Claire Rhein: First of November. Dan Kemmis, being very patient, answering the questions of Claire Rhein.

It’s a little hard in a way, Dan, to pick up from our last conversation, especially since so much has happened. We talked about your decision to not run for the legislature again and the reasons why, but not what you plan to do next. As it turned out, what you planned to do next was very different from what I had expected, and maybe a lot of other people too. So can we begin with the background of your decision why you chose to run for chief justice of the state court [Montana State Supreme Court]?

Daniel Kemmis: We can, although I think that first of all trying to establish any continuity here may be difficult because I’m not sure that there has been very much. I think that what’s happened during this last couple of years involves to a certain extent some uncertainty about where I was going and what I should be doing.

As I view it now, I guess that I see a kind of complex picture and one where if I’d been smarter I would have listened to what I knew I should be doing. (laughs) So I’ve got some regrets to talk about with regard to what’s happened and so on.

I guess I did talk last time about why I chose not to run for the legislature again. That I don’t regret. That had a lot to do with feeling that it was time to come home, to stop journeying to Helena and leaving my family at home and so on. A feeling that I had gone into the legislature thinking that I would like to serve there about a decade, and I had done that and had had a good experience. But what happened immediately after the last interview was something that was very important for me. During that ’83 session, I had begun to work with some friends and acquaintances on an idea that had come to me. Basically what had occurred to me was that in working with people in the legislature and in politics generally, I’d come to feel that there was a dimension to the work that we did together that was potentially there but never happened. What I meant, in particular, was that so many of the people that I worked with struck me by the depth of their feeling of their commitment to the public good and so on. But what happened immediately after the last interview was something that was very important for me. During that ’83 session, I had begun to work with some friends and acquaintances on an idea that had come to me. Basically what had occurred to me was that in working with people in the legislature and in politics generally, I’d come to feel that there was a dimension to the work that we did together that was potentially there but never happened. What I meant, in particular, was that so many of the people that I worked with struck me by the depth of their feeling of their commitment to the public good and so on. Yet I found that almost exclusively the conversations that we had with each other and that they had with each other tended to be on the level of tactics—of what to do next—and that there never seemed to be an opening for people of good will and public-spiritedness to sit down together and just try to understand what it was that was really motivating them and what it was that they really wanted to accomplish. We had a tremendous tendency to take it for granted that we knew what that was all about and that we didn’t need to talk about it. I had come to the conclusion that if we did talk about that that we would learn an awful lot, but that we might also learn
ways to become more effective at accomplishing what it was that we wanted to accomplish.

Well, the long and the short of it was that I worked with a new organization in Montana called the Northern Lights Institute which operates in Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho. Among us we put together plans for a series of seminars that were held in the summer of 1983. That was, for me, one of the most exciting, one of the most rewarding pieces of work that I had ever been involved in.

What we did was to invite an array of people—a lot of civic leaders, a lot of citizen group leaders, people from government, from business, and from religion and so on—throughout those three states. We set up a series of three weekend retreats where we would get out into a nice place in the mountains where there were no telephones—or at least nobody knew where we were—no newspapers, and we spent in each case about two and a half or three days together—talking, playing, enjoying ourselves. Usually watched some interesting movies together. What we tried to do in that series of three seminars was first of all, spend the first one talking about what are the values that are widely shared within this region? Then the second seminar: what kind of vision do we have for the region? What would we like to see happening here if we had our way? Then in the third one: what next steps could we take to follow through on this project and begin to make happen some of the things that we’d talked about here?

It turned out to be a very challenging process partly because at first it seemed like it wasn’t going to work. That when we first got...we got about 40 people together, I think, at the first one, and people had a tremendously difficult time talking about their values. It just didn’t seem to work, and since then I think I’ve come to understand better why that’s so. But by the end of the third seminar, people were so high and so together and there was such a strong sense of community and enthusiasm for the project that I really felt that the promise of the thing had been substantiated. Out of that, in fact, grew, in my mind, a pretty clear conception of what I thought needed to happen next. I only wish I had kept that more firmly in mind over the next year. (laughs) I’d have been better off if I had.

CR: The title is intriguing—Northern Lights. You who brought this together, where did you expect to go with it?

DK: Well, it has so much to do with what I’ve talked about earlier—my view of what politics is really all about. For me for a long time, politics has not been a matter of exercising power. It’s a matter of trying to create what I think of as a civic culture, as a way of people being together and effectively cooperating to achieve the good, as they understand it. But I’ve always been so influenced, I suppose, by some of the thinking of the ancient Greeks in that regard. That it’s not simply as individuals that we can conceive of the good, but it’s as a community that we conceive of the good. The problem in America is we don’t have that...we don’t know what community is, in a sense. We don’t operate as a community. We operate as individuals. We don’t know how to talk about the common good. We don’t know what that means. All we know
is for people to come together and say, “This is what I want,” and “this is what I want.” Then politics sort of brokers all of those individual interests.

