Erin Cunniff: This is Erin Cunniff with the Montana Feminist History Project, August 27, 2002 with Virginia Egli in Glendive, Montana. Okay, so could you tell me about your initial involvement with feminism or activism, and you said it was with AAUW?

Virginia Egli: It was because I grew up in Washington State and when I came to Eastern Montana, it was the AAUW group that was kind of my center. At that time, I had very young children. So it was my opportunity to kind of reach out, to get acquainted, and make friends with women that were my age and had similar interests.

That’s what led me to become involved in AAUW at the local branch and to be the representative for the local branch with Women’s Lobby Group. That led to that. BPW and AAUW were kind of two groups in Glendive. I did not ever belong to BPW. I always kept my leadership with the AAUW. That was how I got involved with Women’s Lobby.

EC: What did the AAUW do to the people over there? What were their goals and...

VE: Well I think from the very beginning, they do a lot to encourage women to continue with their education, that your education does not stop when you obtain your degree. It was the fact that I had a degree from Whitworth College in Spokane. And Whitworth, in those days it was called, one of the approved colleges of AAUW, which meant that I was eligible to be a member.

They’re not so much that way now, but in those days, it was a status, I guess of types. Maybe it was perceived in my small community here that we were status, but to me, it was just getting acquainted and making very good friends with women who had similar interests. These people, many of them, are still my very best friends because we’ve continued with AAUW projects and things. I’m still a member of AAUW and received an award from them this past year from the state organization, as a woman of achievement.

They don’t call it that. I don’t remember, but we can go back and fill that hole. It was recognized. I think one of the reasons I was recognized there was because of Women’s Lobby. The connection with Women’s Lobby, I didn’t know at the time when I got started, I just cared about it because I love politics. It’s very frustrating when you live in eastern Montana because to have a voice in politics is very hard.

If you belong to an organization of women who have some way to connect with the political scene and to find out, maybe to influence in things that you care about in the state legislature or to do something that really will have some meaning for women. It was like caring about
women’s issues. I think things that were Women’s Lobby, the non-gender insurance issue, which looms up every now and then, that we sort of have to scramble and fight for—being a voice, finding a voice for you in Helena. Because when you live in Glendive, Montana you feel very far removed from Helena.

I didn’t so much, but I do now because traveling—I used to just get in my car. It was when I was a teacher. I would go to western Montana to be at a meeting, be at a board, or do whatever I needed to do. Then I’d get in my car and drive back, and drive and get home by midnight or one o’clock and get a little sleep and get up the next morning and be in my classroom. So you always had to juggle those faces. I think about it now and I think, “Oh how did I do that?” I did at that time.

EC: So at that time, were there a lot of women getting a higher education?

VE: Maybe not in our community did it seem that way. In the Glendive branch... it’s an older branch in Montana...it’s never been a large group, so I guess that would be a clue. I think getting a college education was not as difficult to obtain, of course. I don’t really mean to overstate that, but no. In my family, my parents just assumed that I would always go to college.

Being a teacher was one of those safe things that a woman could do. I never thought of doing anything other than that really. But I like to do it. I was not unhappy teaching. I think about it now, there were things that probably, if I had been growing up a few years, of course encouraging my daughter to be a teacher... I’d never thought of that although it’s ironic that she is a classroom teacher. That’s not uncommon I guess for people to. Because my sons are not educators in a way, yes one of them is. I guess you could describe it that way, an educator. It happens in the family.

EC: So what would be typical day like when you were working at the AAUW or, you know, a typical activity you guys would engage in?

VE: In AAUW, Glendive Ranch, a typical activity—

EC: Or whatever you were involved in.

VE: Okay I do have to think of that a little bit. We did things in community. If there were issues, we were concerned about...we were always...education was one of our highest goals. So if we needed a new school, then we needed to go door to door and get signatures, to put it on the ballot to get, you know, and we did that to get a new high school. We did that to get a new elementary building one time.

