David Brooks: Would you mind describing some of your initial involvement in either feminism or just activism in general in Montana.

Carol Williams: Well, you know usually I think most Montanans wouldn’t think that they’d hear someone say this but, I think my early activism and caring about women came from growing up in Butte. Butte was a pretty high-rolling, busy mining town. Yet, I knew, had a contact with, growing up in Butte, enormously powerful, bright articulate women. I think probably from my early teacher there from knowing a lot of women in the labor movement in Butte. Some of the women who ran the cultural activities around the Butte area were people who way before there was the word feminism was ever used were people who were good feminine role models for me.

My mother was a stay at home mom but she was in total control of the family and she was bright and well read. I think all in all my feminism started in growing up there and knowing that women could pretty much do what they wanted to. Of course in my family that what I was taught so that is what I believed.

Then I went away...when I went to college I graduated from Western (Montana) with a degree in education and while I was there I got very interested in some of the government structures in the colleges in Montana. I was elected to the Associated Women’s Students, President of the Assoc. Women’s Students of Montana in 1965, I think, at a convention in Bozeman. It was really the only entity in the government structures of the colleges where, women had a pretty good voice. You very rarely run into an officer in a college in Montana who wasn’t the secretary. The Associated Women’s Students was a really interesting experience for me because it would get young women from all over Montana and all the colleges of Montana talking about what kind of concerns they had about what was happening at their institutions. I think it was a good experience for me both running for that office and being elected and then having to do the duties and travel around to all the schools and talk to all the women counselors and women deans in the schools and the students. I got a pretty good sense of what was happening with women. That was in the very, very early stages of when Betty Friedan was starting to write and some of the other authors were coming out with texts that you had something to put on, it wasn’t just in Montana that women were having struggles to try to get equality, it was everywhere. That was, I guess, when I was in college that I first recognized that this was a universal problem.

Because I had grown up in Butte and didn’t feel limitations myself, was the first time I started reading intellectually that there were limitations and that sort of flew in the face of what I grew
up believing. That was when the equal rights amendment and all of the issues, push for that, conferences for that. I was a little involved at the edges of all of that. Then I got married and got very busy in raising a family but stayed active in cultural and community organizations, particularly those that gave opportunities for women.

One of the ones that I was totally involved with and I think saved my life at the time when my kids were growing up was the AAUW. It was an organization that had a lot of older women, who were good role models but also a lot of younger women like me, who were not working because they were able to stay home with their children. It gave me an outlet both, to be with somebody who was involved in politics and who was trying to make a difference. But still allowed you to stay home and be with your family. And the first political, you know I’ve been very political all my life. My father was the mayor of Butte for many years. So politics was always very comfortable for me. But I hadn’t done anything like lobbying the legislature and AAUW allowed me that opportunity too.

Because the time, way back before your time, there were no kindergartens in Montana and AAUW, the League of Women Voters and some other groups kind of took that on to appeal to the legislature to make public kindergartens public. So I was part of a task force of AAUW that lobbied for public kindergartens where we lived in Helena. Those years were wonderful, Montana, we were just about to write a new constitution. We had the coal tax money so there was money to be spent. And we were able to get the kindergartens instituted and it was a great feeling.

I think without women that wouldn’t have happened because men didn’t necessarily see the need for children to have a public kindergarten and if parents wanted a kindergarten in those days they’d pay for a private school. So it was very uneven, children were coming into the first grade, as an educator it was a problem for me because we’d find children coming into public schools who weren’t prepared because their parents weren’t able to afford private kindergartens. That was the year that I decided to go take a full time job teaching Head-Start for that reason, because of the inequality.

I taught in the first Head-Start Program in Butte, the first year that it was created and taught for two years. Again it was pre-kindergarten children who were not having the same opportunities because they didn’t have a chance to go to daycare and interact outside their family. Head Start allowed an opportunity for that too. Then I guess all of the typical kinds of issues that were around Montana at that time, choice, and women’s insurance and all those things I had a little bit of involvement in terms of being active and talking about them.

But it wasn’t, when I got back to Washington D.C. to live is when I really started to realize that even though women had a lot more opportunities, things were going better, there were still huge areas where women weren’t heard. I helped co-founded an organization called Peace Links, which was founded in the early ‘80s. Betty Bumpers, whose husband was the Senator from Arkansas, myself and Theresa Heinz whose husband was in the Senate from Pennsylvania at the
time. He was killed in a plane accident. She’s now married to Senator Kerry. Theresa’s husband was a Republican, but Betty’s and my husbands were Democrats. So we were out, involved in trying to get women to talk about National Security issues.

