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Oral History Number: 378-017
Interviewee: Carol Snetsinger
Interviewer: Dawn Walsh
Date of Interview: July 28, 2002
Project: Montana Feminist History Oral History Collection

Dawn Walsh: Hello, this is Dawn Walsh with the Montana Feminist History Project. I'm here today interviewing Carol Snetsinger, of the Snetsinger vs. Montana lawsuit. We are at 4604 Juniper Street, Missoula, Montana, 59802, and the date is July 28, 2002.

Okay. Thanks, Carol, for being interviewed for the Montana Feminist History Project.

Carol Snetsinger: No problem.

DW: We're going to focus today pretty much on the Snetsinger vs. Montana case. So the first question I'd like to ask you—well, sorry about that, before we do that just if you could give us just a little personal background, when and where you were raised, where you raised, and when you came to Missoula?

CS: Ok. I was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1961, December 13th, and lived there for about five years. Then my family moved to St. Louis, Missouri, and that's where I was raised. Then I moved to Missoula in August of 1999.

DW: Ok. Now lets talk about Snetsinger vs. Montana, if you could tell us what that case is?

CS: It's a case against the University of Montana, and the Board of Regents, and the State of Montana, and it's pursuing access to benefits for same-sex partners. There's four plaintiffs, Carla Grayson, and her partner, Adrienne Nuff, and myself, and my partner, Nancy Siegel.

DW: Can you tell us a little bit of the history, or the history of how this case came to be filed?

CS: First, a group of people, Casey Charles and some other people in the Outfield Alliance at the University of Montana, were working on getting same-sex partner benefits through all the administrative ways that they could.

DW: First, I want just to say that the Outfield Alliance is a University of Montana group—Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, Bi-sexual, Staff, Faculty, Graduate Students. Ok.

CS: Yep. So, they started working on trying to do that in all the avenues that they could. Part of that was to go to the Faculty Senate, and the Faculty Senate approved their idea to do this. Then, they basically got samples of other same-sex partner benefits policies from other universities, and drafted a proposal. After it passed the Faculty Senate, it was brought forth towards the Inter-Unit Benefits Committee, which is a statewide committee with representatives from all the different universities across Montana. The representatives on there

are anything from carpenters to staff to faculty, so it's a real mixture. They look at benefits issues, and then make a recommendation to the Commissioner of Higher Education, at this time Richard Crofts.

So, they got that proposal, and looked through it very carefully, had it in committee for a while, and the Commissioner of Higher Education had their own consultation with a professional in Denver to look at the costs of bringing that. That was looked at favorably, that it wouldn't cost the University very much. So, on a nearly unanimous decision that benefits committee proposed to Commissioner Crofts that he approve this. I think it was like twenty votes to one, there was only one dissenting vote. Historically, almost always, their recommendations are taken by the Commissioner, but in this case he turned it down. He was getting a lot of pressure, political pressure, from the right wing, and from the Christian Right, and everything to not approve this, and so he did not approve that. Then the Outfield Alliance appealed that decision to the Board of Regents, themselves.

DW: And when was this? I'm not sure if we have mentioned dates yet.

CS: Yeah. That was two years ago that it was proposed to the Board of Regents, in the spring. I have the date somewhere, but not off the top of my head. So, the Board of Regents actually refused to hear the appeal. They just decided that they didn't even want to hear the appeal, and they oversee the Commissioner of Higher Education. That was basically the end of any avenue to pursue it, trying to same-sex partner benefits through any administrative avenues that there were. Then, the Outfield Alliance looked for people that would help them with this case. They approached some different organizations, and the ACLU Gay and Lesbian Project said that they would take the case on *pro bono*, and help us with that. It was at that point, and that was just a little over a year ago, and so it was from that point that they decided that we would pursue it in legal avenues.

DW: Ok. Thank you. So, how did you personally come to get involved in this case, and your name being the name on the case?

CS: Well, three years ago when I started—well, it's about three and a half years ago now—when, I started working at the University of Montana, I went to my new employee orientation. At that orientation, they showed me, explicitly pointed out to all of the nondiscrimination policy at the University of Montana. As they pointed it out, I started reading through it, and it said, "We do not discriminate against," and it included sexual orientation, and it said, "for benefits". I was just amazed and delighted, and I thought, well this is great. I can go and get these benefits for Nancy. So, I was just—I think it was about three days after I had started, and was filling out my paperwork for getting my own benefits, and trying to put Nancy as my spouse or partner, and I didn't really know how to do it. So, I went and met with the Head of the Benefits—which I can't remember her name right now.

DW: Rita?

CS: It wasn't Rita at that time. It starts with a C. I can't remember. Anyway, so I went and met with her—her name was Corrine, I think. I went and met with her, and said I'm confused about how to get benefits for Nancy. She said, well you can't do that. I said, well I'm confused, because you have this policy that says you can, and she said, "Well, no, no, no. You can't do it." I was pretty desperate to get my own benefits, so I just filled out the form for myself. Had read that if you have a grievance with this discrimination policy, that you needed to go within sixty days to the EEO officer—I don't know what that stands for.

DW: Equal Opportunity—

CS: Equal Employment Opportunities. So, I went on the sixtieth day from my February eighth start of employment, three years ago. Went into her office, and explained to her that I didn't understand why I couldn't get these benefits, and I felt I was being discriminated against, and would she help me. She told me that if I were of a different color, or of a different religion she could help me, but in this case she would not.

DW: And how did she respond to the language of sexual discrimination in the policy?