We would hold candidate forums, so people could be educated about the candidates and what they stood for. That was a common activity of AAUW to do that. We’ve done that. We’ve had book sales to get money and pass on good books to people of the community. I can remember
making a big issue because where we live in Montana there’s no bookstore. It’s in Glendive, so having books- get your winter reading- if you’d had the book sale in the fall, “Buy these books before cold weather sets in. You need some new books.” We sold a lot of books that way. We used a lot of that. That’s typical I guess.

EC: When you guys were doing stuff like raising money for schools or doing your typical activities, who were your biggest supporters helping you out community-wise?

VE: Probably the joint relationship with BPW was always important because a lot of their goals and issues were the same. There were more businesswomen at the time in BPW. So these were women that probably had not chosen to be in a small town. Some had joined AAUW because basically that college degree for membership. Some were in BPW because their avenue of employment and their interests and activities were a little different. We did a lot of things with them. That would be common.

EC: Did you have anybody that you remember that opposed what you were doing or caused any problems?

VE: I’d have to think about that. I couldn’t say- we would have disappointments. Some of the elected officials who are not very- I don’t think they opposed us, though. You didn’t have a feeling of that, maybe just they didn’t always understand. That would be when it was important to exercise your logic and your verbal skills and be convincing or encourage them to consider options and that sort of thing.

I think another thing was to be supportive of young women and when young women became in positions where they could participate in sports and things like that, we were always very supportive of that kind of thing. AAUW is not in itself a sports organization. I mean not that. So I don’t really want to overstate that, but basically the bottom line was very important I think to AAUW members in general because the concept they certainly supported.

EC: Do you feel the community response to women getting more education was really encouraging or did you have to battle against a lot to get that?

VE: No. I didn’t personally because my family was always supportive. Because I was an only child, I didn’t have to stand in line with brothers, sisters, or anything like that. Personally, no, I did not experience that.

EC: When you were working with AAUW and trying to encourage that did you see anything?

VE: I don’t recall, no.

EC: What events do you remember as being most significant to that work or things you noticed that were historical events that you were working with at that time?
VE: Well one of the things, the year that we moved here, as I said, we got into an apartment because I was going to teach school. The apartment was across the street from a park and the football field. It’s just a block away. December of ’56, Glendive had produced...a women in Glendive had produced an outdoor theater about the development or the creation of Glendive, Montana.

A historian from the University of Montana came and helped them design. It was a few years later that the whole state did one that traveled around. But this was Glendive’s very own in ’56. When I first moved to Glendive, there were boards on a lot of the owners of businesses dressed of the era and they had white shirts, collars. I thought it was quite funny- sort of a centennial sort of celebration thing. I’ve got some of it. You can meet the lady that wrote the thing. She was the teacher whose class discovered that that was the year they should celebrate Glendive’s 75th I think. We’re celebrating our 50th, our 100 year of Glendive this summer. It’s coming up and going to be really neat. I do remember that. I got off on that because what we were talking about-

EC: Just about historical events.

VE: Yes and that was a historical event.

EC: Important events- events that were significant to your work? You were telling me earlier about how you came here and started teaching and the first time you were teaching, could you give me a history of how you started teaching?

VE: Okay I came and they would hire me because I had a degree. In Montana, you didn’t need a degree, so they would let me teach in the junior high. I wanted to teach elementary. They just said, “Oh no.” They could get all these experienced North Dakota teachers for a much less price. It was cheaper. So I said, “Okay, I’ll be a middle school teacher.” I had taught in junior high in Washington State before I was married.

EC: And then you taught junior high for how long?

VE: Well I only taught for part of a year in ’56 because I was pregnant and they asked me to find...I guess that’s a feminist thing of sorts...I didn’t think about it in those days. I didn’t really care. It was okay with me. Jobs are not that hard to find so I didn’t feel like I wasn’t stressed about that at all. I was happy. Then we were going to have this child, so we bought our first house. So I moved out of the basement apartment and lived on the south side of Glendive for several years. Then we eventually bought this house.

EC: How long did you take off before you went back to teaching?
VE: It was about 13 or 14 years. Well let’s think about it. You’ve got to help me with the math. Okay, this was ’56 and the next thing we’re thinking about is that, did I say it was ’74 that I got certified after going to school?