What I wanted to begin to accomplish there was to build a sense that it was possible, by working together and talking together in a different kind of setting, to get some sense of what a civic dialogue might really be like and to get some confidence that that could be done in some other contexts.

CR: This is really very interesting that you went all the way back to the Greeks rather than just to Jefferson [Thomas Jefferson]. (laughs)

DK: Well, of course you go through Jefferson, and I go through Rousseau [Jean-Jacques Rousseau]. But yes, I agree, Jefferson is the great guiding light in America and always the loser in America. That the Jeffersonian ideal has, to my way of thinking, always lost...thank god, has never been extinguished.

CR: I think we need to remember that. That's a very, very good line. Very good line, Dan.

Going back to the Northern Lights and the need for a dialog...this is a very interesting geopolitical area that you chose.

DK: Yes.

CR: Not a terribly active one, but a very interesting one. Now there had to have been a reason for that rather than just an accident. Wyoming, Idaho, Montana.

DK: What we titled the series...what I did was write a series of papers. I wrote a paper before each seminar, and that served as kind of a catalyst for the discussion. The title of that overall series was Democracy at the Headwaters. What we were looking at there, first of all—assuming that there is a difficulty with democracy, which I do indeed assume—that the question is, Is there something about the headwaters region that somehow makes the revival of democracy...makes this, at least, a likely place that part of the revival of democracy might take place. Part of the theme of the whole enterprise was that there are certain elements of life in the northern Rockies at the headwaters that do seem to make it more likely—that we could actually revive something like a democratic culture here.

The first paper was entitled “Land-based Values as a Source of Political Effectiveness,” which is a little awkward, but the basic idea there was that first of all in order to really have a democracy or a democratic republic that works, there has to be something substantial that is shared—that you don’t simply have all those individual desires—that you have something that holds you together. The word republic in Latin—res publica—means the public thing. That there is something that is public, that is not simply individual.
The thesis that I worked on in that first paper was that here the land is so powerfully with us all the time and, in fact, forms so much a sense of who we are, that if we would attend to that and think of that as our res publica—as the thing that holds us together—that from that we might begin to build a civic culture. I think there’s a lot to that.

CR: It sounds so very poetic because we do live with it.

Are we getting to the end of the philosophy here and leaving what happened to Dan after the legislature? You decided to leave that basically because there was not a real opportunity for forum in the legislature.

DK: That was a big part of it—that’s right. Then, remember, I also talked about the fact that it is so common for legislative leaders to get to the place where they have to choose a direction. They’re going to want to be full time in politics and how do you do that? That really became an issue.

CR: I didn't really understand that. I was afraid we that were getting to sort of state politics that was crisis diplomacy as we have on the national scene.

DK: Yes.

CR: All right, let's look at the individual who makes the decision. Where are you going?

DK: Well, first of all what I came out of that series of seminars advocating was that the effective place to do politics—to build a civic culture—would be to go back to our local communities and work particularly in the area of economic development. In the course of working on economic development, try to get people to think about what mattered to them—to get them to have the civic dialogue while they are working on something that does matter to them, namely their local economies. That was consistent, I think, with the emphasis that I’d come to place on economic development during my legislative career. I thought we had created with the coal tax initiative, a tool for self-determination and that that tool should now be, in effect, claimed by local communities. So that was the work that I advocated. I think I was right about that. I still believe very strongly that that’s a very fruitful direction. I should have paid attention to that.

I did pay attention to it in the early winter of 1983 when Mayor Bill Cregg died, and I put in my name to be mayor of Missoula. The thought that was precisely that working locally on grass roots in this area was what I should be doing. Of course, I ran up against city hall politics there that eventually made it impossible for me to get the mayor’s position. That would have been full-time political work and good political work.

CR: I hate to leave that right there because city hall politics is a little stunning. Will you explain it just a little bit more?

Daniel Kemmis Interview, OH 036-013, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
DK: Sure, I can tell you what I mean and I don’t, and I realize, of course, that I am subject to a certain amount of sour grapes, so...

CR: Okay, that’s perfectly fine. Let’s keep you human. (laughs)

DK: Yes. What I found, first of all, the position of mayor was to be filled by the council members, which of course, is appropriate. The council, at that point...we were between an election and the seating, in effect, of a new council. The council, as a result of that, had a large number of lame ducks. That’s a bad situation in any case. You, in effect, have a political vacuum when you have a lot of lame ducks.

