system head in Minnesota, who said the same thing. He said, “Every year
we’ve got 33 colleges and universities in Minnesota, and we’ve always got a half a dozen
searches going for a president.” He said, “I’m always...I know that when one of ours gets stolen
by some other state, we might get her back in five or ten years at the University of Minnesota,
perhaps, even.” So to play the long game on behalf of both your own university and your set of

Sheila M. Stearns Interview, OH 461-003, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University
of Montana-Missoula.
universities across the state by fostering women’s talent is something we can and should do more of.

DM: Nice. What are you doing with your time now that you’re no longer our president?

SS: Number one priority is family. And that sounds like such a woman thing to say, but I think as most people who know my circumstance would know that both my children and six grandchildren live in town and that one of them had a serious health crisis during the time that I was president and needed me then, and as soon as I was off duty, got my time and attention. I was interim mommy for a couple months while they were at a...got medevacked to Seattle to save a life, for a time, and I took care of the little kids. But that family is still recovering, and need... you do what you have to do, and I’m happy to do it. So, for a year or so, that family...bone marrow transplant went well. They’ve moved back to Missoula, I’m here, I’ve got some time. I’m devoting this year. It’s not interim grandma. It’s not interim family. It is something I’m good at, just as I feel like I was good at being president. I’m good at communicating with those kids. I’m good at communicating...I kind of often know what needs to be done. So that’s my primary year. It has been since I left, and it will be for another...Actually, they were still in Seattle for six months, so when they moved back last...in May. That’s my priority for the coming year, and then I’m sure they’ll...they’re already getting back on their feet. Reestablishing their careers and so forth. So family first, because I can. Then, some of my own thinking, writing, reading, travelling—doing plenty of that. Not enough recreation yet, but to me helping somebody is practically recreational. So I’m having a good life. Still not reading as many of those books by my bedside that I’d like to, but all of those kinds of things.

DM: Right, good. Is there any question that I should have asked you that I didn’t? Anything that you would want to share about your personal or professional life or about the University? About women in leadership?

SS: You’ve asked good questions, and I think that the opportunity to lead in education, at any level—preschool through a university—is a privilege. I think it’s undervalued in this society. Is hugely valued by those in the know. The elites can say all they will about, “Let’s not pay for preschool education,” or, “Let’s tell a bunch of people it’s a waste of time to go to college.” But they wouldn’t for a millisecond undervalue education in their own family or for their own family members. So, to the extent that I would have a life cause or a sort of valedictory, it is what a privilege it’s been, I think, for me to be in, as a career and to be a leader, in what I believe to be the most important profession in the world—education. To both do my own part, bring all of my intelligence, creativity, and energy, and to empower others, thereby to bring their even greater intelligence, creativity, innovation, and energy. It is what is transforming the world. It is the, whatever, fourth or fifth industrial revolution, is this power of education to spread and incorporate digital change. Whether it’s in medicine that cures people, or it’s in history that makes people learn from the past to apply to the future. I mean, I just think I have lived at a
good time. I am living in a good time, and I was privileged to decide to be a teacher. That got me into education. I mean, what could be better? What could have been better?

DM: Nice. Well, thank you very much for this interview, for your service to the University, for your time. Really appreciate it.

SS: You’re welcome.

[Break in audio]

DM: I realize that I had actually one other question that I had intended to ask you, so, if you will indulge one further question. You’ve had many different leadership positions in the university system at different times in your career. I was wondering, again, on the topic of women in leadership, whether you could compare your experiences or talk about your experiences in terms of acceptance of women in leadership positions—in your roles as chancellor, as president, as commissioner. Or even, maybe not even at levels that we would consider to be those highest academic levels.

SS: I think that every position I held, in terms of a woman in leadership, had more in common than you’d think. That was, they valued and needed my particular background, intelligence, and communication skills to move things forward. What differed a little bit, I found the colleges and the universities a little more receptive, than the commissioners job, to a woman being in the job, interestingly. I think it’s that, sort of, inclination, in spite of everything people say about higher education, to embrace change. That people were just kind of excited. I was the first woman in every one of my positions. But, a couple of times I ran up against, over the course of the 35 years, I ran up against a lack of access to being in the room where it happens—to take a phrase from Hamilton, “In the room where it happens.” It’s one of my favorite songs in that...Lack of access. When I first started a vice president, for heaven’s sake, at the University, and you still couldn’t be a member of Rotary. I was vice president of external relations. I mean, come on. In small manifestations, boy, things like that. More overt things disappeared over the years, but there were times when I wouldn’t even realize it until later, that I just had been excluded. There were conversations that mattered. More on the state level as commissioner, and even then, not very often, fortunately.

DM: Any examples that stand out to you, that you’d want to share?

SS: It just...should have both in the legislative and executive branches are more accustomed for the longest time, was so wom...unlike the University, so few women in their leadership roles. So they just weren’t as comfortable in reaching out with, and having those kind of conversations I mentioned earlier that I had with Beverly and Rosi. Just that relaxed, I mean, not drinking buddies, but just, sort of, we have so much in...We’ve been cowboys. We’ve had our farmers and ranches together. You know, just that...and they’re just comfortable. They, as a result, almost without any malice of forethought, excluded me from conversations. Golf course-type
conversations that mattered. So a little bit of that, and I’m sure that still exists to a degree. But not much, and diminishing—I like to think optimistically—over time.

DM: Right. Well, good, thanks for adding that one in, and again thank you for the interview.

SS: Yes.

[End of Interview]