One of the things that became very clear during the early ‘80s, when Reagan was first elected, was that the priorities that most women had in this country were needs for their family, health care, education. Those things were all going to be slashed. We were going on this huge military defense build-up that was just eating the federal budget basically. You would never hear in any discussion of these issues (or) a women’s point of view. It was always, every time you turned on the TV you talked about the cuts, the expansion of the military. It was always a bunch of white men sitting around talking about why this was necessary to do.

So what we decided to do at Peace Links was get women empowered to have a voice in their local communities and at the national level. They had enough information about what was happening in their world that they would be willing to speak up and that they would be willing to take programs to the PTA and the local League of Women Voters. We started training congressional wives to be speakers to go around the country and go into these kinds of group and conventions and talk about priorities and needs of the country rather than military expenditure. Part of this was, of course, driven by the nuclear issue because the anti-nuclear movement had died for a long time.

But with these increases, during the Reagan years it became really clear that the buildup of nuclear weapons was going to be something that was not only going to be very costly but was very dangerous. That really kind of captured women a little bit because on the surface of it most women understood. You didn’t have to write a book about it for them. They understood that nuclear weapons didn’t make them feel safer. Here we are nowadays right back into this conversation again, sadly in a way much more stifled than it was during the Reagan years. I mean Reagan was so popular that people were a little bit afraid to speak up against what you know he wanted to do.

It’s worse now than it was then. I didn’t ever think I’d say that in my lifetime. I’ll just talk a little more about Peace Links then I’ll wrap that up. I’m sure you have another question.

DB: No, go on.

CW: So we did this training with the congressional wives. We then tried to do the same thing in local communities. Have the congressional wives go put in a speaker bureau in a community of women. They thought they could send out in their (the congressional wives) absence to go and do speeches to the groups. One of the things that was really interesting to me when I started traveling around the country doing this was that if you were going to do a Peace Links demonstration in front of a group of men and women. Interestingly you’d go into a room full of people and when you came to the time for questions and answers, women would never ask a question. They would just sit there and men would ask all the questions. Maybe at the very end
if all the men had spoken maybe some women in the back would raise her hand and say something. Well you know, I don’t really agree with that but it took a lot to get someone to say something. So when I’d do my speeches in groups like that I’d ask men to wait to the end to ask questions, because I particularly wanted to hear what women were thinking. It was important for us to know if we were on the right track or not. As soon as I started doing that, women would become very involved in the conversation, have much better questions frankly, much more insightful questions.

Most men would say, “Well you know when I was in the army...” and their whole background about understanding national security was their own personal experience. Because women didn’t have that, they somehow didn’t feel that they had a right to somehow care about this whole national government of ours and what was the priority of it and where are our expenditures going. We were writing blank checks to the Pentagon and cutting everything else. Women didn’t think they had a right to talk about national security issues.

Now we’ve got Condoleezza Rice, who’s not exactly my kind of a women. But on the other hand she’s there and I don’t think she’d be there if it weren’t for groups like ours going out there and finding people like her. We used her a lot in the early days when she was teaching, I don’t know, some college in Texas I think, I can’t remember. But we used to bring her in for conferences and we’d get press for them. We got a rolodex of really articulate women. That every time there’d be some national problem we’d call up the national press and say we’ve got someone here we’d like to comment on it. They’d be like we’d love to have it. But because they didn’t have those women on their rolodex they weren’t in a position to know who to call. So we were gradually starting to get women into positions where they were credible and articulate. They’d get called be the press.

In addition to that, one of the things that happened when we were touring around talking about the nuclear weapons issues someone would always raise their hand and say, “What about the Russians? Well, yeah you’re right, we have too many but what about them?” We realized we weren’t going to be able to break through all of that unless we started an exchange with Russian women and it wasn’t that easy.

In 1984 we talked to Valentina Tereshkova who was the first women cosmonaut. She happened to be in Washington D.C. at a conference that Betty Bumpers and I were at. We visited with her and then Betty was going on a trip with her husband to Russia, a Congressional trip. They made an appointment to see each other in Russia when they were there. So that was sort of the brains of our very first women’s exchanges that got knocked out by Betty and Valentina in 1984.