CR: Were there larger than usual numbers for some reason?

DK: I’m not sure. It’s just that had the mayor died at any other time than between election and the seating of a new council you wouldn’t have had that, and I can’t now recall how many lame ducks there were but it was a substantial number—enough to make a difference. The difficulty with that is that you have people who no longer have any real accountability. Their only accountability is their own sense of what matters, particularly when you are dealing with people who have been in city hall for a long time. You find out then what really matters to them.

I came to have such a strong sense of what I referred to as “fortress city hall,” that there is a fortress mentality that says, We’re going to keep this thing here. We know this guy and this guy, and we’ve built up working relationships within this fortress and we’re going to maintain that. It was that mentality that was most difficult for me to overcome. What I offered, I think, was a sense of vision for the city of Missoula, of hopeful and forward looking...a sense of really reaching out to the community and pulling the community together. Well, that’s fine, and for some of the council members that’s good, but for too many of them it was that sense of pulling city hall together that mattered.

CR: You were in a lame duck situation yourself at this time.

DK: Yes.

CR: That possibly did not help.

DK: That may very well be. In fact, interestingly enough, we had a special session of the legislature right at the time that the city council was meeting, so I was in Helena when—

CR: I was going to ask how much lobbying time really did you have...?

DK: It was difficult, because as Speaker I had to organize the special session and so I had major responsibilities there, and then I had to go to Helena right at the very crucial time.
CR: Did you have someone here working for you?

DK: Oh yes, I did...but—

CR: I mean you’ve been a good member of the Democratic Party—

DK: Oh yes, I had that, and I called everything in that I had.

CR: Did you call it in?

DK: Yes. But there were some places where there was nothing to call because of those lame ducks, because of the total unaccountability. There’s no way to work politics in that situation.

CR: You didn’t realize that situation when you started because you really left yourself open, in a sense, to being a loser—

DK: I did.

CR: —and you’d never been before.

DK: Yes. That was true, and I was cognizant of that, and in fact I struggled for a while with the idea that I won’t announce publicly until I know I’ve got it. Well, that’s not necessarily fair. Other people don’t have the option of dealing with things in that way. So, yes, I left myself open, and I lost. Then I compounded that by turning to the Supreme Court. But that turning, during that...oh, what would it have been, two months at the most between the time in early December when the council made their decision. I spent December and January and during that time decided that I would run for the court.

The background to that, of course, was that from the time that I had said I wouldn't go back to the legislature, I'd been dealing with that issue of, well, how do you maintain a political presence? How do you follow through on the political career that you've built—all of the political capital that you've built up? You want to do full-time political work. How do you do that? The mayor's position would have been ideal, I think. Truly ideal. It would have been some home that would allow me to work in the arena that I'd come to believe was the effective political arena, and it would have been full-time work that I'd, at least, have been paid for. But when that did not open, I had to look back to the question of, well, then should I go for a state-wide political office? I have a state-wide network of support. Under ideal circumstances, or many circumstances less than ideal, I should be able to translate that into political office.

I let myself, I think, get carried away by a certain dramatic sense in that by the time I decided to run for the chief justice position...there were two positions open. There was associate justice, and there was chief justice. Dan Shea was saying he was going to run again for associate justice.
It turned out he didn't. His close friends among civil libertarians were very concerned that I not run against him. They felt that he deserved another crack at it. Gene Turnage had said he was going to run for chief justice. There was no doubt about Gene Turnage's power as a political force. He had been in the legislature for years. He had run the legislature for years. That was the common perception, certainly, that he had run the Senate.

CR: Was he that strong?

DK: Oh, there's no doubt about it. He was, by all odds, the most powerful legislator.

CR: When was this? What period are we talking about? Because, you know, there's a gap in my political education in Montana.

DK: Well, Gene Turnage, I think, had gone to the legislature in 1965? He had been there for 20 years. Throughout the last, at least, ten years of that time he was acknowledged to be the force in the Senate whether he held leadership or not. He was always the key senator, and whether he was in the majority or the minority. It didn't matter.

CR: It didn't matter?

DK: He was that good and that powerful.

CR: Those are two interesting words—he was that good and that powerful.

DK: I have a lot of respect for Gene. I always did have. One of the things that I did when I got into leadership was to begin watching Gene fairly closely. As a political actor in the classic sense of realpolitik, he was a master. He is a master. I always felt I had a lot to learn from that. I genuinely respect that kind of master.

CR: This was a gentlemen's campaign that both of you waged, do you think?

DK: It was. I think it was a gentlemen's campaign; however, for a Supreme Court campaign it was pretty free swinging.

CR: It was at least noisy.

