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Interviewee: Claudia Brown
Interviewer: Dawn Walsh
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Dawn Walsh: Hello, Claudia. Thanks for having the interview tonight. I'd like to start out with asking you some general background information as to when and where you were born.

Claudia Brown: I was born in Butte in 1937 in a flat.

Dawn Walsh: And then you grew up and went to school in Butte?

Claudia Brown: I went to grade school and high school in Butte, and then came over to Missoula to go to the university and have lived in Missoula for most of my life now, yes.

Dawn Walsh: So when you were growing up in Butte either in your family life or in your social life at school, were there any issues of peace that were discussed and addressed as you were growing up?

Claudia Brown: Well, that's really a good question, because when I grew up there was a lot of conflict and prejudices between Catholics and Protestants in Butte, and also a lot of political tensions. It so happens that my father—I learned a lot from him, but I learned was to feel the opposite way. There was quite a lot of bigotry and prejudice, which even went down into the children in their playing and fighting. So that—you know, we had misconceptions about each other. We were Protestants, and so we had heard these stories about what Catholics were like, and that we couldn't go into their church, and they couldn't go into ours. I did early tend to feel sympathy for the underdog. So that's probably been an important part of my motivation.

Dawn Walsh: And you mentioned that you learned from your father. Do you recall what his message was to you or what even the tone or the atmosphere that was created from your father that made you have sympathy and peaceful way of looking at the situation?

Claudia Brown: Yes. He was a very intense man, and he would often talk in extreme terms. And well, he thought the Democrats were terrible and the Catholics too. They were just all—you know, all black. He at one point took us on a ride up to Meterville in Butte to show us all the bombed houses where union people had bombed the homes of the scabs, the people who still worked. Yeah, he gave us quite an education. But I did begin to see another point of view and wonder what the other side of the story was. Then coming to the university here, and at that time we were all under the onus of the atomic bomb. That was something that concerned me a lot—atomic bomb. That was even before the hydrogen bomb. Yeah, it was something I spent a lot of thought on.

Dawn Walsh: And so, what were your thoughts about the atom bomb at that time?

Claudia Brown: Well, I wondered about our future, what it is going to be like. At that time, there was still where teachers were having drills with students where they'd get underneath their desks. It's always been a natural part of me. We're all different kinds of people. I think that we all are members of the universe and that war is not worth it. It's hell—war is hell. We need to work to make a better world, which sounds pretty idealistic but I think it's very important.

Dawn Walsh: So it sounds like you felt this way for a long time. Even as a child, do you think and then it has just?

Claudia Brown: Yeah. And it really came into focus when I—well high school and college.

Dawn Walsh: And so, what were some of the ways that you expressed your views on peace and universal belonging as a young person? Was there an avenue for these feelings and beliefs at that time?

Claudia Brown: Well, actually for a long time there wasn't. I remember telling someone once that I was a closet liberal. I did that because well, I wasn't that involved in action, and the people around me felt different than I did, and I didn't have much confidence or knowledge. When I did start to get involved it was when I had small children. One of things that fired me was my husband was a forester, and he hired a man that others wanted to fire. This was during the Vietnam...the early...or just before Vietnam or the early Vietnam. And this man was very—that my husband hired—was very intelligent. He was, actually, an artist, but he had long hair, and he was peace-nick. Yeah, he was a hippie. There were a lot of people that agitated to have him fired, and that just really touched something in me about the fairness of it. That motivated me, and I joined League of Women Voters, and I started working with them to begin with.

Dawn Walsh: And how soon after that did you get involved with Missoula Women for Peace?

Claudia Brown: Quite a while later. Let's see...family life took up and going to school and getting a degree and then working took up a lot of my time. Then, when my children were leaving home or independent then I started getting involved—volunteered at Jeannette Rankin Peace Center. I had known Women for Peace for quite a while and was just really interested, I was interested in them for quite a while before I actually joined, but had that as a goal. One of the reasons I joined was the other women that were involved. I admired them.

Dawn Walsh: And how was it that you knew of them?