What we started doing was bringing groups of about 15 or 24 women from all different parts of the former Soviet Union to America from places like Primghar, Iowa to Las Vegas to Detroit. I mean we tried to give them a really good sampling of what this country looked like. It was,
1985, the height of the evil empire time. It was very risky. I mean, the right wing really went after the congressional wives who were involved in this. A lot of people who had been very supportive of our exchange, who we kind of depended on and planned trips around with these people, ended up getting so intimidated by some of these people that they ended up backing out. They were sending out letters, saying “do you know your congressman’s wife is in bed with the KGB.” Then they’d come out and picked everywhere, “Roses are red and so are Peace Links.” and the same old crap that’s been going on forever. But a lot of people just during the height of all that. Reagan’s popularity was so high that, particularly the Republican spouses that were involved with us, just got very cold feet. But we continued and until I left Peace Links in 1997 we had two or three exchanges a year from that.

In fact this year I’m going to have, the Library of Congress has put a lot of money into, well the Congress has put a lot of money into the Library, to continue to do these kind of exchanges because they think that they are so important now. We are going to bring a group of women out to Montana in I think September or October to do a leadership skills training thing with some legislators and try to let them get a hands on feel of what our campaigns are like, and what you need to do to run for office here. And see if we can give them some ideas about maybe going back home and doing something similar.

But those were all I guess. I’m just going to summarize a bit here by saying it was never our intention in saying men shouldn’t have some right to make decisions but it was our feeling that while women didn’t necessarily always think smarter or better, they did think differently. Until we had everybody at the table with everybody’s views and everybody’s values we weren’t going to have an America that looked like it ought to most women in this country, in terms of what’s important, what should we be putting our energy and our time and our money in. What are we doing, that’s not making us safer at all, but in fact making us less secure. That was sort of what we did in terms of both local and empowerment. Trying to get women involved at the local level but also national and international issues. Saying your views, everybody’s views are as important as your husband’s views on this. The only difference is we never hear your voice. And we usually hear theirs. I think it made a huge difference, I really do think it made a big difference.

It was just one little microcosm of a lot of different things that were happening for women during that time. But it was one that was important because it brought the world closer together. It made people understand. When we’d bring these Russian women, we’d bring them into a room because you know we were all conditioned by our history of what we thought of each other. We’d just bring both participants into the room and say, “Look we’re not going to talk about politics here, you can talk about politics all you want when you go home. Our governments don’t like each other. They sometimes won’t talk to each other. But what we’re here for is to get to know you as a human being. And what your views are, what your concerns are, what’s your values, what do you dream for your children. That’s all we want to talk about on these trips, we’re not going to talk about, you know, internal politics. Because it’s not up to us to change your internal politics and it’s not up to you to change ours. So let’s do what we can

Carol Williams Interview, OH 378-033, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
to change each other as people as human beings.” Because of that, I think it made
enormous difference.

One of the little side things that happened with this was we had an intern who spoke Russian
one year in the office and she asked me if I could, she said could I write a letter. It was right at
perestroika, when Gorbachev was just talking big about how things were going to open up. She
said, “Why don’t we just write a letter to Izvestia and ask them?” I guess we wrote to Pravda
and Izvestia both, and ask them, “Say, we’re a group of American women who really want to
know more about people in your country if you write to us.” and we knew in the early stages of
that you couldn’t even get a letter that would get delivered in the Soviet Union. So I thought, oh let
her write the letter, how much problem could that cause us? We have a very
small staff. About a week after, about two weeks after, I think it was, the letter was mailed.

A friend of mine who, down the street who does a lot of Russian translating and had done a lot
of work with Russian businesses called and said, “Did you write a letter to Izvestia?”

“Oh god, yes we did.”

“Well they printed it this morning.” About five weeks later they were bringing mailbags about
this big (indicates about three feet high with her hand) up to our office, just dragging them up
the stairs. Because there was suddenly this opportunity for Russians to write to America and
get a pen pal. What we said was we want to correspond with you, we didn’t call it pen pals. We
said we want to correspond with you about your lives and what your dreams are and what your
hopes are for your children and your country and the world. If you’d like to correspond with an
American woman write to us.