DK: Yes, it was.

CR: It was the noisiest—

DK: It was a campaign that raised a lot of issues. My feeling was if we are going to elect courts...and that's always an issue. Do you elect justices or not? But if you are going to, then give the people something to get their teeth into. If all you're going to talk about...and all Gene
wanted to talk about—for good reason—was how many years have you practiced law? That was all he wanted to talk about, and that was good sound political thinking on his part. (laughs) Obviously, I couldn't win that campaign. But I also felt that the people deserved to think about issues a little bit. So yes, we raised issues during the campaign, and in that sense it was a good campaign. I think we ran a good campaign. It was absolutely uphill from the beginning, and I knew that. I had been in other uphill campaigns. The first legislative campaign was uphill.

CR: Yes, you certainly pulled down a big one there.

DK: Right, and the one against Jack Mudd was uphill. So I had come to think, well, okay, uphill battles are okay. You do them. You give them your best. We did give it our best. In the end—

CR: Well, you came up rather further than anybody expected you to, did you not?

DK: Yes, I think we did very well.

CR: Did you really expect to win, Dan?

DK: Oh, that's hard to say. That's where you get into this, almost an existential place where you say, “No, just because I know I can't win that's why I'm going to win,” or something. I don't know.

CR: There's a mystic here.

DK: Yes.

CR: But I wondered at the time how you really felt about it. Did you really expect to? You took on almost a windmill there.

DK: Yes. In the end, as I look back at it, the age and experience factor were simply insurmountable. There are a lot of places where the people will elect somebody under 40—many places, but one place that I think they won't is chief justice of the Supreme Court.

CR: Being young as always been a real problem for you, hasn't it? (laughs)

DK: (laughs) Well, I'm getting older rapidly, believe me.

CR: Well, it has. This is a subject that has risen several times before. I don't know whether you're aware of it—winner, loser—but you've never been quite old enough to do what you want to do.

DK: I know, that's true, but I'm getting there.
CR: Well, okay, I guess we’ll drop that. (laughs)

CR: I think I got you off the track. Let’s go back to your decision why to make it chief justice.

DK: Part of it, as I say, was the feeling that you’ve got to take on big fights. Of course, I was being prevailed on by people who were saying, “You can do it, Dan, we’ll be behind you,” and they were. I give them credit. They were there.

CR: How much pressure were you under?

DK: Oh, a lot, but—

CR: Was this party pressure or people who were your philosophical support?

DK: Yes, I was under a lot of party pressure. A lot of people were looking at the court and saying, if we control the legislature and the governorship, but the corporations control the court, we’re nowhere. We’ve been there before. We cannot afford to be there again. There was strong feeling that way, and there was strong feeling that somebody with some real weight has got to run against Gene Turnage. That was heavily discussed. Frank Morrison talked about running against...and John Sheehy (?), both on the court, and they ended up getting a suit filed to allow them to do that. They cleared the way for that. Yet it was not clear that they were going to, and in the end they didn’t. In the end I was the one to carry the standard, and I was not the one to have done it.

CR: In a sense did you at all feel sacrificed sacrifice (unintelligible) already on the court—

DK: No.

CR: —and had that stature behind them? They didn’t decide to take on this particular man.

DK: I never felt sorry for myself or sacrificed. It was my choice to do it.

CR: Well, yes. But as you look back, do you feel at all that one of the other two—Morrison certainly who already...He had the advantage of a little more age—

DK: Yes.

CR: —would that fit the picture a little better?

DK: Oh, no, I just don’t have the feeling that somebody else should have done something else differently. If anything I would say, if I had stayed out of it I think Skeff Sheehy (?) might have run for it. So if anything, I blame myself in that regard.

Daniel Kemmis Interview, OH 036-013, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
What should have happened is that I should have run for the associate justice position, as it turns out. I think it is almost universally agreed that I would have won that position. But, I didn't do that, and that's my fault. In the end, it isn't anybody's fault but my own. The regret that I have about it is not the regret of having done it and lost. That's fine. I think I can honestly say I don't regret having run and lost. I made a good run. We made a good run—a much better showing than we had any business doing—and that was because of the incredible depth of support that came forward.

What I regret is that I engaged in something that took me away from my family for almost an entire year, and laid on us a burden, particularly a burden of individual and campaign debt that didn't just end on election day. That goes on. That's the regret—that what I took on was bigger than it should have been and bigger than I and my family can really carry.

CR: Let's turn the tape on this.

[End of Side A]
CR: I don’t think there is any doubt that Jean supported you through all of this. Therefore when you talk about debt to the family, the major part of it probably comes down to financial.

