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Interviewee: Pat Williams

Interviewer: Donna McCrea

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Donna McCrea: This is Donna McCrea, head of Archives and Special Collections at the University of Montana in Missoula. Today is September 24 of 2014 and I am interviewing today former congressman Pat Williams. We are going to talk primarily about the National Endowment for the Arts, but I suspect we'll touch on other topics as well. So, for the record, if you would introduce yourself and spell your last name for us and also state your date of birth, if you would.

Pat Williams: Well as you said, Donna, my name is Pat Williams and I was honored to be Montana's member of the U.S. House from 1979 until 1997. I suppose pride obligates me to note that that's the most consecutive terms ever provided to a Montanan in service in the U.S. House. I'm not sure if people's judgments were all that good in those days but I'm quite proud of that. Proud of the record. I'm from Butte, living in Missoula at the time of this interview, and my wife and I've been here for 18 years, which is the number of years that have transpired since I left the Congress. I've been teaching here at the University of Montana all that time. I was born on October 30, 1937.

DM: Thank you. So we have chatted with you about other topics in the past, and today I really wanted to have a conversation with you and really get your own perspective on what I would call a battle around the funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, and hoping that you can provide your own perspective, your view from the floor. And if you could begin, maybe just by talking about what you were doing, what committee you were serving on at that time, and how you became such a key figure in that controversy.

PW: As I mentioned at the introduction, I served from '79 to '97. I was elected as chair of a subcommittee within the full Education Committee. The subcommittee was called the Select Education. And prior to me a formidable member of the House who had retired, named John Brademas of New York, great fellow, had chaired that subcommittee so I was delighted to follow him. That subcommittee for the purpose of our conversation here had included within its jurisdiction the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and a number of other select education jurisdiction, including for example, education of the disabled. I held that chairmanship in the late '80s, and then quite often members of the House and Senate will move around to different subcommittees. So I became, a year or two later, I became chairman of the Subcommittee on Labor Management, and I took with me the continuing jurisdiction over the NEA and NEH.

The big fights, the big internal fights in Washington, D.C., within the Congress that is, are usually fights about jurisdiction. Battles over who is going to have what jurisdiction because there is some power and authority follows jurisdiction. There was, by the way, no opposition to me

taking national endowments with me; I don't think that nobody wanted them but it's that they were seen as possible trouble. Maybe for reelection back home. They weren't particularly popular. Other jurisdictions were better. I liked the National Endowment for the Arts. I took it with me. I then moved years later to chair the Post-Secondary Education Committee. I'm an educator by profession and as so I was really pleased to have the opportunity to have post-secondary education and again, like the Peanuts character Linus with his blanket, I tugged along the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. It wasn't until the 1990s, '89 and '90s, that those issues, that issue of the National Endowment for the Arts, really became a battleground, and caught national attention, not just of artists or arch-conservatives who opposed the endowment but of literally most people in the country had begun to hear the National Endowment for the Arts. The battle reached front pages all across the country. The cover of either Newsweek or Time, I've forgotten which, and was featured on the nightly news quite often. So the battle that we underwent was quite horrific as we'll discuss in this interview.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan became president and in his first budget he suggested that the Congress do away with the National Endowment for the Arts. He was paring back a great deal of, a great many of programs in the federal budget, some of which in my opinion needed paring back, but many of which would have been a mistake to do so, among them the National Endowment for the Arts. I was a freshman and had—I wasn't on the budget committee or the appropriations committee—so I had very little to say about the Reagan budget except to vote yes or no on it. But an interesting thing happened to his proposals to get rid of the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. But we'll confine ourselves from here on to the National Endowment for the Arts. It was interesting that there was no public or congressional support for getting rid of the national endowments. The arts hadn't been controversial up to that point. And, so a Democratic Congress simply ignored the Reagan effort, which was lukewarm, to get rid of the National Endowment for the Arts. Let me stop there and see, Donna, if you have any questions about those early, very early '80s. There wasn't a lot going on in regards to the endowments.

DM: Well I think I'll just let you carry on and tell the timeline as how you think it will lay out best.