Well, it totally took over our office for two years, I mean we could do nothing almost, except
match up. Then we had to go find American women who would do this because we weren’t
absolutely sure that women in America would think this was hot. And so we started calling...
did a story, Washington Post did a story. So then we started getting the bags full of American
letters. We had to come up with a system to try to get people matched up. It was quite an
ordeal but what it showed you was the humanity, the spirit of people in this world. Who really
in spite of what they were trained and learned in school about each other, once the
opportunity came, that they could talk to a real Russian person maybe a teacher like them,
maybe a lawyer like them. And share their experiences with them, people in both countries
couldn’t wait to do it. I mean it was just phenomenal to see that happen. You’d get the same
kinds of letters from the Americans that you’d get from the Russians. They’d say I really want to
write to someone in Russian because I’ve known nothing, everything I’ve known about them
my whole life has been negative. What I want to know is what they are really like as people.
This thing just totally exploded it took us over for a while. Even though we weren’t doing much
with the program when I left in ’97, I did go back and take a group of women who wanted to go
and meet their pen pals. We took a group. I took a group over to Russia in the winter of ’97. It
was just phenomenal. It was so beautiful to see people relate to one another on that level. Most of them are still corresponding with one another. They just have, people have their Russian friend's picture on their refrigerator all of a sudden. I mean it was just, it was great. That was the other little side project besides the exchanges. And the empowerment of women and the other things we did.

But, then we took a group to Beijing for the women's conference in '96 was it, '95 or '96, I can't remember. We had a plan to meet up with some of the Russian women while we were there and the Japanese women while we were there. So we had a little sort of inside meeting of Peace Links people. A lot of our local Peace Links people sent groups of people to Beijing for that conference. We had a fairly large contingent there. That was really interesting, because at that point I knew I was going to be leaving. It was a nice conclusion of having these women find other folk in the rest of the world to sort of maintain a contact with. I knew I was going to be gone so that sort of summarizes most of what I've done.

I had a little bit of experience when I got back. I ran for the legislature, and only served one term because I ran for lieutenant governor and lost. But that legislative experience was very interesting because having been a staff person at the legislature in the '70s and I helped lobby with AAUW previous to that. But being there even with all my experience with politics it's clear...it's clear to me that there are huge changes for women that you just couldn't get away with. The things you used to be able to get away with. When my husband was in the legislature there was not much patronizing of women. Women's issues that normally wouldn't pass, like contraception, payment for contraceptives, payments from insurance companies. Those issues were taken pretty seriously. We didn’t always have enough votes to get most of those things passed. But the one thing we did get passed that session was the renaming of the 'squaw sites' and that was a bill that Carol Juneau and I had '97. And, er, no '99 that was '99. It was really nice because you had not only the whole opportunity to have a dialogue about that it was very anti-women but the Indian women had such a different take on it than the word itself, that the numbers itself.

There were a couple of Native American legislators that year. Having an Indian woman come to these people and say it's wrong. And dare them, just dare them to say that it was politically correct, that they were trying to be politically correct. To say that it wasn’t hurting her as bad as she said it was, to say it couldn’t be hurting her daughters to be called squaws. It was really interesting, they couldn’t, they couldn’t. The same members in the legislature who would not let the Diane Sands bill that was identical out of committee. Wouldn’t let it out of committee, same people. Couldn’t tell Carol Juneau that. It was a huge change, sea-change in Montana Legislature when Carol went there. Because they suddenly had somebody looking across the table at them telling them that they were wrong and had experience and understood the pain that that had caused her and her family all those years. They couldn’t muster up any excuses. I think we had four or five votes against it that time, I mean it passed out of committee unanimously, it only lost four votes on the floor. So it was huge success. But again it was a
combination of being a woman and being a native woman that just, I think, locked it up. So you ought to talk to her sometime if you haven’t.

DB: I think a few interviews have been done with her.

CW: Yea, she’s really good.

DB: You’ve talked about quite a few of the different groups you’ve been involved in, and projects you’ve been involved in. Could you kind of describe what a typical working day for an activist is, for you personally anyway? I know you mentioned some of meeting you’ve had, and the obvious letter reading, but what are the things you do in a day-to-day routine?

CW: Well, when I was at Peace Links, do you want me to talk about that a little bit? What’s misunderstood is that it’s something that you do occasionally. I think to make change in the world you have to change yourself. You have to be in a situation where you understand that you’re going to work really hard on these issues. But, and, maybe you’ll fix it and maybe you won’t, but that doesn’t make any difference in a lot of ways.