EC: That would have made you 32. Yes you started going back and taking classes in ’78?

VE: Yes.

EC: Oh no, it was ’73, you’re right, after your 13 year maternity leave. So you went back to school to get certified at Eastern Montana at Billings? And what were you trying to get certified there for?

VE: Because I had been out of teaching, I needed what Montana calls residency (?). In order to do that, I had to get a recommendation from a Montana school. I had graduated from Whitworth College in Spokane. My degree was fine, but I needed a Montana school to recommend my certification. I needed Eastern to do that.

EC: Then you went on to the University of Montana?

VE: No. So that led my getting a job. That was in ’73 and then it was from there I got the Montana Writing Project because I had been teaching English. I received an invitation to participate. That put me on campus in Missoula, which I fell in love with Missoula and the University and the faculty members, Dr. Adler and others that are now retired. So I did Montana Writing Project and then from there, I became a writing consult and would do workshops. I didn’t do a lot of them, but I did some of those.

EC: What was the Writing Project about?

VE: Well that’s got history. It started with the writing project out of University of California writing project- I can’t remember that. That’s when I started doing workshops and things.

EC: After that you went back to get your master’s degree?

VE: Well then I discovered that the University of Montana was... after you’ve been teaching for a number of years, you realize that in Montana, in order to get an employable wage, you work on it in longevity. They give you little increments usually. You’re going to do it by getting more education. If I had a master’s degree, my salary would be higher. If had a master’s degree, then when I retired, my retirement would be...and that was my intention. That’s what I did. In Montana, in the meantime, you can retire without penalty after 25 years. So if a master’s degree after 25 years and my salary would be my retirement. It’s not terrific, but it would be better. If you don’t have a master’s you’d have to teach for about 30 years to retire, about. I did it in 25 years.
EC: Were there many women or teachers, for that matter, who were getting their master’s degree in the 70s at that time?

VE: At the University?

EC: Or just people you knew, that you taught with?

VE: No there weren’t very many that I taught with that got their master’s degree at the University. No. That was just because my family was supportive and my husband would... I would pack up and take off for Missoula, which I loved doing. It was like...I just wanted to do it.

EC: Did you work with any of the AAUW women in Missoula then or any other organizations?

VE: No. I’m a member of Phi Delta Kappa that’s an education fraternity and of the University of Montana group. I’ve kept my membership with that.

EC: Were there lots of women that you were going to school with at that time?

VE: Yes.

EC: Higher education?

VE: One of my friends from AAUW here, she was getting a degree at the University in Librarian internship, so she needed to be in Missoula. So she would go to Missoula. I would go to Missoula and do the education thing. The rest of them were people that I met that I just knew. Of course I’d run into people. After I went back to teaching I got kind of involved in the union, in the MEA. Then I would run into people at the University from the MEA.

EC: What does the MEA stand for?

VE: Montana Education Association.

EC: What were their goals, what did they try to accomplish?

VE: Better wages and working conditions. It was union goals and support, financial support for materials and things. That’s the forerunner in now in the MEAMFT. Did you hear about Eric Fever and that are now in a suit against the Montana for not providing enough education or funding. They’re suing the, well, the schools are...they’re suing, well, I’d have to take a look on what—basically get enough money for the schools, to run the schools. I think they’re probably suing the legislature, which sounds funny because they’d say, “We don’t have the money. We can’t give it to you.” I was pretty involved with the union and did some things.
EC: So when you got your master's degree, you came back and started teaching in Glendive again?

VE: I got my master's degree and I had an endorsement in administration. About that time, my husband’s job changed. I never would have considered being an administrator in Glendive, not because I wouldn’t like it, but because they wouldn’t hire women administrators. In the meantime then, I really fell in love with the classroom. I didn’t see any mobility, so I just stayed as an 8th grade English teacher in Glendive, Montana at the junior high. That’s where I stayed until I retired.