PW: Sure, thank you. With regard to the arts, things were ok until about the time that I became chair of the subcommittees that had to deal with the arts. As we know, the business of the Congress is done by its committees. And there are what's called full committees, such as agriculture, education, defense, appropriations, budget and so on. And then within each of those, in order to further specialize, there are subcommittees. And I was on the full Committee of Education, and I mentioned some of the subcommittees, post-secondary and others. And it was within those subcommittees that the work began on authorizing legislation with regard to the jurisdictions under that subcommittee.

For example, in the Agricultural Committee, the Subcommittee on Crops—particularly let's say wheat or rice—decides what the payments are going to be, what the surpluses are going to be, and so on and so forth, and they do that every couple of years, every new session of Congress. On the Education Committee, with regard to the endowment, Congress would every three to five years reauthorize the legislation guiding the National Endowment for the Arts. Every three to five years, changes would be needed and they would make those changes in the new authorizing legislation. And once an authorizing bill or in the appropriations committee, an appropriations bill, once it passed the subcommittee and then go to the full committee, and if it passed there, it would go on to the floor of the House. It's, that's the same process in the House and Senate. So the National Endowments for the Arts reauthorization came to the fore in 1989. And just prior to the reauthorization started, some conservative reverends, particularly from the South, began to attack art that was, and artists that were, funded by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

One of them, most notoriously was an artist named, I believe it was Andrew Serrano, Andrew Serrano had a piece which he labeled "Piss Christ," and what, I talked to Serrano about it, what it appeared to show was a crucifix in what people thought was Serrano's own urine. It wasn't his urine at all. It was a concoction that would hold up in this glass frame that it was in. And what Serrano, who's a rather religious fellow, was trying to demonstrate was the way we handle the crucifix in this country. We put it on our dashboard, we hang it from the mirror in our car. And he thought all that was all kind of blasphemous, so he was trying to get Americans to realize what they were doing with this kind of outlandish trick of his "Piss Christ." And conservatives didn't get it. And maybe nobody got it, you know art is sometimes difficult. But these conservative reverends didn't get it and they went after Serrano with an ax in 1989. It turns out that Serrano was funded—a small grant—from the National Endowment for the Arts so the NEA went under you know these checks for, these screens for blasphemy.

Along with that came the work considered even worse from an artist named Robert Mapplethorpe. By the time Robert Mapplethorpe became nationally famous he was dead. But Mapplethorpe was a photographer and he—a really good photographer—his work sells for many tens of thousands of dollars. And he did some homoerotic photographs, which to some, I found them this way myself, were a bit distasteful. But their quality was extraordinary. And these conservative reverends and other conservatives across the country not only went after Serrano, they went after Mapplethorpe, literally, with an ax. Reverend Pat Robertson, the political commentator and former Bush—no excuse me—Reagan speech writer named Pat Buchanan, the owner of the Washington Times, Sun Myung Moon, went after the arts through the NEA, and there was an enormous outcry. That's just a small example of it. A great many people started to run for cover. Now all this time, you might mind you, I have jurisdiction over the National Endowment for the Arts. And their reauthorization, their three to five year reauthorization, is about to hit my desk as chairman. A lot of people in groups began, interestingly enough, to run for cover. Thirty six senators signed a letter, asking very hard questions about the NEA and I suppose the questions were all right, but what the senators

were doing in my opinion was protecting themselves from criticism back home. They could say, well, we wrote a letter.

There was legislation in both House and the Senate to outright kill the National Endowment. An artist [Scott Tyler, later known as Dread Scott] somewhere did one of these kind of reverse jujitsu things like Serrano was doing. An artist put an American flag on the floor of a museum [Chicago Institute of Art] and invited people to stand on it, or walk on it. Not to tear it up or trash it, but to walk on it. And the question was, "What does it mean to display the American flag?" That's what this artist was trying to get at. How important is the flag to us? And I suppose he was trying to get at other things as well. The Senate voted 97 to nothing to ban placing the American flag on the floor or the ground. It's ok with me, I don't particularly care seeing the American flag on the floor on the ground; it's better off when its flying in a nice breeze, but for the Senate to take the time to vote 97 to nothing telling us how we have to show the flag was a little beyond me. The Corcoran gallery cancelled the Mapplethorpe exhibit. The Corcoran gallery, one of the great galleries in America—they later apologized—but in their apology they didn't mention their lack of courage in cancelling the exhibit.