It’s the attempt to fix it that is important in a lot of ways. It’s sort of the ability to do things in your life where your children and the people, who know you, know that you are willing to go out there and do something that is uphill but you go out there and you do it anyway. But I think part of what working at Peace Links did for me, for my kids, when during the real height of the nuclear build up there was a real interesting undercurrent for children in this country. They were about half worried listening to this talk, they were picking things up but there was never any discussion at the dinner table about it. It was just that they’d hear things, then they’d log it back and it would frighten them. One of the things that I learned early on is that families who had activist parents who were trying to make a change had much more happy and much more well adjusted children. Because they knew that their parents were trying to fix this and I really think that at the core of what got me going in the morning all those years was that I knew that my kids were dependent on me. They really, they really thought that I was managing and maintaining things around the house pretty well so they thought I could probably do that outside the house too. They had a lot of faith in what I was doing.

The paradigms was different at Peace Links in terms of what our average day would be like. We were really wanting to be inclusive with other groups. There was always a little bit of territoriality about funding sources and because there was always so little funding for these sort of things that it was always very competitive. But we just used to bite the bullet and include other groups in our things we did. We were constantly maintaining contact with other national groups that were involved in the anti-nuclear movement at the time. And very supportive of those group when they’d be doing something. So we had the base of our day to day thing would be to go in a deal with, find out what was going on. We didn’t have the Internet in the early days so you had to do it by phone and be coalitions. We used to have
meetings every couple of weeks, with different coalitions of groups and try to be sure we could be helpful to them.

In addition we did a lot of things on Capitol Hill, forums and, we’d actually use the Capitol for it. Because if you use the Capitol for it you could always get press. I was always planning legislative luncheons for members of Congress where we’d bring in a speaker. We brought in Carl Sagan for instance. Dr. Howard Hyatt, who’s very well known in the health care communities, who would talk about the side effects of all this on kids. We used to do that regularly.

Sometimes that was the other piece of what I was trying to do. We were always doing these exchanges and trying to bring, women of like minds together and talk about professional interests and their personal involvement with their children and what they had in common. We used to use the Hill for that too. We’d always have the event on Capitol Hill. We’d invite the Congress to come and meet these women, because it was a good way to get press. Then other people around the country would know what we were doing.

One of the things we did, during the exchange time, one of the first groups we took to Russia included some Congressional wives and some other women and talked to a young man named John Albert, we talked into coming and doing a film of it for us. In addition to that, he sold, he used to do some little bits on NBC Today Show. He sold bits of it to the Today Show so we were really excited about having that opportunity. It was probably the very first exchange they had ever showed on national television like that. John did a wonderful film for us that we used for, internally for the organization. But the part he got on NBC was terrific.

So I was always looking for press angles. In a small organization, when you are the director you also do the fund raising and the ideas for the events. We had a wonderful board of people. But boards don’t do the day to day stuff. It was a staff of three or four and me. It turned out I think to be fairly successfully dynamic in terms of trying to keep the administrative costs down. We spent most of our money on programs and exchanges and very little on administrative overhead. But it was a challenge to have to do all of those things. The big contact, the big help for us from the very beginning, was having the ties to the Congress. It was not that they could do anything for us, it was that they could give us some visibility. When we’d do anything and we’d get members of Congress to show up the press would follow it. We found out very early that spouses, Betty Bumper used to say “I use my name shamelessly.” And she did. It didn’t bother her a bit to call up somebody and say you’ve got to do this. Then she’d call up somebody’s wife and say “Hey, your husband’s not doing this. We need him to sleep under the peace quilt tonight. And his office won’t call me back.” And Betty’d just deliver the peace quilt to the spouse to be sure that it got done. Then they’d have to write a little note in the book saying they’d did it.

But, it was a combination that the time was right for women to be more verbal and articulate about the problems in the world. We gave them an opportunity to do that and it was a wonderful thing watching Congressional wives. One of my best friends Sylvia Sabo from

Carol Williams Interview, OH 378-033, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
Minnesota had never given a speech in her whole life. We had her come to this training program and I talked to someone on her staff and on her husband’s staff in Minnesota. I said isn’t there some group that Sylvia could go out and do kind of a test there of. So they said let us think about it a little bit and a few weeks later they called back and they had found some place, some group and she had agreed to go out and give this speech. Her husband was so intrigued, because Martin doesn’t give speeches. He’s a very quiet, Scandinavian, Minnesotan of very few words. He just doesn’t give speeches. It’s a little different than it is out here. Anyway, he decided he’d go watch her because he was so intrigued that she’d agreed. She’d never done this in her whole life. Apparently she was fabulous, she just did a great job. She just got up and spoke from her heart about what her concerns for what’s happening with the military budget. And Martin, the next day I saw him and he was just beaming from ear to ear. He just couldn’t believe what a wonderful job she did. He said, “I just can’t believe how wonderful, she’s never done that before and she was really good.”