So I was just a classroom teacher, but I was endorsed and had prepared for, and thought I was going into administration. I was not denied it. It was just that you have choices and I chose not. To me, that was the thing to do. I was like psyched to do it, but then when Elmer’s position changed, in what he was doing, he was working in Billings at the time and my children were in college, finishing up school. I have to think when they graduated. Steve graduated from high school in ’74 and Kate graduated from ’78 and Ken graduated in ’82. Are the numbers coming out right, because they are three apart?

EC: You said ’74, ’78, and ’82. That’s about four and four.

VE: Yes that’s right. Because they’re about four years apart. You always have to take into consideration that there’s months in there where school started. They all went to kindergarten and when my children went to kindergarten, they were private kindergartens because public kindergarten in Montana didn’t start until after. So they all went to private ones.

EC: So are you still currently working with the AAUW?

VE: Yes in the local branch. I have been on State Board and things like that.

EC: On State Board, are you just dealing with more University issues or just state education in general?

VE: Education in general, yes.

EC: What were some of the accomplishments?

VE: I think on that sheet, doesn’t it tell the different things I had done for AAUW? Let’s see here...if you pick it up here, see what this triggers you to ask, right in here.

EC: Okay, so you got the Glendive’s Woman of Achievement?

VE: In ’84. That was from BPW, yes.
EC: Okay, why don’t you tell me about that a little bit. You got nominated by BPW, which is the Business and Professional Women’s group.

VE: Yes, and it was in the Glendive club. At the same time, I didn’t get a Woman of Achievement for the state, but I did just for the local.

EC: And what was that for?

VE: They came for the things that I had done. They’re all in there. I’m telling you the things I’ve done.

EC: I know you can tell me about your master’s degree and you experience in starting the writing program?

VE: Well, let’s read the things that they said I did.

EC: For recognition in the field, completed graduate coursework for gifted and talented students, and completion of the...

VE: Yes I was working- they were starting the gifted and talented program in Glendive. They wrote a grant and I wrote for some more monies. With that, then we hired the first gifted and talented teacher in Glendive.

EC: And what is that gifted and talented?

VE: Well, they called it Step at the time. We would identify with certain gifts and it was sort of a pull-up program, that they participated that way.

EC: Could you give me an example?

VE: We identified at I think third or fourth grade, I can’t remember when that was. Then there was a Step teacher and they would leave their classroom for, I think one day, a portion of one day. I think I’m not telling you because I’m not remembering.

EC: For what kind of talents would you identify?

VE: I knew all of those things and now I don’t remember.

EC: They’d be like writing or...

VE: They would do writing and problem solving. Odyssey of the Mind was a program and they encouraged students to participate in that and form teams and represent Glendive’s schools. At
one point, they even had a high school team. At that time it was still third and fourth, fifth grade I think.

EC: It says that you participated in the political arena and contributed to the Montana Democratic Party?

VE: I did. Locally I started as a precinct committee woman. Then I was on the Central Committee of the Democratic Party here in Dawson County. Then eventually I was elected Chair. That’s a big honor. They were looking for somebody to do it. I was Chair. After serving as Chair for a while, then I was nominated to be on the state E-Board, which is the State Central Committee. I served on that for a while.

EC: Were there very many women working with you on that?

VE: The Democratic Party is designed, in Montana, that everything is equitable. Everything that you elect (unintelligible).

[End of Side A]
VE: —gets out of sync sort of is that political parties have a balance so you have some that are elected officials. So depending on your state, in Montana it’s pretty equitable because the Democratic Party in the state of Montana, the party rules are pretty- they insist that it be the same. That you have the same number of men and women in slots so that’s how I kind of was.

EC: It says here that you held the highest local office of lay leader in the Methodist Church.

VE: Yes I did.

VE: And I’m the Methodist lay leader as we speak of the Glendive Methodist right now.

EC: Okay and what does that entail?

VE: Well the Methodist Church has- that doesn’t have to be a woman. There’s no barriers of women having leadership skills of choosing to be in leadership. So I served in the local level in offices and I served in the state and working with children, I did that for a while. I took a lot of trips. Methodist Church has a lot of training. The Methodist has an organization, a women’s organization. I’ve always been a member. I’ve taken offices, but I didn’t pursue that. I was using an education thing more. I did that. Let’s see...