Jesse Helms got into the act and under an appropriations bill of which I have no jurisdiction except a final vote in the House because I wasn't on the Appropriations Committee, Jesse Helms was able in the Senate to add language to an appropriation bill for the National Endowment that said that obscene material could not be shown. Then he went to great length to try and define obscene material. He left a lot of things out that I personally think are obscene but he put in a lot of things that I didn't think were particularly obscene. It makes no difference. It's just, look how difficult it is to define obscenity. So among came 1990 and it was time to reauthorize the bill. Controversy was afoot. I decided the best thing for me to do was to begin the hearings on my committee which is where the bill had to start by bringing the hearings home to Montana. So I brought them to Billings. And most people who came were supporting the reauthorizing of the NEA, but certainly not everyone.

A number of bills—that by the way was in June—a number of bills began to appear through the summer and fall to kill the NEA. It was interesting to me that the groups, state art groups, and the national art literature, I'm not sure I have the name right, the Art Alliance, a national group, and several other groups, began internally, I suppose bickering about when the NEA is reauthorized, if it is, how should the money be divided? How much should go to the states, how much should stay federal, how much should go to agents, how much to go to localities and so on? So here was this not quite dead agency but it was on life support and sensing that, and sensing that maybe it could survive in some form or another, the groups, perhaps understandably, wanted a bigger piece of whatever the survived body looked like. And that was starting to internally tear support for the organization apart—well, at least divided.

So I brought all the groups together, that is representatives of the groups together, to Washington, and created what was called Williams Art Summit. All the major art groups, including some citizens, got together in the spring and sort of locked themselves at my

suggestion in a hotel conference room and sort of didn't come out except for breaks until they had decided to come out with one proposal, one suggestion to the Congress for legislation. One of the things they decided was there should be no content restriction on the grant-making process. Quality decisions yes, decisions about the quality of the art, yes. But not about the content of that quality, which is very important and a big difference. It came out pretty clean with agreements on how the bill should share the federal appropriations. I introduced that summer, along with another member of my committee—Congressman [Tom] Coleman of Missouri, Republican—we introduced legislation to continue the NEA, to reauthorize it, and accepted most of the suggestions of the summit. The hearings were first, fierce. The controversy continued with editorials, TV opinions, small hearings that states themselves were holding. Governors refusing to accept money, a few governors, a handful, refusing to accept any NEA money throughout that summer, well, throughout that year, up until that summer. Senators continuing to write letters. Difficult time.

My bill, mine and Congressman Coleman's bill, made some changes in the bill. And they were not exclusively but primarily these: we changed the application process so the artist would provide up front detailed description of the art form, the art they were going to produce. Now some art almost produces itself, it takes off in the artist's hands, and so one cannot require the artist to give us an absolute description of the final piece, but we wanted the NEA council, the council or councils that selected these recipients for a grant, we wanted them to know generally what kind of art was going to be produced. We created local, well, statewide advisory panels, not in every state, but the ones that were formed, were state panels to advise the NEA panels on which art had the quality, which applicants and their work had the quality to be acceptable. So the council for the first time was getting a lot of advisory opinions. With regard to the division of money, the state arts council shares—share—of the total appropriations, the total expenditure by the NEA, it rose from 20 percent to 35 percent. We eliminated the Helms obscenity language, and we used a Supreme Court definition to sort of define what obscenity is and, if I may, I want to read that into the record here. If I have it. Maybe you'll want to stop for a minute while I find this. I'm not sure I have it, but let me see.

