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Interviewer: David Brooks
Interviewee: Vivian Brooke
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David Brooks: Okay it’s June 12 and it’s David Brooks interviewing Vivian Brooke this afternoon in Women’s Studies 138 for the Oral History Project. Thank you for coming.

Vivian Brooke: Thank you for asking me.

DB: Could you start by describing some of your initial involvement in activism or feminism in Montana?

VB: I was active actually I came to the political arena through I guess primarily the League of Women Voters. I hadn’t really been a very what you would call a real strong feminist. I was active in a variety of groups but not necessarily the feminist movement. I was always interested in a variety of issues. But as I got more involved in the political arena, I did become more, I took on a lot of the issues in the legislature that would be defined as feminist issues. With the League of Women Voters, it’s kind of a broad cross-section of good government and accessible government and support for quality education, quality childcare with a broad range of governmental services, I guess. So those were kind of the things I was interested in.

And I think one of the things that really drew me into the political arena was that the League in Missoula had what they called Observer Corps. That is a group of volunteers from the league that will sit and listen to boards and commissions as they meet: the City Council, County Commissioner, Health Board, whatever. And then they would write a report for the league newsletter. As I became more aware of what government was doing through that avenue, the Observer Corps, I saw that it wasn’t quite as intimidating as you would, as someone that’s not familiar with the process would think. And I think that’s one thing that Montana that brings a lot of people into the mix of the political arena, that it is accessible and it’s not as intimidating as other places may be. It’s not (unintelligible). Your neighbors or your representatives and County Commissioner, that sort of thing and they’re easily accessible. So I think that was one of the main things for me in just building my confidence that I could become involved.

DB: When you say that you eventually got into what you would consider feminist issues in the Legislature, what are feminist issues, or were?

VB: When I was there—for several years the issue of pro-choice, a woman’s right to choose, had been fairly dormant from the seventies. Right after Roe v. Wade there was a lot of effort to restrict a woman’s right to abortion. But then through the eighties it kind of died down. There wasn’t much political activity. Then with the advent of the Christian Coalition—more of the
right-wing of the Republican Party—those issues seemed to come to the forefront. And as luck would have it, you know, I kind of had to stand up and be counted.

When I was running for office that was a big question: Are you pro-choice? I think, as I said, it seemed to me from what I recall in the early eighties and late seventies, there hadn’t been very many bills. But we definitely had our share through my tenure of bills that were trying to restrict women’s rights to choose. So just because there are fewer members of women and fewer people in the Legislature that will take the lead on some of those issues, I decided that I would do that.

DB: Did you have the leeway to in the legislature? I know you’re assigned committees.

VB: Well in the House, I served there six years and I was on the Judiciary Committee, which did hear those bills. So yes. At one point, at one session I was the Vice Chair. I was in the House those years from ’89 through ’93. And then when I moved to the Senate—my two sessions in the Senate were 1995 and 1997—because I was such a strong pro-choice person and outspoken, I wasn’t assigned to the Judiciary Committee.

DB: And that was intentional?

VB: Oh definitely, sure. He was a much more moderate person (unintelligible) I asked but (unintelligible) told me (unintelligible) in the minority. 1989 was the only time the Democrats were in the majority.

DB: And did you see yourself as having allies in this time you were there?

VB: I should correct that, that was 1989 and ‘91 was when the Democrats were in the majority. Allies?

DB: Allies, I suppose, were they simply partisan?

VB: Well, during my tenure, I would have to say yes. That was fairly...though I remember in 1989, one fellow from Kalispell surprised everybody—a Republican—and voted against a certain bill and shocked a lot of people. But we were told that his daughter really leaned on him quite a bit. But that was kind of a rare occurrence. That issue has been debated over and over again in the Republican Party and their platform (unintelligible). That’s one. For me to take that lead was kind of unique I guess, because I had kind of carved out kind of a leadership position for myself in the Catholic Church prior to coming into the Legislature. So I was an identifiable Catholic in the diocese. I’m on a first name basis with the bishop. I used a lot of resources from Catholics for Free Choice, which is a national group. And (unintelligible) a lot from the bishop. That was in the news and that kind of thing.
Then again too, another issue I was involved with as far as feminist, I guess you might call it, was domestic violence legislation. I sponsored some reforms to that. I carried a bill that had originated in the Senate that I was carrying in the House. The other thing that I did a lot of most every session was to try to repeal the law that makes homosexuality a crime. So kind of a human rights sort of thing I think.