DK: Well, yes and no. Jean did support me, but it was a very difficult family decision about running. If Jean had had her way, I think it wouldn’t have happened. What it came down to from my perspective was, okay, we know we’re going to make a tremendous sacrifice for the next year. If we win, we’ll be in a position where for eight years we get to live a fairly solid life and I get to be involved in public life as I want to. So that was the way that we looked at that.

CR: Can I ask a question about Jean and herself? Had you won, what would have happened to her career? She’s been a pretty strong individual.

DK: Well, yes, that’s certainly the case, and it wasn’t clear what the answer to that would be. I think we did feel that the possibilities for Jean are actually greater in Helena, in terms of her career, than they were ever likely to be in Missoula.

CR: Would she have continued in a career mode, so to speak?

DK: I think it’s difficult to know. She was pregnant by then.

CR: She also would have been wife of the chief justice of the state Supreme Court. That’s almost cutting trail for a woman today.

DK: I’m just not sure what would have come there, and we’re still not sure. What we do know is that trying to have a baby and have Jean continue to work during that whole year when I was gone all year was just plain too much—way too much. That I now regret our having tried to do. I think we finally learned that there are limits on how many different lives you can lead at once. We tried to lead too many lives during that year.

It was a tremendous strain—more of a strain on Jean, I think, than on me. The campaign was hard, very hard, but for Jean trying to have that baby and raise the two boys and work half time at the same time was more than could be done. Partly as the result of that Jean, after the campaign, quit her job and has now stayed home for a year which we’ve all really needed. We have needed very much to put the family back together, and that has worked.

What’s been difficult is that, first of all, we had to borrow a lot of money to get through that year when I wasn’t earning any money, so now we have to pay back that individual debt and it means that we really can’t build up the kinds of things that you would hope you build up. Then in addition to that, I let the campaign go in debt, and I’ve had to carry that debt and try to raise that money and try to deal with that lingering element of the campaign at the same time I am trying to make a living and trying to have a family life. So there is still too much going on.
So in the end, if there’s a case of hubris, this is it—that I overreached myself. I let myself get too involved. I thought it was too important that I have a statewide political office. I was wrong about that. I should not have run for the court. I have not many times come to the place where I say, “I’ve just absolutely made a mistake,” but that was absolutely a mistake.

CR: But you didn’t do it alone. You’ve got to admit, you were certainly encouraged. You saw the opportunity, and I certainly don’t think you’re to be blamed for having taken it. I’m interested, too, that your family responsibilities were a major thing for you then and they are now, because I feel sometimes some of our successful politicians have not had a very successful family life.

DK: Oh no, I think that’s true. But if there is a positive side to all of that regret, it’s a strengthening of my belief that we’ve got to work that much harder on building a politics that is not inconsistent with a good life. Again, that’s the Greek ideal. That the two go hand in hand. They have to go hand in hand. Now in America, by and large, the vast bulk of people try to live the good life without paying any attention to politics.

CR: We don’t like to pay our debts at all, do we?

DK: No, right. But then there are a few people who on the one hand are pushed toward and on the other hand through ambition, or whatever you want to call it, are pulled toward leading a very public life and doing a very miserable job of leading a good life privately. We need to move toward common ground on that score. We need to have a public life, a citizenship, a civic culture where more people are more involved and a few people are less involved. (laughs)

CR: We always want the perfect world.

Dan, before we talk about where you are and what you’re doing now, would you run again? Are you looking for an opportunity? Is this within your vision at this point?

DK: No. I am not looking. I’m trying to do what I’m doing. I believe in what I’m doing. People are always asking me, “When are you going to get back into politics?”

CR: I imagine they are.

DK: But my response to that, whether I say it to them—and I usually try to say it to them—but my immediate response myself is, “I have finally worked myself to the place now where I can begin to do what I consider to be real politics.” Real politics is trying to create that civic culture, and I’m doing a lot more of that now than I’ve ever done before.

CR: Okay, what you’re saying is that now you’re practicing what you have been preaching.

DK: That’s right, and I’m also saying that if I’d been smart I’d have just done it during that year.
CR: Maybe you had to learn something too.

DK: Apparently I did!

CR: So talk about where you are rather than the less pleasant dregs of a very busy campaign.

DK: Yes, let's. Yes. I'd be delighted.

CR: (laughs) Okay. Where are you now, Dan?