EC: The Yellowstone Conferences Children Work coordinator?

VE: That’s what I was, yes.

EC: A lab instructor and that was a national church and teacher training.

VE: Yes I did that. They have lab schools. At one time, a lab school would run for an entire week. Now, you’re lucky if you can do a weekend. The time has changed and people have. In lab schools, you teach people to teach Christian education classes. I was a lab instructor for kindergarten, which is always kind of interesting, kind of fascinating, because I didn’t ever teach kindergarten age when I was working in the public schools. In my church, I worked with early childhood classes and programs and things.

EC: It also mentions your AAUW and said that you’d served as treasurer-

VE: Don’t you think that’s a hoot? When you think that I can’t even add two and two. I think about it, and it was kind of a hoot then that they even trusted me with doing it, but we won’t go there.

EC: It also said that you, the divisional level have been multimedia share-
VE: That would be for state level.

EC: For AAUW?

VE: Yes. When they say division in the AAUW that’s state. They used to have a sub-identity. It was multimedia. They don’t do it that way anymore, but I served on that, yes.

EC: Also education area of interest representative and on the division Board of Directors for AAUW?

VE: Yes and I was, but then that’s kind of tickly because I was multimedia. Also, then later, if you were a local, I was Chair of AAUW locally, then you’re on the state Board. I think that’s what they’re referring to there.

EC: Then it also said that you’ve served as the regional representative for Montana to national and have been a national convention delegate in ‘81 and ’83.

VE: For AAUW.

EC: Yes. What did you do for that?

VE: Wait what did it say again?

EC: A national convention delegate in ‘81 and ’83.

VE: Okay that’s because you’re elected by your branch.

EC: What are your responsibilities?

VE: Go to a convention. I can remember one time that the branch- I won’t go there- but they sent me as a delegate and everything, but they didn’t have any money to pay my way. So I just paid my way. I remember taking the train. The convention was in Kansas and I had a sister living in Kansas. I think I had Ken with me at the time. I took him and we took the train. We got out of the train because the train ran and we went as far as Minneapolis and then we took the train down to Kansas City. It was sort of an adventure. We went to see Aunt Anne. Then I went to the convention, I think about it- these are things I would not even consider nowadays. I did that and took Ken.

EC: Okay this also said that you had been active with the Montana Pro-Choice Coalition, the Women’s Lobbyist Fund, Peace Links, and the National Organization of Women.
VE: I just have belonged to them. That’s contributing to them and then being the voice and getting in touch with people. I guess you could say I was a joiner, something like that. In connected with your project, I don’t think it was that outstanding, but okay.

EC: It’s just that you were involved. Did you get involved in these organizations when you were on maternity leave or after your children had grown up?

VE: I guess my children would tell you that I was always involved.

EC: So you’ve always been involved?

VE: Yes.

EC: In part, that had to do with your family because you were an only child?

VE: I think that my family just always encouraged that. I think you have to kind of figure your roots and what motivates you, you know, to do things. My family, I was never given a thought that there were things that I couldn’t do because I was a woman. It was important that I do what my heart said was the right thing to do. The right thing was to do all you could do in your church and do all you could do in your community that needed things done. This was sort of my prompt. One of the reasons I was with you when I retired because I couldn’t remember the date, we went on this cruise. What was the month that we did that?

EC: It was July 1995.

VE: Okay so then it must have been that fall that there was an election. One of the things that I wanted to do because I was always so interested in political things and living in Montana. I had connections with the party. I got in touch with Vivian Brooks who was a legislator from Missoula and said that I would volunteer at the legislature if she knew a senator that had an office here, senators have offices in Missoula and Helena. The legislators just have desks. She connected me with Jack Weldon, who was a senator at the time in Missoula.