Well, I had hoped to find the language that we used but we simply used a no-redeeming-value definition about the earlier—produced earlier by the Supreme Court in a case unrelated to this controversy. My bill and Coleman's bill, if I haven't said it, it passed the House 382 to 42, which is an extraordinary win, for any controversial legislation, let alone one that has gone through these kind of fires. The House was given a backbone in this controversy and that was because in large part, about a year into the controversy I liked to say the artists who had been dead silent during all this, that is the everyday artist out in the country, climbed down out of their garrets, took pen in hand, or picked up the telephone and wrote or called their member of the House or the member of the Senate. And the postmaster at the time—Congress has its own postmaster because the regular post office downtown in D.C. prefers not to be flooded with congressional mail—so Congress long, long ago developed it so the congressional system, they have their own postmaster. When I was there it was a guy named Bob Rota. And Rota told me that once the artists decided to do something, the House of Representatives, where all the action was at the

moment, received more mail than at any time, including the Vietnam War, during a one-year period. It was absolutely extraordinary. Although I'm compacting all of this in to what seems like a short time frame, this was going on for a two-year period. Once the artists, and the artists' families got engaged in this issue, it turned the Congress on a dime, because it was very clear that each individual representative's constituents had an opinion, and the opinion was overwhelmingly in favor of not censoring, of picking not based on content but quality, picking the art. And the issue really did revolve around whether or not big government—I, by the way, am not an opponent of big government, but I use it in that term of anger that a lot of people use. People did not want big government deciding what it would see in its art, in their own art galleries. And I was absolutely stunned by—I thought we were going to win, but I didn't think we were going to win by almost 10 to 1. There was no indication of that. Although one began to get the sniff that something that was happening because members of Congress would for the first time in a year would come up to me and say, "Pat I'd like to co-sponsor your bill for the NEA. You don't mind do you?" And I'd say "No, hop on board, we haven't left the station yet. Come on. It's not as scary as it seems." And so we began to get sponsorship, but more important than that, members of Congress writing home to their constituents saying, "Oh yes, yes, yes. I'm with you on this, I'm all for it. I'm the sponsor." So 382 to 42 the bill passed, went over to the Senate. No trouble in the Senate. And it passed there as well.

DM: What year was, or what month, do you remember?

PW: Let me see, what month. October, I believe it was. It was, it was in October or so. It was in the fall no long before the Congress adjourned for that year. Or perhaps that session after, it the second session of Congress and we did it just weeks before we adjourned. I've always thought, or liked to think, we took the NEA from bullseye to bulletproof. It has survived ever since despite some fairly significant efforts to kill it. No president since Reagan has proposed to kill it. So I do think it's bulletproof but it can be starved to death, can this little endowment, which makes up less than one tenth of a percent of the federal budget. Back then, around 1990, its budget was \$170 million. Today it's 150 million, all these years later. And that's—you don't want to kill it, but there's really no genuine feeling of support for it. Yeah, they'll vote to continue it but whether to increase it, the appropriations, is another matter. So I worried, worry about it being starved to death. Its cost to Americans is 50 cents apiece annually. Which is the cost of a small milkshake once a year. We spend 50 cents, France, the Netherlands, Canada, spends \$35 per citizen in its federal, national efforts to help the arts. And we spend 50 cents, probably about 35 now. Surely the arts and freedom that the arts portray are worth more than that, and I want to talk a bit about freedom, but I'm wondering if I should slow down here, Donna, to put in anything I may have left out or answer your questions about this terrible monologue of mine.

DM: No this is good. I do have a couple questions that are related to the legislation, and I'm wondering if you could talk about maybe what you were hearing from your constituents? Were there any arguments for or against that you found particularly compelling? I was looking through the correspondence that people wrote to you and you were responding to a lot of

people on both sides, “Thank you for your support,” or “I wrote legislation about obscenity and we’re going to follow the courts’ definition,” as you said. I was wondering if there was anything you could remember from that time about your constituents said to you?

PW: Well there was some anger. Sometimes it was pretty in my face. I can recall a few occasions when my children would be home for the summer, along with Carol, we all lived together outside D.C. after I got elected but they would come home very summer. And I remember in this particularly difficult summer coming home and being greeted—we were living in Helena, at our home in Helena—and I remember coming into the airport and being greeted and my little daughters and my son would be there, and I’d be greeted by protestors, some with signs that were as profane as any of the art we were trying to allow. So I didn’t object to what was written on the signs. But my little kids were kind of appalled by it, by the fierceness and the nastiness and the anger, [protesters] sometimes screaming at me. So, yes, there were Montanans that were very, very angry at me. And I would stop and talk to them and try to mollify them some and tell them about—you know that we would probably agree on obscenity and that I was banning obscenity under the Supreme Court definition and there was nothing else I could do constitutionally that would hold muster. And a lot of these people that were protesting me were constitutionalists so they’d stand and listen to that.