Claudia Brown: They met at a room at the same church I go to, and I knew several of the women.

Dawn Walsh: And before you got involved what were some of things that you knew about their work and the group?

Claudia Brown: Well, I knew they were peace activists. Let's see, during the Gulf War—oh, I started going to more meetings during the Gulf War. No, that's...oh, I went—I had been going, actually, to the peace potlucks for quite a while. So, yeah, I went to the peace potlucks for a long time before I actually joined Women for Peace.

Dawn Walsh: And do you recall what some of those peace potlucks were about, what the topics or issues were?

Claudia Brown: The peace potlucks were always held in like a church basement, different church basements. So, disarmament was a very important issue, and there was a lot of letter writing and advocacy and petitions at the peace potlucks. They were wonderful affairs, and they used to be very well attended. Different people that I came to know as peace activists would get up, and many of them were very well informed. I learned a lot about what the issues were, and what was going on, and what the peace community was doing. I think some of the older members could probably tell you more about the specific activities that they did.

Dawn Walsh: Then, I'd like to go back, even though you weren't a member of Missoula Women for Peace when they began in 1970, you did mention the Vietnam War and that was at the time when Missoula Women for Peace were getting active. But again, even though you weren't a member at that time, what were your thoughts and actions and involvement with Vietnam as a Missoula community member with your strong feelings of fairness and peace?

Claudia Brown: Well, that was when I started reading the paper really regularly and reading things that I just hadn't bothered with before. And I remember, let's see, the Gulf War... You're talking about the Vietnam War.

Dawn Walsh: Right.

Claudia Brown: And that was—see I was a mother raising small children. I did—that's when I joined the League. But you're asking what I remember what was going on?

Dawn Walsh: Yeah, but what was going on for you during the time of the Vietnam War and did your involvement with the League of Women Voters do any work around the war at all or candidates at the time, questioning them about their beliefs about of the war or stand on the war?

Claudia Brown: At that time, we lived in Helena, and what I was doing and what the League was doing was more focused on, like land use issues and state government, but it was just the beginning of my getting toes in the water, going to listen to the Legislature and helping to supervise a table that the League of Women Voters had on issues and educational materials. As

far as the war went, it was just a time of troubled thoughts about what we were doing. What we were...you know, massacres and killings and what it was doing not just to the Vietnam people but also to the soldiers. Well, actually, at that time there was quite a split between people who were in favor of the war and people who were against it. Those of us who were against the war, I think, weren't as aware then of what it was like for the soldiers as we were after they came back and told their stories. So it wasn't that I was doing something myself actively at that time, because I was raising children and working, as that it occupied my thoughts and also helped to form a lot of my energy that began to build up that I used later.

Dawn Walsh: And so, when the young men who came back from the war and told their stories that you just mentioned, and as you heard those stories, what effect did it have on you and your thoughts?

Claudia Brown: You know, we all have our own prejudices, and at first, I thought, well these were soldiers and I didn't like what they had done. But as more and more came out about what it did to those soldiers—the post-traumatic effects, the post-traumatic syndrome, there was a process for me. It didn't turn me in terms of my attitudes, but it did reinforce my feelings that it was—well, not just that is a crazy way to deal with conflict, but also I became much more aware of how ordinary people were just pawns of global and political interests. At first—well, at first, I didn't want to believe it, but the more I read the more I learned that it really did happen. Then, later on, even the popular press admitted these things. So that's what I first read in the alternative press, it was confirmed later by popular magazines, and so. This was quite a process for me. It was a long process where at first I wasn't sure what could I believe and what could I trust. I wanted to believe that we weren't so complicit and, of course, we know now that we were very complicit. Not that, I've come to know that none of us are really innocent. When even just turn our backs, that's a form of complicity.

Dawn Walsh: So then, the time that you were becoming involved in Missoula Women for Peace was the time that the Gulf War was starting, and you had mentioned that was a time when you started reading on a regular basis and becoming informed about that war. And so can you speak more about what was happening for you at that time and what was happening with the Missoula Women for Peace as you were getting involved through the Gulf War at that time?