He had an office and there was an extra office there. I took my computer and went to Helena probably at the first of the year. We waited until after transmittal which is when things start happening again in legislature. I found an apartment. Someone helped me find an apartment through a connection of my son’s. One of my son’s good friends lives in Helena. I found an apartment and I stayed from there until about the time—when do they usually, it’s 90 days of legislature. I did keep a journal then. I will try to find it one of these days. What I would do, would be to pretty much open my own and answer some of his communication with his constituents, answer telephone calls, just did funky things. It was very fun for me to be in Helena.

EC: Was that recently you said? That was when you retired?
VE: Yes in ’95. It was very interesting. By that time I knew the people. Karla Lynn Hart was a really good friend. I think she was working as a secretary for the senate minority. Karla had worked for Dorothy Bradley when she was running for governor. That’s when I got involved with... so as a result of that, I’ve been in state campaigns for people that were running. I haven’t been real involved with the state party that much. It was not a choice. It was just that as I got older and then in these last few years, I don’t travel all that much. After I had my stroke, I’m not supposed to drive out of town. I drive in town. You can do that in Glendive and get by with it.

EC: So is there anything that you would have done in retrospect differently or do you think that everything...?

VE: My personality is to not be patient. I used to always think that the things I wanted to do, I wanted to do them yesterday. I always treated like, if I had a chance to do something, I better do it because I might not have a chance to do this. I think back on it now, and I’m not sure why that was so necessary to be so impatient. I am. I know I am impatient.

EC: Do you think you accomplished as much as you did because you were impatient?

VE: I don’t look back on my life as accomplishing that much. When I look back, I’m not so sure that I was that great of a mother. My accomplishments were my extensions of my children. They are really, the things that they did and the things that they have done. That’s probably, I sense, as one of my accomplishments. I don’t know if that’s a very- when you read those things, they appear- I guess so in a little ways.

Like right now, I had this stroke in ’98, I think it was. When I had the stroke, I had had a little one, they call them little TAs. It was a warning and I didn’t pay attention to it. I went right on doing what I wanted to do and didn’t pay that much to what I wasn’t supposed to do. Well, so then we were in Texas for my youngest son’s wedding and I don’t like to say too much about it because I don’t really want my family- I didn’t want Ken and Kristen to think that it was their wedding that brought on my stroke.

By the time I came home from the wedding, then I’d had a much more major stroke. In the meantime, because I had had the little TA, I had a connection with the neurologist at the Billings clinic, Dr. Gaddy. So I went to see her then after this other...Elmer and I got on the plane. I was very confused and that’s when some really major things in my brain had been damaged. That’s when the numbers totally disappeared. After we got on the plane, flew from Dallas, Fort Worth on Northwest through Minneapolis back to Billings. Some friends of ours met us. We stayed over night with a friend.

The next morning I had this appointment to see Dr. Gaddy. I said to Elmer, “There’s something going on my brain. Something’s not right.” So they took me to the emergency room and they did a CAT scan. They did a CAT scan and they said, “We’ll get the results of this.” Because they

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knew I had this appointment with Dr. Gaddy the next day. That got lost. It’s one of those things. The next day we kept the appointment to see Dr. Gaddy and she was kind of late and she invited us in and asked, “How are you doing?” I thought she had seen the results of the CAT scan. So we’re like communicating but not communicating.

When you see a neurologist, they have you walk a line and hold your hands out like this and they do these little things. She said, “Well I just think you were a little stressed from the wedding and everything. Everything will be fine.” I think we had a 10:30 appointment, but it was like about 1 or 1:30 or 2 that we left her office. We were going back to Glendive. We left her office, went to the Perkins that’s kind of close to the Billings clinic, and had some lunch, and got in our car and started back to Glendive. In the meantime, she got the results of the CAT scan and went berserk.

She could see that I had this more major stroke. They tried to get a hold of us. We were in the car driving to Glendive. By the time we got to Glendive, the phone was ringing off the hook. My husband answered it and they wanted me to come right back. It was due to that that our oldest son bought us a cell phone. We’ve never traveled in the car across Montana without the cell phone. I said, “No, we’re going to stay home tonight and sleep. We’ll come tomorrow.”