Most Montanans however, began to recognize the real value of the National Endowment for the Arts because they started to hear and to research what it was the National Endowment for the Arts meant for Montana. There’s a—I guess I can’t go into that because I’m forgetting a few names—oh yes, there’s a Shakespeare in the Park, or there was back then at least, Shakespeare in the Park appearance that would be held each summer out in far eastern Montana up on a place called Poker Jim flats, which I always thought was a marvelous name for a place where people could gather and watch Shakespeare in the Park. It was funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. People would get in their cars and their horses and ride to Poker Jim flats and wind up the little trail to it to sit in the sun, on a wonderful late afternoon and watch Shakespeare brought to them by the National Endowment for the Arts. And those sorts of things went on all over small-town Montana. Throughout small-town Montana. You see I always thought and I used to say that New York, Chicago, Boston, LA, don’t really need the National Endowment for the Arts because they have wonderfully generous and huge contributors to the arts in those places. But there are other places in this country that probably make up almost a majority of people in this country adding all these places up, including people in Missoula and Great Falls, that can use the federal help to bring the arts to their community. And so the NEA was about us, I used to tell Montanans, and they understood it, not because I told them, but because they’d look it up, as they say.

DM: When you were getting co-sponsors or trying to get co-sponsors at first, I believe I’ve seen a quote that you pretty much had one co-sponsor to begin with, and you slowly, gradually had to go out and get these people. You mentioned that it was their constituents that got them on board, but did you have any sort of arguments that you tried to make directly one-on-one to them, or did you have to wait for them to get their constituents to make their argument?

PW: With the major players in the Congress and you know Congress is still the place where the committees rule and there are committee chairs, I was one of them, subcommittee chairs. So I would talk to relevant people with regard to that, and then I'd talk to the House leadership. First Speaker Tip O'Neil, later Speaker Jim Wright, and then Speaker Tom Foley, and others in the leadership of which I was a small part myself as deputy whip. But to try to get around to 445 members would have taken all of my day and you just can't do it. I did try to talk to all of the opinion makers, more than the ones I've mentioned here. But it took their constituents showing their support for the NEA to turn the Congress.

DM: Just one other question about how you mentioned being an educator and also your interest in taking the NEA with you when you went to these other subcommittees. Why? What was it in your background that made this topic appealing to you and made you want to maybe protect it or pay attention to it? Was it just coincidental?

PW: Well, yeah it was kind of coincidental. When Jack Kennedy [was] asked how he became a war hero he said it was involuntary; they sunk my boat [Laughs]. I sort of felt like that. It was involuntary. I got elected chair of this committee and the committee happened to have the NEA in it. But, I moved committees. I didn't have to have to take the NEA with me, but I wanted to because I thought it was such an important, tiny agency that could leverage so, so much good in America. There were 10 times as many dance companies that were after the NEA as there were before. There were six times as many symphonies as before. And the list goes on. It leveraged all this private money and so was extremely important. Then once the fight came, I really did decide that was my last move from one committee to another as its chairman. I really decided to take it with me because I ended up knowing at least as much, maybe more than most members about it, so I thought I could put up the best defense. Plus, although I liked some of these members of the House and Senate personally, I abhorred some of their politics, such as the politics of Jesse Helms. And I just decided we were going to win this fight even if it might my being defeated for re-election. You know, I didn't, people elect and re-elect who they want, and you can't complain about it. What you can do though, is your job. I decided my job was—one of them, while I was in Congress—was to protect this little agency, so I threw everything I had into it.

DM: Who did you have on your staff that were sort of key helpers with this particular legislation?