Claudia Brown: Do you remember the date of the Gulf War? Was it was in the '80s?

Dawn Walsh: Early '90s wasn't it?

Claudia Brown: Well, my—what I remember the most are images. I remember listening to Rae Horan, who is a local person, speaking to a big crowd from the steps Main Hall. I always mention her name, but she was one of just many people. My own thoughts then...I still...I was pretty green, but I was concerned and was just doing a lot of listening. What I heard was a lot of talk about what was fair and just and what was true. Then when I listened to other people, I would hear hatred and anger, and just those two different messages really spoke to me in

terms of where the truth seemed to lie. I also have vivid images of meeting at Christ the King Catholic Church in the basements, and a lot of high emotions over the Gulf War. I was listening to what people were saying and the emotions behind what they said and the values behind what they said really influenced me.

Dawn Walsh: Like?

Claudia Brown: Well, human dignity, human rights, telling lies versus what the truth was, finding out that people that I had trusted—trust is the wrong word—they had the authority, like a President has the authority, that they knew what they were doing. When Reagan with Iran Contra, what Reagan was doing giving support and troops to the government soldiers and doing a lot of killing, and hearing about how the military had trained other people who were terrorists. Yeah, it was very sobering to learn that our own government had been complicit.

Also, then coming to realize that all of us have unconscious prejudices and learning to recognize that in myself, and I think that's a really important step. Then, coming to even monitor my own thought processes because there are a lot of good people that are honest people who feel very differently than I do, and somehow it doesn't work to be, "East is east and west is west and never the between shall meet." That isn't going to work. So I have gotten a lot more interested now in how to bring diverse groups together and be able to listen to each other and find out what can we agree on together.

I also have come to know that this is really a critical time—that I'm living in a very critical time in history. Before World War II the German people didn't want to believe or recognize what was going on in their own country. A lot of people in Europe didn't want to recognize what was going on. I think we have the same thing here now, that issues have shifted some. Now, there isn't a lot of energy in terms of disarmament, and we don't have—we have a lot of wars, but they aren't ones that we are involved in. We are involved in other ways. But there isn't the energy for disarmament that there used to be.

There are other issues—issues of...environmental issues, actually, that are critical, as well as other political issues of power and globalization and all that. There's still quite a pervasive feeling of everything is just fine—that doesn't concern me. I think that's very strong. My husband and I are retired now, and I think it's really important for us to be involved. It's just a really critical time in history, and it's so important for me to know what's going on as much as I can in my limited way and to do what I can do—do something. It's an exciting life, yeah. And a lot of hope, I think, in being aware and in doing something.

Dawn Walsh: I'd like to go back to when you were talking about the importance of being able to communicate with even somebody who you don't agree with. I know that at Missoula Women for Peace group there was a member who did consensus training and decision-making that she then shared with the group. Could you talk about what you learned from that process

and experience and how the Women's Peace group incorporated this important idea of consensus?

Claudia Brown: That was Connie, right? Wasn't it Connie Skousen started that? Well, when I first learned about—well, I was even at that time that aware of group dynamics, but, oh, I've learned so much since then. Actually, Women for Peace was one of my first models, and it meant that everyone got a turn. There would be a monitor so that if, it often happens that one person will start to dominate, and we would monitor ourselves so that everybody got a turn. We learned about the round robin and when you're going around the table, you don't give your opinion when someone else is talking. It's a discipline that you have to learn, and you can only learn it by practicing. Then, the other part of that is the active listening, really listening and learning to repeat back what the person is saying so that you make sure that you hear them, what they're really saying. It is amazing how it's easy to hear something other than what a person was really saying. Just that process of listening and the discipline of not responding when somebody else is talking, something happens in that, and when there are different points of view.

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

Claudia Brown: Connie researched the consensus model quite extensively, and she had a lot of hand-outs, which we read and then practiced. Do you have other questions about that?