They were not happy about that, but the next day we got in the car. It was about 4 in the afternoon. It was as soon as we could turn around and drive back to Billings again. That time I was met with a wheelchair and they whisked me up to a room. They started on a whole bunch of tests. That’s when they start tests and test your major veins here because they’re looking for something here. It wasn’t as bad as I thought it was. Before the next day was through, I’d had a TCI. So it wasn’t just a CAT scan but it was the next major test, where you have to go in the thing.

This is when, if you’ve raised a child that’s medical- okay our oldest son has a master’s in nursing administration for the University of Washington. His wife, he’s married to- who has a master’s in nursing and is on faculty at the MSU school of nursing. She teaches nursing. Steve gets on the phone because he’s upset with Dr. Gaddy for letting me go and not having this stuff and not testing this. Nurses connect with nurses and he connected with her nurse, her office nurse staff. They did the tests, those first tests I mentioned and then they said that I would be going back to Glendive for probably some therapy.

They thought maybe I would go to a swing bed (transitional recovery unit often attached to a hospital) or the nursing home. This is like a red flag to a senior. You don’t just say that you’re going to a nursing home. I don’t have any real negative thing about it, but I didn’t think that’s where I wanted to go and I didn’t think that’s what I needed because I felt that I needed therapy for learning some coping skills the best I could. The first thing they said was- so then Steve gets on the phone and they said probably they wouldn’t send me to the nursing home in Glendive but that I should probably be on fourth floor of Deaconess Hospital, that they had therapists there and that would be a good place for me to be. There wasn’t a bed, as we spoke.
So they moved me to another bed. Miraculously, a bed became available. The next thing I knew I was moved to fourth floor and I started my therapy then.

That’s intensive therapy when you’re there at Deaconess Hospital. It’s like an occupational therapist that wakes you up in the morning. On fourth floor in Deaconess, you’re not in a hospital bed, you’re in a motel room. It’s very attractive. I didn’t need all of this, but that’s where I was going. You eat in a common dining room where there are other people. It’s a lot of surgical patients there that have had knee replacements. I would have an hour every day with an occupational therapist.

They also sort of casually mention to you that one of the things that I would have trouble with was dressing. Little do they know when they’re telling you this, how much trouble I have with dressing. To casually mention this with my brain, that’s like... I have to laugh about this. Elmer has to figure out what’s the front and back of things and put them on. In fact I wear things that are easy. These are my good Lands End shorts because I can pull them on and I don’t have to mess with buttons and things. I was in the fourth floor about three or four weeks.

Every day I had the occupational therapist and I had a speech therapist. I had physical therapy. You just kind of went to one therapist until your whole day was scheduled. You get very tired after you’ve had a stroke, you get very tired. You’re best in mornings and by afternoon, you’re not that great at doing anything. I was there for about three weeks. Then I came home. When I came home, then they checked with the hospital in Glendive about what kind of therapy could I have. The hospital here said they had physical therapists and occupational therapists, and they had speech therapists. I’d used all of these therapists while I was there.

So I came home and then what I discovered was the occupational therapist was the physical therapist. I didn’t continue with that too much because the things that they had me do, I could pretty much do here on my own. The occupational therapist, I went to that for an hour for several weeks. I discovered that the only speech therapist- they told me that they had speech therapy- and what they did was they contracted with a school speech therapist. He’s a nice person. I knew him because he was a colleague. He was in the schools. He didn’t know how to relate to adult stroke patients. This was not satisfactory.

So I can remember calling Steve and saying, “I’m firing my speech therapist because this is not going to happen.” So I got in touch with a speech therapist that I had been working with in Billings. They would fax to the hospital here some activities for me to do. Across the street is a retired speech therapist. She’d get on the phone and they’d fax to the hospital here some things that I should continue. She knew how to pick up on some of the things that I was doing and- like playing cards and things that are helpful because they are counting and things that I needed to work on. We did that. That was the kind of stuff we did.