DK: What I began doing almost immediately after the campaign was what I had said in that last paper of the Headwaters papers, that should be done. That is to begin working on the local level and trying to bring people together to work on common projects—commonly identified and agreed upon projects. Economic development is, in some ways, secondary. It's a vehicle in a sense, a vehicle for building what I think of as a civic culture. It's important in itself because, like it or not, we have to live by the sweat of our brows, as we have been told, and that's true. That's part of the human condition. In order to have a good life we have to work. So economics is central to our lives and always will be. But in another sense, it's secondary. In the sense that if all that we do is concentrate on the economy and don't at the same time concentrate on building the civic culture, then I think we won't have succeeded. Certainly I would not be interested in economic development if it weren't even more than that community development. The word for me, these days, has become community. Community is the key to my political philosophy and activity.

CR: What's the vehicle? Let's get to the vehicle that you are using to—

DK: I work in three counties: Ravalli, Mineral and Missoula. What we have done is to establish a series of forums. In Missoula they're called Good Work Missoula. They're public forums to which we've invited a real broad array of people, and so far I think we've done a fair job of establishing that. I've got the Chamber of Commerce involved and the Economic Development Corporation, which is a kind of Chamber-based organization. I've had environmentalists and women's groups and a great variety of civic groups. What we've tried to do is to bring together this real mix of people, most of whom are active in one way or another, but their level of activity varies greatly—from people who are just kind of gadflies to people who are very centrally involved—leaders of the community.

We've tried to do two things at once, and this is what I think I learned from that series of seminars that I believe you need to do. On the one hand, institute a dialogue where you try to get people to back off a little bit from their ideological formulations about the good life and the way to do it, and just talk as human beings about what matters to them. Just try to get them to talk as members of this community about what really matters to them. Not what their ideology tells them what matters to them, but what does matter to them. That's a very, very interesting
process to try to get people to talk as human beings instead of as ideologues.

But secondly, I came to the conclusion that if all you do is talk, there are real limits to how far you're going to get, either in terms of accomplishing anything or in terms of really pulling together. What I've come to believe that at the same time that you're talking together you have to be working together. That that is how communities, where they've ever existed, have come to exist.

One of the things that I mentioned in my paper was the old-fashioned barn-raiser where people used to come together and build barns together and do something where you could actually see what you've created. In the course of doing that, the people had become communities in a way that they never would have simply by getting together and talking. Interestingly enough when we started doing this work, I didn't talk about barn-raisers, but a couple of people at the forums suddenly said, “You know what we need to do is a barn-raiser.” So we started trying to do that. The idea—

CR: Anyway, there's a picture in people's minds of what you're trying to get to.

DK: Right. So, I think there is. It's a slowly emerging picture that the idea is that by...I think you need to work together on specific projects, but the great danger—and it's particularly, I think, an American danger—is that if you say, “Well, if we just do this project it we'll be fine.” Again we have this kind of technological approach to things where if we just figure out the technique for accomplishing economic development then we don't need to worry about things like the civic culture or anything like that. It's the same thing I was seeing in the legislature: if we figure out the technique for achieving a liberal program we don't need to worry about where we're really going.

CR: Are they also looking for a grant?

DK: Of course, you're always looking for a grant. I spend a third of my time now trying to put together grant proposals.

But that leads to another element of this that has kind of crept up on me that's rather interesting. While I was in the legislature, I got to, fairly regularly, being called on by the National Conference of State Legislatures to attend meetings and speak on panels and so on. In the course of that, I eventually got drawn into an emerging area that I hadn't heard anything, or very little about. Jean actually knew more about it than I did. That's something that's sometimes referred to as “alternative dispute resolution.” It's one of those god-awful names. But the main idea of it is that we have a society that tends to resolve disputes in the most ferocious and expensive way imaginable, mainly through litigation. In fact, I spent a lot of the campaign talking about the fact that we had become way too litigious and that we needed to be looking for ways to get away from that, and I was amazed at how responsive people are to that. They feel that in their hearts that that's true.

Daniel Kemmis Interview, OH 036-013, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
But anyway, to get back to the story—

CR: It did sound different coming from you. In a campaign (unintelligible).

DK: The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) had taken up alternative dispute resolution, particularly in the environmental field, as one of their projects. They started inviting me to some of their conferences. I think there were two reasons for it. One, that I was a member of the Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission, which is an example of an effort to resolve a major, major dispute over Indian water rights outside of courts. So they were interested in that. But they were also interested in the work that I had done in economic development which was really an effort at preventive conflict resolution. That what I had been trying to do with the coal tax was to build a base where people, who had always fought each other over developments, could come together and say, “Well, there are some kinds of developments maybe we could agree on. If we only had a tool to create them, maybe we could make some progress.”

Anyway, I got drawn into this whole field of dispute resolution—mediation is the main form that it takes—and I began to make contact with professionals in the field and some of the national leaders in the field and with a number of the foundations that have started funding a lot of work in that field. So through that, I have now started working with dispute resolution professionals here on campus in trying to put together a community-wide approach to conflict resolution. But what I have argued whenever I've gone to these national conferences—

CR: This is a maze. Do you realize it really sounds like a maze?