Dawn Walsh: How do you think that model, or do you think that model would be helpful at the political level in terms of solving conflicts and keeping conflict from escalating on a larger global, political level?

Claudia Brown: Well, the training—if politicians themselves, and a lot of them do—it's gotten to be much more of an accepted thing. I've been involved with the Celebrate 2000 forums where consensus is practiced. In that group, there is much more of a diversity of opinions, say than there is in Women for Peace, and the careful attention to letting each person have their say that in itself, I think, softens edges, softens lines of difference. Am I answering your question?

Dawn Walsh: Uh, huh. That's fine.

Claudia Brown: It's a knotty—it's not an easy thing. I do know that a lot of the problem is that we do nothing. When the Legislature is meeting, not enough people actually go over there and voice their opinion. Not enough people contact their legislatures. They keep telling us over and over again that really makes the difference, writing personal letters and contacting Representatives even beforehand, giving them information and asking them, "Would you get back to me on this." And going over and being present, being counted and testifying too, that really matters.

Dawn Walsh: And so, have you found for yourself that it has helped to be involved in that process? Have you seen the positive effects?

Claudia Brown: Well, yes. I've gotten more into doing that in some other organizations, other advocacy organizations. Well, it—they don't always do what I would like them to do, but I know the fact that we go and advocate, I know that is important. Sometimes it takes two or three legislative sessions to accomplish something. But if advocates didn't say anything, they would just do what they wanted to do, and they wouldn't be informed. They wouldn't have the whole picture.

Dawn Walsh: Is there a particular issue that you want to talk about?

Claudia Brown: Well, in terms of involvement of women, it has had a real impact on me, meeting, and young women that I have met who are dedicating their lives to peace work, like when Julie McKay came. I think, she was about your age, just a young woman and very articulate, and she had a lot of information about disarmament. She was very well versed about disarmament. Also, Yvonne Simmons who went over to Bosnia several times and worked

with women over there and worked at empowering women. And Pat Ortmeyer, she was first director of Women for Peace. You know, I think that it was pretty lonely for those women, but they were so dedicated to what they were doing it was inspiring to see them living their lives for that.

Even though it's quiet work often, it all creates a web that is stronger because there are many people doing many things, like the two women, the two elderly schoolteachers who are now going around Montana in covered wagon. Have you read about that? They're in their seventies, and they are traveling around Montana and advocating for abolition of capital punishment. I think that capital punishment is a part of this whole violent means versus nonviolent means. I guess that's a real important way to think about it, finding nonviolent ways to solve problems. And here's these two little old ladies who are going around Montana. The Quakers and Women for Peace and Jeannette Rankin, it forms a web that really makes for a lot of strength. It's very important work.

Dawn Walsh: And it sound like doing this work, specifically with other women, seems to be important to you and has served as model and, perhaps has—you used the word empowered—empowered you as a woman. Has it changed your views as yourself as a women or how you see women working in these arenas?

Claudia Brown: It certainly has. I've gained skills that I did not have at all. One of things about working with women...you know, if there's a mixed group, I think it still can tend to happen that—men have been at this for so long, they know how to own the floor. It comes very natural. It's natural historically and in our culture. So, if you have say a woman who is a leader in a women's group, if her husband comes it can change, the dynamics can change. Of course, that's especially true with women my age. Probably not so much for women your age, but it is for women my age.

The women's movement has made such a difference in ways that twenty years ago a lot of these cultural ways of interacting—they were unconscious. We weren't even quite aware—only of the frustrated feelings. But it took women who really analyzed what was going on and the importance of language and how language forms our unconscious ways of acting. So, yeah, having a women's group that's working on peace is so important. Then, there's so many levels to it, because there's Women for Peace here in Missoula, plus other groups. Then, WILPF—that's such an important support—us supporting WILPF, and WILPF supporting us. I've gotten so that I read the newsletters from WILPF much more carefully than I used to even. Such a fundamental change, and it is happening awfully fast, but it does take time. So, Women for Peace is a part of that.

Dawn Walsh: So WILPF stands for Women's International Peace?