It was just seeing these women who were very capable who had grown up in the presence of other things. Many of them had their own involvement and their own careers. But to get them all together to get them thinking on the same page about, okay, all of these things are really good that you’re doing, but everything that you’re doing is very important, but nothing is more important than how we are going to deal with this nuclear issue. Because it affects everything, it affects whether you are a teacher, a nurse or whatever. It all affects your family. So you’ve got to put a priority on this in addition to what you’re doing, and there were these women who’d just say, “Yea.” “You’re right, you’re absolutely right we’ll go do it.”

All the way from Washington these women who were helping us to the local PTA’s who’d come out and hear a Congressional presentation then they’d want to go out and go do it. Then we’d do a little training exercise in Des Moines, Iowa or something for bring women in for speaker’s bureau training. It came from both ends, so it was a beautiful fit. Women from Washington who had powerful husbands could get women activated from local communities and gave them a huge amount of power in their own minds about what they could do and the good things they could do. Because their husbands were in Congress.

Most women came to Washington thinking that it was a drag frankly. Hey, your husband’s in Congress, that means that you’ll never get to see him. They had to fill that hole with something and with something that meant something. One of the ways they could do that was to go back to their local communities and get their local women engaged in something. Betty set off a whole new ripple when she got the grass roots group involved. It was really not only important but it taught women. All those women who thought that they were totally liberated found out they weren’t when they started doing this. So there was a lot more work to be done because of it.

DB: You talk about bringing people back to their grassroots and being involved in their community. What of the things you’ve done would you consider most significant or even historical? In terms of both Montana and outside Montana.

Carol Williams Interview, OH 378-033, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
Carol Williams Well, I think probably of the work I’ve done, I’d say the work that was most important was the work I did at Peace Links because it touched so many people’s lives. It touched people around the world in a way and you’d hear, even in Beijing, people would see a Peace Links button and somebody from Africa and we didn’t do any work in Africa. We always talked about it but were never able to muster resources to do it. And somebody’d come up and say, “Oh I know about Peace Links.” It’d be something they read somewhere or maybe about the pen pal project because that got a lot of international news.

But the thing that made me realize that even on a small budget, we had a $500,000 a year budget or something, and to do all the exchanges and grassroots sort of outreach that we did. That’s a pretty small budget, when you’re dealing with international organizations. But it touched so many people and I guess, this is just a total aside but I wanted to get it down but it’s just so interesting. On one of our last trips we did was Eastern European trip. We went to Denmark and then St. Petersburg and then we went down to the Czech Republic and Hungary and Austria and ended up in Germany. This was an American group of women that we took there and one of the things that was so interesting there in Denmark the year that, this would have been in 1995. We met with some people in the Danish Parliament that told us they had just come to a conclusion from research on their foreign aid money that, compared to us per capita, their budgets, their foreign aid money isn’t huge. But by their standards it’s fairly large, I mean when you look at our GNP and what we give to foreign aid it’s pretty paltry. In fact, people who complain about it that it’s too high, most of what we consider foreign aid money is military money that we’ve given away to somebody.

So, pure foreign aid money for humanitarian reasons or business or whatever anything outside of military, sending them guns, other countries do a lot better. Denmark that year, we had a meeting with these Parliament members. They told us that they had just made a determination that they were not going to give money to anybody but emerging women’s groups in these countries, Africa, South and Central American, Eastern Europe. That they weren’t going to give a dime to anything but emerging women’s organizations because what they’d concluded was that without the women’s organizations that could come in there with a fresh start and look at the landscape and say, let’s go do it this way. Not with any background to say they could do it this way but just to try it. Try anything different, try anything that’s not being done now. I talked to them a year later and they were just raving about how successful, about how, with just little bits of money what some of these women’s organizations were able to do. Including economic development and humanitarian things. They talked about a story about a woman who the bank gave ten dollars to, this Danish corporation gave a ten dollar to a woman, who went out and who bought a bunch of thread. A box full of thread. Then she went door to door and sold all that thread and made fifty dollars on that first box. She went back to the bank and said I’m paying you back and I need more money to buy more thread. Before about a month and a half went by she had enough money to send her children to school. The Danes thought that, those little stories would mean nothing in Washington D.C. It’s like that. It meant something to Hilary Clinton by the way. She really made it her mission when she was First Lady.
to go to a lot of these countries and do some things like that with some of these women and made the United States be more responsible with these small projects.