DK: I’m afraid it is, but there’s a common thread.

What I've argued at the national conferences is that what dispute resolving professionals do—what they really do when you look at it—is to facilitate the creation of community. That what they do is to get diverse people to see what it is that they have in common, and that coming to an understanding of what you have in common is the first step toward community. So I've tried to argue that what's happening there with this...and it's very clear that this dispute resolution, this mediation thing, is a big movement. Something is going on there. You talk about megatrends, this is a megatrend. That there’s something major going on there, and we’re going to see the effects of that in our society.

My concern—and I’m always quoting John Nesbitt in megatrends—one of the things that Nesbitt says is, “Are you sure you know what line of work you’re in?” That's what I say to the dispute resolver, “Are you sure it is really dispute resolution that we are engaged in here, or is it community organizing? Is it community building?”

Well, what I'm trying to do now is just say...In any event there are a lot of skills that have been

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gained by the people in dispute resolution. What if we bring those together with some of the work we’ve been doing with the forums here, and see if we can get better at getting people to work together to the point where maybe some major disputes within the community could start to be brought in to this sort of a process. At the same time, let’s be thinking about what we’re doing. Let’s have a theoretical side to this that is trying to think through the implications of what’s happening. So we’ve got the Mansfield Center, for example. Paul Lauren is extremely interested in this and has offered his support to it. I think that something real interesting is going to come out of all this.

I guess the long and the short of it is that, I’m just loving what I’m doing now. It’s politics where I really believe that politics can and should happen, and I’m glad to be home with it.

CR: One of the things that is really mind boggling to me is that you appeared at the Stevensville Civic Club the month before we did—Leo and I and half of the local historical society [Stevensville Historical Society]. In turn, a month before Marcella Sherfy, who is the State Historic Preservation Officer, trying to relate what you were saying, or what I think you were saying to Stevensville...I’m not really what you were saying, but one of the things apparently that happened as a result of what you said is that they are looking at Stevensville.

DK: Yes.

CR: They are looking at the Stevensville community. Therefore they were receptive to listening to Stevensville historically, and what Stevensville could become if Stevensville worked together. This would be a definite community move. Now, I’m not sure that this is what you had in mind because what also is hard to understand is what affects Stevensville and how you approach Stevensville. How do you do that with Missoula which is one of the state’s larger cities and say, in the same breath, the Mansfield Foundation which is looking at, not national, but international?

DK: Well, I think that is the real challenge. There’s a slogan afoot that I think is worth preserving that says, “Act Locally, Think Globally.” We talk about what is happening with dispute resolution as a megatrend—obviously there are international megatrends—but something is happening that on the one hand is increasing the tendency toward localism, toward people working together on a local basis, and yet it’s not by its nature insular, isolationist kind of thing. It can and it has to go hand in hand with a global consciousness. That’s a real challenge, there’s no doubt about that, and there’s a lot about it that I haven’t thought through at all.

CR: I want to try and apply it to Stevensville. What, for instance, did you go to Stevensville to say?

DK: Well, I went to Stevensville to say what I say in most places and that is, “Nobody else is going to take care of Stevensville. If Stevensville wants to be taken care of, it’s going to have to do it itself, but you’ve got the resources here to do it. What you’ve got to do is to pull those
resources together.” We built this whole federal mentality where it’s true that somewhere in the back of our minds the federal government is finally going to come and take care of us. Well, it is not, and it’s time we stopped thinking that way. It’s not good for us.

But if we’re going to take care of ourselves, then a community is going to have to do the same thing that a household does. It’s going to have to mobilize its resources in a carefully thought out way, but in a way, too, where we’re not diverting resources into fighting each other. That is not productive. What we have to do is to pull those resources together, and particularly, I think, what we have to do is build again a sense of common purpose where...because community is more than the sum of its parts. When it exists, it creates more than it ever could have imagined that it would create. I use the example of what we’ve done on the riverfront here [Missoula, Montana].

The barn-raiser idea eventuated in a series of work days on the riverfront. Well, if you went down there individually early this summer and you looked at all that knapweed and all that junk, you’d have said, “This is terrible,” and you’d have walked away. You couldn’t do anything about it. Yet, we got all of those people together there. None of them had anything personally to gain from it. I mean not that much personally to gain from it, but they did it and it made a difference. It made a big difference. But the idea is working communally you create more than individuals could ever do.