Claudia Brown: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

Dawn Walsh: And what are some of the issues that you've become aware of through that group, or how has Missoula Women for Peace been involved with the international group?

Claudia Brown: Well, Women for Peace has been involved with WILPF, I think since the beginning. It's like, I think it's the parent organization—I'm not sure about that, but I think so. I've learned a lot about globalization, about the role of the United Nations both in terms of what different U.N. organizations have done and what they have not done through WILPF. I've also—I've gotten really interested and involved in environmental and sustainability issues. Actually, sustainability issues can either provide fodder for war or they can prevent war. If we deal with these sustainability issues, it's actually a base. If people don't have basic needs like land to live on, food to eat, shelter over their heads, meaningful work so that they have dignity, clean water, air that doesn't produce a lot of illness in populations, then it progresses to discontent and terrorism and wars and the haves and the have nots.

Dawn Walsh: So you think economics is a big factor in warfare?

Claudia Brown: It's very big. It's actually—well, it's basic. Yeah, it's basic. I have not been a person who was interested at all in economics, and I have had to educate myself because it's just so important.

Dawn Walsh: I know that the Women for Peace has done a few things to raise money, such as rummage sales and bake sales. Were you involved in those?

Claudia Brown: Yes, yes. And those were fun. Women for Peace knows how to raise money. I think, and I'm not the expert on this, but I think that the high teas were the most successful single fund-raisers, and they were wonderful. It's amazing these women in Women for Peace who are such good cooks and bakers and all these wonderful tea items. They really know how to put on a high tea. I think it amazed us all how many people came. It showed how much support there was for Women for Peace in the community. There were too many, really, for the room. You couldn't hardly turn around.

Then, the other thing that Women for Peace has done maybe the most regularly are the tax day bake sales. So, we would set out these tables in front of the post office uptown, and many people, more than even people in Women for Peace, would bring bake goods to sell and all kinds of goodies. I just have this wonderful image of Helen Vivian, who is—she's in her seventies now, blond hair with bangs and a kerchief tying her hair back, a very petite woman, the most gracious woman you could ever imagine just buttonholing passersby and saying, "Did you know about this? Did you know how much money that we spend on military involvement every year and do you know how much of your tax dollars goes for military expenses?" And I'll tell you, she got rid of those flyers. She was an expert at it, and she was so polite and gracious. She wasn't your image of rabble-rouser at all.

That's one thing that really is special about Women for Peace is that here these women are now in their seventies or eighties, but even in their sixties are in a gentle way doing very important work, activist work that kind of goes against, say, a preconception of what activists or revolutionaries are like. It brings up a lot of fond memories to think of those again. Yeah, raising money to give for peace purposes has been a really important part of Women for Peace.

Dawn Walsh: And so that's my next question. What are some of the ways that you've utilized the money that you've raised, what types of projects or things have you purchased or supported with the money that you've raised?

Claudia Brown: We've supported WILPF and also the Jane Adams Peace Award, which is the children's book, we've donated money for that. We've purchased the books that won the peace awards for the children's library. And our yearly rummage sales... Oh, donated money to Jeannette Rankin. And brought these women here that I've mentioned, the peace activists, like Julie McKay and Yvonne Simmons, so that they could go over to Bosnia or come to the United States from Geneva and spread the world. Oh, then I helped to bring Russian women over here so that they could see what women activists are doing over here.

Dawn Walsh: Was that just this past summer? Were you involved with that group of Russian women?

Claudia Brown: I wasn't involved, but that's part of the kind of thing that Women for Peace has done, yes. Let's see, what are some of the other things that we've...Oh, there's a group in town, I think it's still active, called Friends of Ellacuría, a town in El Salvador that was started on a brand new town composed of refugees from a nearby town that was completely destroyed. So, Women for Peace has support them. Also supported sending medical supplies to Cuba for the people there—and the peace train. Let's see, who sponsored the peace train, was it WILPF, or was it the U.N? But, we supported that. Pastors for Peace is another that we've supported. Oh, and then PRIDE, which is a gay and lesbian support group that is very statewide—and that support for basic human rights for a group that's been legally as well as culturally discriminated against.