DB: Was that ever repealed?

VB: No. It’s been declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, but the Legislature in its wisdom has deemed that it needs to be in the books to show the people what kind of society we are that we do not approve of that lifestyle, one person was quoted as saying. After I was out of the legislature—I think it was in ’99 actually—that the Supreme Court declared the law unconstitutional. And actually I felt good about the fact that the legislative work that I had done laid a groundwork for that lawsuit because it showed time and again that there was a discriminatory nature to the, that the legislature did not repeal it and that it was discriminatory—all those kinds of things. The history of what had happened to that attempt was good grounds to show to the Supreme Court why it should be repealed.

DB: Which lawsuit are you referring to?

VB: *Grisen v. The State* (?)

DB: Besides partisanship and the question of allies, what was a typical working day as a legislator outside the legislative life? What did you do in an activist’s day?

VB: I got called a lot by a variety of groups to come and speak. Once your name is out there and people are looking for somebody to be on a panel or talk to a class or give a talk, I got called on quite a bit. Then also I attended a United Nations conference in Cairo. It was the International Conference on Population and Development. That was in 1994 and after that, I think I ended up at 20 events; the Rotary, Soroptimist, all kinds of places, because it had been in the news. The conference was in the news, of course. Then when I got home, *The Missoulian* interviewed me about my experiences.

The reason I went to that conference was that the Catholic Church has a seat in the U.N. as a—(unintelligible) what exactly. It’s not a full-voting member exactly, but kind of yields a lot of power. They were going to eliminate a lot of language in the document that was going to come out of this conference with regards to family planning and women’s freedom of choice. So the Catholics for Free Choice was going to fight to retain that language or to create some good language. There had been meetings leading up to that with documents and chapters of the documents being worked on. I was pretty active while I was getting a lot of their material and keeping up to date on what that (unintelligible). And I thought it would be kind of a historic conference to go to. It was fun to be in the mix of the activity there. Because I went there in
September of ’94, I was asked to do a lot of talking, (unintelligible) readings, different things. That was one thing.

A legislator gets involved. There are a lot of different statewide associations that ask you to come and listen to their pitch on what they want in this legislature. A lot of mail would come (unintelligible) that regard, too. Also, through the interim for legislators there’s these committees. One of the committees I served on was the Children and Family Committee. I was chair of that one year. I was real proud of the work we did. I think that’s an equally bipartisan makeup in those committees; there are equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans. So you come at it with a whole different mix than you do with the (unintelligible) majority/minority. I think that was kind of an eye-opener for me. I had served on other interim committees, but that one, we all invested a lot of time and effort into studying the childcare system in Montana, and we came up with several recommendations (unintelligible).

We really did a thorough investigation. We allowed people to come in and testify. So we came up with the recommendations, but as with any other kind of recommendations, they (unintelligible) money. What happens at the interim committee, is that (unintelligible) the off year and by May or June you have to have your recommendations to vote on what bills you want to put forth. When it came to that, everybody in the midst of an election and nobody wants to say they’re going to spend anymore money. (Unintelligible) so we didn’t have any bill. There was nothing, nothing, after all that. We worked together and everyone supported all of the things we said we wanted. So it’s very disillusioning. Nobody will say that this is important enough to fight for.

DB: So no legislation came of that?

VB: I think there was a real watered-down, we all support better investigation or training for childcare workers, some general (unintelligible) kind of thing, but nothing that we needed. It takes more people in the state to check out (unintelligible) or we’re going to set up this much training opportunities for childcare workers, none of that. Nobody was willing to say that it was worth fighting for. So that atmosphere exists and I certainly didn’t want to spend my time (unintelligible).

DB: Was that the beginning of the end of your time in the Legislature?