PW: Yeah. I had three or four staff people working on it, but I had a fellow who'd been in education and he had been Senator Claiborne Pell's leading legislative aide and then came over to me; I didn't even recruit the guy. He just decided he'd rather work in the House than in the Senate. So he left Senator Pell—the Pell grants are named after Senator Pell. Pell was great, great senator so I was glad to have this guy. Name was Rick Gerough. Rick lives in the Carolinas now but he was enormous help to me, smarter than a whip, dogged worker, long hours into the night. So Rick Gerough was the main guy in the effort but here were some others as well.

DM: Thank you. So now let's talk about freedom.

PW: Well that's the other reason I kept it with me. It isn't often that you can be in the front lines of trying to protect freedom of speech, but how many people can go through their remaining years saying, "I protected freedom of speech"? I'm not the only one that protected it in Montana history, I'm not the prime one that protected it, but I got to do my piece, a bit of it. I feel exceptionally fortunate. Freedom of speech is not a given in America, although we seem to take it that way. The playwright Arthur Miller, who wrote *Death of a Salesman* and other fine works, once said, "Censorship, I'm afraid, is like lightening. It appears to descend from above but actually it only strikes where negative charges are silently collecting deep down in the earth." And I think Miller had it about right. The problem, I think, with censorship, is that once it starts almost everybody wants a piece of it, including in this country. For example, which one of us hasn't been outraged by some aspersion against one or another group? Which one of us hasn't been delighted by an aspersion against one or another group? How many people can stand still while the Ku Klux Klan parades in front of us with their vicious symbols of what they'll do to Jewish people or black people or yellow people or red people? And yet in this country we allow them the freedom to make that parade. There's something special about that. Not all or even most censorship has been applied by governments. Most of it has been applied by people, by local groups.

Down in the Bitterroot Valley not far from here, not too long ago, a fundamentalist preacher was trying to have Maya Angelou's book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* removed from the school library. And that type of censorship is nothing new and not confined to Montana and for that matter America. In this country, censorship, denial, repression, has plagued us through our two centuries and more. But we have one bulwark against it: The Constitution of the United States. It protects expression and also requires us, through the courts, to define that speech, that art, the words which are obscene and thus outside the bounds of constitutional protection. I think it was Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes who wrote, "If there is any principle of the Constitution that more imperatively calls for attachment than any other, it is the principle of free thought." And here's the important part, not free thought for those who agree with us, but freedom to allow the thought that we hate. The struggle unfortunately, or maybe fortunately for us, the struggle against censorship is constant. It wasn't that many years ago when Rudy Giuliani was mayor of New York and the Brooklyn Museum presented some art by a fellow named Chris Ofili. I don't know how to pronounce his name, and I can't recall the work, the so-called offensive work offhand. But Mayor Giuliani proceeded to withhold funds and shut down the museum. A judge ruled against the mayor, saying legal principle protects the expression of ideas, even unpopular ones. Even when the mayor of New York doesn't like it. Expression is constitutional, barring it is unconstitutional.

Now let me, unless, Donna, you have other questions, let me end with a couple of things here. The arts and our rights, particularly freedom of expression, are inexorably linked. The artist has an intimate relationship with what we Americans, and perhaps all people, like to refer to as

freedom. The creative process flourishes only in freedom's atmosphere. Artists, after all, are subversives. They repeat truth as they see it and know it in their own mind and heart. Through them we receive the honeyed muse of epic, or the lyric or form. In setting aside the reasoned arguments of law and regulations, we submit instead to the pleasure or pain of the artist. The artists are our sorcerers, they are our seducers. And their spinnings are necessary for they remind us every day—whether we recognize it or not—every day that we look at that painting, that abstract piece of sculpture or whatever it is, that they, and we, are free. In totalitarian societies, they lock up the artists first. Usually, by the way, the poets. Only the most secure nations dare to unleash their artists, those writers and dancers and painters and poets, and archivists, who will brazenly reveal our beauty, our ugliness, our past, and our today. And during my two decades in the Congress I was pleased to have been in a place where I could be a leading defender of the National Endowment for the Arts, that tiny agency which demonstrates American's belief in freedom of expression. NEA, I have often said, is America's proudly worn little badge of courage.

DM: Thank you very much.

PW: Thank you.

[End of Interview]