Around Thanksgiving of that year, we went to Missoula. In the meantime, the hospital here had sent an evaluation. You do not give retired schoolteachers evaluation forms. They gravitate to

Virginia Egli Interview, OH 378-034, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
them. Evaluation is what teachers do all the time. I took the evaluation form with me. My daughter-in-law helped me and we filled out the form. I remember what I complained about was that they did not have good speech therapy...they said they had speech therapy but they did not have it.

The person of the therapy department called me when I got back and apologized and said, “You’re right, but we don’t have anybody else.” They were changing CEOs and they said, “Well when the new CEO comes down, we’ll just have to get on this.” About two or three weeks ago...I do have an end to the story, quickly I will get to it. I heard that a teacher friend of mine who is a retired kindergarten teacher who had gone to visit her daughter in Wyoming and she’d had a stroke. She was home and she was doing physical therapy.

Someone said, “I think you need to call her because she needs to talk to someone who’s been there.” I called her and she wanted to talk. So we met. Her husband wouldn’t let her drive. She lives within walking distance of Hardee’s. So she said, “Would you meet me for coffee?” I said, “Yes.” So we met and we visited. When I asked her how things were going, she said, “The physical therapy has been helpful.” She said that there was a speech therapist. She said that the speech therapist was Cash Murrows (?), the same guy that I’d had. I realized that all this time that they’d had to do something about it. They hadn’t done anything about it. This was very stressful to me.

We talked and I got on the phone. In the meantime, a speech therapist has retired and she’s available for...something the hospital should have picked up on. They should not have sent you to...you know. Because I’d gotten this call from Rita saying thank you for the evaluation. I thought, “Okay.” So I got on the phone and I called her and said, “Rita, you still haven’t set up a program with a speech therapist.” “I know, I know,” she says, “But now that you’ve called me...”

Then a woman who’s kind of on the staff here that’s for support groups. I said, “We needed support group for people with strokes.” They said that they’d really like to do that. So this woman gave me some telephone numbers and how to get on the internet and stuff like that. So that’s my thing now. We’re going to start a support group. Then she said, I thought this was kind of funny. “I know we should do this,” she said. What they were thinking is that people who had strokes were just old people and they were content with anything. They immediately think that it’s somebody that can’t talk, so they’re not going to say anything.

They try to get them to walk a little bit or move their hands a little bit, but they’re not dealing with the things we did. Because I’m like talking to you, they don’t see the things that speech therapists do with stroke victims. They don’t really understand that connection. So that’s what I’m working on. We’re going to start a support group. They said, “Now that we have educated, articulate stroke victims...” And we’re going to start some start of support group. I find this all kind of amusing.
EC: Excellent.

VE: In the meantime, one of the doctors locally, his wife had a stroke and she’s educated and she’s articulate. I know we’ve got the beginnings of...

EC: A good combination.

VE: That’s...

EC: Is there anything else that you want to add to that?

VE: I don’t think I’m very special. It’s just like, I guess everybody said, “Oh well Virginia, you know...” Because they’ve been remodeling in the hospital and I said, “You said you were going to get a new CEO and you did that. You still didn’t change. You said you were remodeling and you’re remodeling. You still haven’t changed?”

She said, “Oh you’re right.” So I got on the phone and talked to the retired speech therapist and she says, “Yes I’ve already looked into it and I’ve got the information about...” See she has to contract with the hospital to do it. So she’s going to be available. So I feel like I’ve moved that along, that they’re not going to use Cash anymore. They’re going to use Carol Dougherty. So we have a new speech therapist that’s available for the next person that needs a speech therapist. I feel that that’s kind of moving along.

EC: An accomplishment?

VE: Yes it is. It’s not feminist. It’s just getting on people to do stuff. Our local church went through some kind of bad times with just leadership. Now we have a new pastor, whom I like.

EC: You said you felt that you didn’t really accomplish- or that you’re not that special or whatever. Do you feel like that when you’re going to college, or getting your master’s degree that there were a lot of women doing what you were doing or involved in organizations like you were?

VE: No. They were more directed on specific things. They weren’t as involved in organizations.

EC: And raising—you had three children also?

VE: Yes I did.

EC: Excellent, well thank you very much for your time in the interview.

[End of Interview]