VB: Yes, kind of. I had gotten tired of the religious right from the time they started having a lot of influence there. There were people that I think demean education, demean free thinking, creative people, people that want to have different ideas; everybody has to be the same. It became, for me, a time when I didn’t want to be called a Christian because (unintelligible). So it’s not a very pleasant atmosphere to be in. I figured I had a choice. I could leave if I didn’t want to be around those people. A lot of people want to say, “Oh, the Legislature is a great place.” You argue the issues and then you go off and have a drink together. I always felt that

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because I carried the kind of legislation (unintelligible) branded as somebody that was evil (unintelligible).

DB: Sounds like you met a lot of opposition.

VB: There was one time, there was a guy from—Olden was his last name. I think he was from Glendive. He was the Vice Chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee. I had a bill that had something to do with including gays and lesbians in the hate crime definition (unintelligible). He played it so that I didn’t hardly have time to have a hearing. I don’t think all people were that rude. I felt that was rude and very undignified and un-Senate like. I was a Senator, But he didn’t want to have the bill do anything. So he drug on different hearings that morning. He scheduled another hearing in front of mine when I had all the people up that were for the bill and they had to take time out. I know somebody drove from Billings to be a part of that hearing. She had a child with her. It was very difficult. It was totally rude for him to do that. That’s the kind of treatment I got (unintelligible). There was never a time for me when people would say let’s go have lunch and talk about this (unintelligible). For (unintelligible) interaction.

DB: What people or organizations support did you have?

VB: Well, the Human Rights Commission, (unintelligible), the [American Civil Liberties Union] ACLU, and I did a lot of environmental stuff too. I was always on Natural Resources, and I was on the Environmental Quality (unintelligible) committee for the natural resources, so all of the natural resources organizations: (unintelligible), Natural Resources Defense Council, a variety of those. There were a lot of allies, but it felt like you were kind of whistling (?) in the dark. I was there in ’85 (?) when they brought forth the water degradation bills. There were only like three (unintelligible) in the Senate in the Natural Resources Committee that even made an effort. Then I was on the (unintelligible) Forestry regulations (?) (unintelligible). So there were people that were in there trying to stop a lot of bad legislation, you know from Marc Racicot, (unintelligible).

DB: Could you name any legislation that you did see through or that you proposed that did get passed that you see as significant?

VB: Well, I think my favorite bill that I did was moving the women’s prisons. The women prisoners in Montana were housed until two years ago in a dormitory the Warm Springs mental hospital campus and it was a fire hazard. There had been several inspections and the ACLU had been very active in trying to get the facility closed down, and the women moved to somewhere else. That was in 1991 that I did that. I created that bill and I worked with the bill drafter to get the language in it exactly like what I wanted because at that time the Corrections Department wanted to choose a site for the women’s prison. They were going to move them, they said, and I think that (unintelligible). They were talking about putting (unintelligible). I had in my bill this criteria of what the site had to have: a mental health facility, you know, a community big

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enough so that if people were able to leave the prison and they could work and there would be jobs and community acceptance of all that. There was a lot of criterion.

Also I had a community structure set up that was going to take legislators and a variety of people around the state to determine where the new prison would go because the Corrections Department at that time was looking at a community (unintelligible) kind of a slump. They were going to do a real bad behind the doors kind of deal. And a lot of communities were looking at it as a kind of economic development (unintelligible) for that community to have jobs. And I wanted the focus to be changed so it was looking towards rehabilitation of the inmates. So I was real proud of that that the bill passed. It was real difficult to get passed, but I had enough allies that didn’t like the way the Corrections Department was doing things primarily. So we got that passed.

We formed a committee and the community that wanted to have this facility put their program, their pitch together and the committee met and heard their (unintelligible) and it was all very scientific (unintelligible). Then we picked the site in the very next year and it was starting to be... There was a lot of opposition from the Deer Lodge Valley because we were taking jobs away from the Deer Lodge Valley (unintelligible) Anaconda (unintelligible) real strong (unintelligible). After the bill passed, after we did the committee work and we determined that we were going to move to Billings, there was all kinds of (unintelligible) behind closed doors trying to say that it was invalid or that there was a better facility (unintelligible). So we fought that. Then it turned out that the building never got built because the site that was chosen (unintelligible) the soil under the site was not strong enough (?) (unintelligible). It was going to stay in Billings so there was a juvenile kind of a mental health facility (unintelligible) the area we would have would be a place where it could grow and be developed. But anyway (unintelligible). That was a big bill.