Now to get back to Stevensville, what you say about the historical aspect is something I think is really important. Part of what I’ve tried to say to people is:

“If you think you’re going to help Stevensville by simply getting together the Chamber of Commerce—the Main Street businesses—you’re going to fail. I can show you two dozen examples in Montana of where that’s been tried. It hasn’t worked, and it won’t work. What I think can work is if you sit down and you say, ‘Let’s get the Main Street people, let’s get the farmers, let’s get the teachers. Let’s get the people who are very interested in art and culture. Let’s get the people who are very interested in the history of the area. Let’s try to sit down and say...talk. Let’s start a dialogue about what could Stevensville be? What would we like it to be?’ Do that talking, and do it kind of slowly and over a period of time. Again, try to do the talking at the same time that you’re doing some work.”

Stevensville has not done it the way I’d like to see it done, and eventually I think they will. Alberton has come closer to that. They’ve started doing something. They’ve started a business incubator right there in town, and at the same time every time they get together to decide what to do next with the incubator, they talk about what else they might do. They talk about the history and how the art might fit in and how floating the river fits in and everything. You try to draw it all together.

CR: This is a pretty exciting concept, I must say. I’m sitting here listening to you. I’m not too aware of it, but don’t you suppose somewhere inside of most of us there is something awaiting awakening to be larger than we are?
DK: Yes, I do. I think that's exactly right.

CR: Now, let's come back to your Riverfront Park. When you say “we,” are you speaking from an organizational point of view? Who started the thing?

DK: Well, it came out of the Missoula Forum—

CR: Missoula Forum is...?

DK: The Good Work Forum. One night what we were doing was talking about an investment company. Could we form an investment company in Missoula? Our model was the Bitterroot Valley Development Corporation which is a great organization, I think. Anyway, we were having this discussion, and we were saying, “Well, how could we get a whole bunch of people to put in some money to invest in the Missoula economy?” We had a fairly good discussion about it. But afterward, Chuck Jonkel, the wildlife biologist here, the grizzly bear man—

CR: The bear man.

DK: —said, “You know, there are different ways of making investments. If you look at the way people used to do it with barn-raisers there is a social investment. People are investing something besides their money for the common good.” It was out of that—out of Chuck’s motivation—that the river front work grew up, but that’s how it ought to be. What should happen is that though these community forums that suddenly that thing that’s there in all of us, as you say, sort of gets...a drop of water falls on it, right, and it starts to grow. As soon as it starts to grow, other people recognize that, yes, it’s been there in them, too. Again, it’s partly through work that—I think work and play together—that people need to come to that awareness.

I guess what concerns me is I think we need to build a sense of confidence in ourselves—a sense of confidence that we’re capable of working together. We’re so far from that that I think we need to take little steps, and each time we take a little step we need to pause and be aware of what we’ve done.

CR: You always have the long view. I go back to your short-range view at one point was 200 years. (laughs) That’s kind of interesting for one who has a problem with being old. But again, you’re building on a slow, long-range point of view. Let me ask: this is Missoula, Mineral and Ravalli County. What about the other counties in the state? There are 53 others. What are they doing?

DK: Oh, I think there are a variety of things going on and always more of a variety than we dream of.
CR: Then this is, and you are, in that sense, a unique...Who’s funding this?

DK: Right now, my work is being funded by the federal government, of all places—the Economic Development Administration. I applied for and was hired for a position that’s called Economic Development Specialist, which I consistently refuse to be known as.

CR: Oh, that’s wonderful. Well, because, given your political philosophy, you don’t fit the picture of a fed specialist (unintelligible).

DK: No. No. That’s right. I have to get free of it as soon as I can. I can’t tolerate the bureaucracy and the red tape, and it’s a matter of making friends with evil money.

CR: Really?

DK: Yes.


But this is dealing only with these three counties. I still have to wonder what about the rest of the state? Why were there no...or is this kind of a seed affair that you are doing?

DK: Well, I do it very much as a seed affair, and that’s why the money that I’m looking for is foundation money. Foundations are in the business of funding pilot projects, something that has potential that can be...if you learn about it here, you can teach people how to do it somewhere else. That’s what we’re doing.

CR: That’s basically what is happening here?

DK: Right. So what we’re doing...I’ve gone back to the Northern Lights Institute and have submitted a proposal for them. The Hewlett (?) Foundation has, in effect, told the Northern Lights Institute that they’ll fund half of what I do if we can get the rest of the money somewhere else. So we’re off to a good start there. It may not work out. One way or another, we’re going to get some foundation money to do this work because that’s the kind of money it needs to be. The federal government is not, by and large, in the process of taking the long view, as you say, and doing pilot projects and so on. They’re in the business of going out of business.

CR: Well, I think the current feeling very strongly is that we’ve got to stay...

[End of Interview]