Dawn Walsh: So how was it that as a group, Missoula Women for Peace, come to decide what projects they're going to support, and maybe along with that question is could you describe the structure of the meeting that you have and, again, how you come to decide what next you will do or what project you will support?

Claudia Brown: Well, I'm going to describe—I don't know for sure if it's the same now—but I'm going to describe, say, what I remember most. The president will start out by usually giving a reading, and for a long time, it was a reading from the *Tao of Leadership*, and so that was a thought-provoking paragraph or two that we'd start with. Then we'd go around the table and each woman would just catch the rest of us up on whatever thoughts she wanted to give, what

was going on in her or a concern for an issue. So we would do that next. Oh, and we would always have a cup in the middle of the table and that was for donations. So that was how we would just fund just regular checkbook, small expenses, like mailings. We would all chip in whatever we—it was a very informal thing—we would just chip in whatever we could or wanted to.

Then, we would have ongoing projects, and we would have an agenda, and we would go through those ongoing projects and make decisions on what we were going to do. Then, usually, there was a report from someone. As I mentioned, Lois Hove always did a lot of research. She would give a report on land mines, and we would then discuss what we were going to do, what action we were going to take. We would have addresses of our Legislators and Senators. We all had the number, like for the White House call-in line, so that we could act individually as well as a group on the issues at hand. Oh, let's see, what else can I tell you? Have I answered your question?

Dawn Walsh: Yes, thank you. That was very good. I wonder, is there a particular issue that is important or relevant for you right now?

Claudia Brown: Well, there is very much so, but it's not a... Now for me it's sustainability—globalization issues, but even more than globalization issues, it's sustainability. I'm doing a lot of work for that, and it's taking up a lot of time. Oh, and my husband and I have helped start up a couple of groups here in town. They're actually both related to—they're advocacy groups with a faith base.

Dawn Walsh: For this issue of sustainability?

Claudia Brown: Yes. One of the groups has a broader issue, state legislative advocacy on human rights issues—you know, social justice issues. And the other group is specifically on sustainability. But Women for Peace was kind of the base of my starting out and getting involved in this other thing.

Dawn Walsh: It sounds like you have a real fondness for your experience with Missoula Women for Peace?

Claudia Brown: Yes, yes I do. I admire these women very much. They're role models. And now, for a lot of these women, it has come to be a support group for the original members. I think it's a very strong support group that's very important to them.

Dawn Walsh: Well, we're just about finished, and I just want to let you say anything that's on your mind that we haven't talked about yet or you have one last story that you want to tell or just a summary of what we've been talking about, and just end on an open-ended note.

Claudia Brown: Well, let's see. I guess the most important thing that I feel is how important it is to be involved in the ways that one chooses because democracy is at risk, and that is actually a very critical thing. It's really critical. Different women, particular women, their energy and passion: Debra Dawson with her passion and energy and humor, and Jean Pfeiffer with her seriousness, and Flo Chessin with her steadfastness—I think she's been involved longer than anyone, or at least one of the first ones, and she's an amazing person who has really kept the thread going. Yeah, Flo has really been the strongest thread, I think, through the whole thing. Alice Campbell, who raised eight children, and then got involved as an activist. Yeah, they're just really important models for all of us.

Dawn Walsh: Okay, so that makes me think of just the continuum of women in women's activism. And so, as you talk about women that are older than you and they're role models for you, what messages or a message do you have for younger women?

Claudia Brown: The main message that I would have for them is to become aware of what's going on. That is so important, to become aware and as... In their busy lives, there really is room for action—there is room. It doesn't take along. It's so easy to pick up the phone or send an email, talk to people—just talking to people—but that being aware of what's going on and do something to be involved. I hope I'm not forgetting something, but that's all I can think of now.

Dawn Walsh: That's great. Thank you very much.

Claudia Brown: You're welcome.

[End of Interview]