DB: In addition to specific issues and bills, what do you consider that you’ve done to further the general cause of activism in the state?

VB: I don’t know if I’ve done much. I haven’t done anything lately. I think that if anybody was aware of the fact that women, during the time that I served, I think that women in general in the legislature showed that they were pretty strong. We tried to start a women’s caucus. It would be non-partisan so that we could kind of brainstorm things that were of mutual benefit. But I felt that a lot of things that I did in the Legislature, I would back them up by checking it out with a lot of the women that I had as allies (unintelligible). It wasn’t necessarily a formal caucus. I think that, from what I could see, the people that came to the Legislature that were interested and were interested in bills, or the issues or were lobbyists or whatever, I felt that while I served, and it may be true now—it might have been true before—but while I served, I thought there was a real strong presence of very articulate women (unintelligible) not being afraid to get out and say (unintelligible). So I think that (unintelligible) example for (unintelligible). I have a lot of admiration for people that can do that kind of thing (unintelligible). It takes a lot of your
energy and who you are and what you’re doing. I think that there are a lot of people that, if they are interested, they (unintelligible) not be afraid to put forth their ideas.

DB: Looking back, what would you do differently and why?

VB: That’s a really good question. I think I like the (unintelligible) that I did and I also felt that because I was from a University District, I had that freedom to do that. A lot of people are from districts that are very (unintelligible) pinned them to the wall (unintelligible). I think I would have liked to have been more active in some of the other issues that really (unintelligible). That’s really where (unintelligible). That’s really the work or the meat of all the work that you did. I don’t know if I would have ever been able to get on even the Appropriations Committee (unintelligible), but I kind of wish I would have—

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VB: —been a part of that whole work that (unintelligible). There you saw people who put in lots and lots of time and a lot of times you almost felt like it was non-partisan when you watched the committee hearings. I liked the way they worked. That just wasn’t where I was. I wound up on Natural Resources and Judiciary Committee in the House. They wanted to kind of clip my wings. So I didn’t get on (unintelligible) Administration and (unintelligible). That’s an area that I think is so worthwhile. It’s very rewarding (unintelligible).

DB: How about (unintelligible)?

VB: That I wish I had done something different?

DB: Or would have done different (unintelligible).

VB: I don’t think there’s anything, no. I think that kind of running on (unintelligible) you want to do with your life.

DB: Would you consider anything that you’ve accomplished as an individual or a legislator, outside (unintelligible)?

VB: I guess I’d have to say that if anybody studies about any work about (unintelligible) the bill, (unintelligible) law (unintelligible). I think that if people are interested in church or Catholic Church (unintelligible). I can’t think of any (unintelligible). I did some other work with the women’s prison. I guess I can’t (unintelligible).

DB: (Unintelligible) pro-choice (unintelligible)?

VB: I think that (unintelligible). I think that in the human resources and human services, (unintelligible). This is so frustrating because for the last 15 or 20 years, there’s been (unintelligible) anti-tax. There’s been a turnaround of what all the different services can provide. So it’s a real battle to (unintelligible) and to try and (unintelligible) democracy (unintelligible) and working together. So we decided that (unintelligible). Those concepts were born (unintelligible). Proportionately, I just don’t believe it. So there’s a lot of work to be done in human services, how much money (unintelligible) education and all of the different kinds of (unintelligible). And the fact that it does take money (unintelligible). I think that the whole idea of interdependence and how we live together in society (unintelligible).

DB: How about specific in terms of (unintelligible)?

VB: The facility that the women wound up in wasn’t perfect (unintelligible) some type of training (unintelligible). So the other thing we’ve been working with is (unintelligible).
[Rest of tape inaudible; garbled sound]