But before her, it’s just not something we consider to be a huge success that a woman could go out and be self-sustaining and put her kids through school by going out and by selling a few bolts of thread. But, it was huge and it totally changed that family’s life. That’s the kind of thing that I think we are missing more and more in this country. We’ve become so concentrated on budgets as an item that we don’t pay attention to what that all means in terms of people’s lives. I think women are the only ones that can make a good appeal in this country in terms of reregistering priorities.

I’m doing something similar to that now. When we lost the election I had met so many wonderful people on the campaign that were so devastated that we hadn’t won.

DB: That’s the 2000 election?

CW: The 2000 election. One of the things I said right after the first of the year was we’ve got to keep some of these people involved. My daughter and I co-founded a group called Montana Kids First. It’s on a state level a lot like what we tried to do with the National Budget in Washington during those years, that is make people understand where their state money goes and what do they get for it. Also we haven’t had for many years, probably for a decade a state budget that reflected the needs of our children. What we are doing is raising money in this pack to give to legislative candidates who will vote for more money for education, more money for higher ed., more money for children’s health insurance, more money.

One of the things that the governor has tried to do now that I think is totally offensive, is against everything I believe, is these across the board budget cuts. Just telling everybody to cut it. Well, fixing a pot hole is different than fixing a child and across the board cuts don’t work. I mean they don’t work. Some of these cuts affect peoples’ lives at every single day. They can’t get medicine for mental health problems. You don’t cut across the board. There are some things that have a lot more value. This administration (Judy Martz governorship) and a lot of them before it haven’t figured that out.

So what we’re going to try to do this election cycle is be kind of noisy and endorse candidates that agree to go to Helena. Because we have these biennial sessions, by the time people get back around to being elected again everyone has forgotten how they’ve voted two years earlier. So we’re going to take out ads and put their voting record in the paper and endorse some of these people who were the worst in Helena. It’s kind of a drop in the bucket but again, back to saying to people, what are your priorities here. Everybody will tell you their priority is education and everyone will send people back to the legislature who won’t vote for it. We’re digging ourselves a hole in Montana both in higher ed. and K through 12. That’s outrageous. We’ll never catch up if we keep doing this. We’ve got teachers who are quitting because they can’t afford to be teachers anymore. We can’t keep teachers here.
You look around this campus and we graduated all these wonderful people like we did this year and most of them aren’t going to stay in Montana. In the meantime, all the people who taught them are about ready to retire. We are in for a real comeuppance here if we don’t start paying attention to this. Again we’ve got a lot of wonderful guys that are men, that are helping with this program but it is really driven by the women who see this on a day to day basis with their own children and their own grandchildren. And who are just tired of doing it and just want to try and do something different. Just want to go out and speak up and get more people to understand this and just see if we can turn it around. So that’s off the subject a little but just sort of back to priorities again.

DB: No, that’s OK. You’ve talked a lot about issues that are women’s issues. How about those people who have been allies or opposition to the things you’ve done? Has that been as gendered as the issues you’ve centered on or could you say that? Or what would you say about the allies you’ve encountered or the opposition you’ve encountered?

CW: Yeah, I think it, I think it, more than anything during the times that, or the Peace Links times the opposition almost always would come from men. I think part of that is, well it’s partly that they are not used to being questioned about it for one thing. The Pentagon used to send somebody out to every single thing we had. If we had somebody out, they’d send the Pentagon out and be there to talk about how silly we all were. After about a year of doing that they stopped doing it because they, they started looking pretty silly. They’d get up there with all their charts and all their graphs and the women sitting out there didn’t give a rip about any of it.

What they wanted to know was how come my kid’s going to sleep at night afraid of a nuclear weapon. How come I can’t get daycare and how come I can’t get healthcare and I can’t get this for this child.

[G.G. Weix enters room.]

CW: Hi, G.G.

How can my kid do that? It made the Pentagon look so bad that they stopped doing it. We started inviting them ourselves so that we could announce that they decided not to come. They just didn’t want to have to answer those questions. Somebody would stand up and say something just as simple as, “Well, you don’t think I should be involved in this decision. I raised this child, I birthed him, I give him his vitamins in the morning. And make sure he drinks his orange juice and eats his breakfast and you’re telling me that I don’t, that I shouldn’t be able to say something about what you’re going to do when you’re trying to explode the world?” They’d go (makes intentionally nonsensical noise with her lips, laughing). I don’t know what to say about that. So they stopped coming. They just decided that they wouldn’t put their energy into trying to talk to a bunch of these dumb women.
DB: Did you find a lot of opposition to be partisan as well as gendered?

CW: Some of it was. But during the Reagan years, and it’s going to be really interesting to see how historically this time plays out. I think we are in a much more dangerous time now than we were with Reagan. We have this phenomenon going on with war. Whatever it really is that we’re in, that has totally muted all kinds of criticism. It can come all the way from talking about national security and the war itself to anything else that seems just a little bit not Bush-like now. I’m really troubled by it. I’m troubled by it because you are hearing even fewer women on these topics than you used to.

I mean, for awhile there you had this cadre of bright articulate women that you’d hear from time to time pop up on these issues. Boy, everybody’s just disappeared. It’s just almost like McCarthyism all over again. And it’s not like, they’ve substituted the word Communist because there aren’t anymore, except a few here in America. Now the only ones they can use, they just use Liberal. It’s totally masked any discussion. I think it’s just pushes people aside. I spoke to one of the sororities here, political science fraternity shortly after the Gulf War. All the kids in there were saying I don’t understand why nobody will stand up and say anything. Or not the Gulf War, I’m sorry, about Afghanistan. They were totally troubled about how there was no discussion about it. I said you just don’t hear anything in the press, that would lead you to have a discussion about it. People are afraid because everybody in the town has a flag on their car. So it’s like, it’s totally made you feel like you can’t talk about it.

I saw a thing Dan Rather did the other day. And he’s saying the same thing, exactly the same thing. He said the press has gone totally to sleep. We don’t even know what is going on in Afghanistan. I mean can you imagine if this happened with Bill Clinton, think about that for a minute. If Bill Clinton had been having this war and we hadn’t seen a single picture from Afghanistan. We haven’t seen what kind of damage we’ve done, we haven’t seen what the country looks like. The press can’t even get in there. They’ve had their little war over there and totally in isolation from the press and the American people. And we’re letting it happen. It’s like, oh, it’s okay because we’re afraid. Because of what happened on September 11th. It’s totally, it’s just, I think it’s going to subvert our freedoms here. It’s already starting to, and the new, whole discussion about the new cabinet post (Homeland Security), and no discussion. It’s like, well, we can’t talk about that because everyone’s afraid and they don’t want it to happen in their neighborhood and they’re willing to give up all of these freedoms. I think it’s scary. Even the ACLU, even the Liberal groups, you don’t hear. You’ve still got 147 people in prison, that aren’t charged with anything. And it’s like, oh, that’s okay. They probably don’t look like us and it’s okay. They’re probably visitors. We don’t care. We don’t care who they are. We don’t care if they ever get charged. They can just stay in prison. Well, how un-American is that. So I think it’s time for women to start this again, I do. I think that its going to, and it will be women who end up starting this discussion. I hope it’s soon.
DB: In terms of doing something like that, it sounds a lot like when you were talking about bringing Russian women over in the height of the Cold War. How do you start that sort of dialogue? How will women start that?

CW: Well, I think one thing, as soon as this thing stabilizes to some extent in Afghanistan, what you’ll end up seeing is a lot of women’s organizations. A lot of women led organizations to be very involved in Afghanistan and what’s happening to women there. Then that will start to get out a little bit. I know a group named Vital Voices. It’s a group led by a woman who used to work for Hilary Clinton, was her chief of staff it’s just now starting to talk about bringing some Afghan women to the U.S. and travel them around. So people can see their faces, see what their lives were like before the Taliban, what it’s like now. I’m going to try to help her out with some things out West if they ever get some money. See, raising money for things like that in this climate is really tough. There are some groups I know of like them that are interesting in doing that. That will have to be expanded to the Mideast in general. We did one exchange with Israeli and Palestinian women. It was really successful. But I’ll tell you, it was so hard to raise the money for that. Some of the more conservative Israeli groups in America, including a group in Montana.

DB: I hate to pause you but we’re just running out of tape.

[End of Interview]