CS: Well, she started telling me all of the things that I did have. For example, that I could get a Griz Card for Nancy, and I said, "Well, that's great if she wants to workout, but what if she breaks her leg," you know. She tried to explain to me how great all of the things that we did have, basically, and basically said she couldn't do nothing about it, because it was about sexual orientation. I told her that I had had a conversation with a national organization—which I hadn't at that time, it had been a statewide organization, because I had talked to PRIDE about the whole issue, and what I should do about it—and, so I told her that I'd talked, and they thought it was a pretty big problem here to have this written policy, and yet not to be following it. She told me that it took a very long to get this on the policy, and it would really be a shame if someone did something to make us take it off.

DW: Oh, my goodness.

CS: Which at that point, I felt, well she's threatening with like other gay people being upset that their Griz Cards are going to be taken away—I'm not really sure, but it was just... So, I left on that note, and feeling pretty threatened by her, and pretty condemned by her, and that she was not going to help me at all. But the one thing she did tell me, she said, "You know, there's a group of people on this campus that are trying to deal with this issue." She gave me Casey's name, Casey Charles's name, and so that's when I got involved with the Outfield Alliance and their work on trying to do what they were doing. So, that was enough of a spark to get me pretty...pretty wound up about the whole issue.

From there, as soon as the ACLU had taken the case on, they interviewed, I think nine different couples as potential plaintiffs. They really narrowed it down to just a couple couples, because

they wanted to have people that had a legitimate claim to not being able to have the benefits, because Nancy does not get benefits through her work. They wanted to make sure that people had an actual legitimate claim, because some people said, “Well my partner doesn’t get benefits”, but the partner had better benefits than the University employee did, so that makes sense. So, after we interviewed, it was down to Carla and Adrienne, and Nancy and myself. Adrienne and Carla did not want to be the lead plaintiffs, so—and actually neither did we.

DW: Did you all toss a coin?

CS: So, we ended up being the lead plaintiffs. But, that’s how it happened.

DW: Ok. So, plaintiffs were selected, and I know it was what, February 3rd...

CS: 4th, yeah.

DW: February 4th, 2002, of this year, they did a big press release, and the case got filed.

CS: It was a press conference.

DW: Press conference, I mean. Sorry, excuse me. Right. I know you were there, and part of that, so could you tell us what that was like?

CS: Well, before that we were all pretty nervous, and little did we know that we were going to get a lot more experience. We thought this was going to be our big media splash, and we had all prepared statements. So, yeah, we were nervous about what to wear. We were nervous about—none of us had ever been in a press conference before, or anything like that, and so we practiced our speeches. Once that was over, there was a couple of hard questions that people asked me, and I just had to answer and realized, but the lawyers were there, and so they picked up on all the difficult questions about the legalese and what not. Then the stuff came out in the papers, well it came out in the news on Monday night, that night, and it came out in the papers the next morning. You know, above the fold, which is a term I’ve now become familiar with. That was like ok, well, that was it. Now we can go back to our little normal lives, and hide again.

DW: Ok. Before we go any further as to what happened since the filing, can you talk, do you want to share a little bit more just personally how you were processing or coming to terms with your role in the case, being the lead plaintiff, and how you thought about that, and how you thought about sort of the historical moment of what was happening? Do you know what I mean?

CS: Well, things had been drawn out, because we were going to file in early December. Then that got cancelled, and then we had a couple more months. We had really built ourselves up for this filing in December, and then when that was cancelled it was kind of like...augh. It was kind of a big let down, but I think in the end result we were much more prepared. We had more

time to think about everything. So, I was just kind of wound up about, you know, let's get this over with.

I really didn't think that much about it as a historical moment or anything until we were sitting in the press conference, and Carl Olsen, the Executive Director of PRIDE, in his little speech he was saying, "This case, Snetsinger vs. Montana, will go down in history," and I was like, "Whoah!" Then when things came out in news, and my name was in there it was like, "Wow. This is a, this is quite interesting." Especially because of, I guess because of my name being rather unusual, there's not a lot of anonymity in that. So, all the sudden I thought, well, kind of out there.

It didn't make me all that nervous, I was kind of proud of it, and excited about the case. I felt, to tell you the truth, I felt really, really lucky, because I though here is an opportunity, and not everybody gets this opportunity in their lives. Here is an opportunity to really stand up for something, and ask for something that I deserve. Here is my opportunity in the world to stand up for what I believe in, in a pretty big way, and put myself out there. So, I did. I felt really fortunate. There were so many people that put so much work into getting things as far as they had that I was just grateful for that. Because Casey and other people had just, you know Mona and all sorts of people had just worked really hard to get to that point.

DW: So it would be Mona Bachman and Casey Charles.

CS: Yeah, yeah.

DW: So, how did your family, and other friends, and larger friends respond to you doing this? Did you find a lot of support? Where people nervous for you, or mostly supportive of you?

CS: Really supportive. I don't think that they were that nervous, I'm not sure. My little sister was little bit nervous. I called them up and told them, and just said, because basically everybody, almost with the name Snetsinger, if you know them they are likely to be related to me. So, I called them up and said, "You know, this case is going to be called Snetsinger vs. The State of Montana, just so you know, because that's your name. Just to warn you that that's what's coming up." But I think that the people were proud, and just excited about it. It had been such a long time in coming. I mean we had been talking about it, and working on it for so long that it was like, ok, finally something's really happening.

DW: Great. So, now we want to talk about what has happened since the filing, because it's taken a direction that most of us didn't expect or anticipate.

CS: Yeah. Well, the next day, well actually things were in the news on Monday night, and Tuesday morning it was in the paper, and then we thought—we anticipated that there would be some nasty editorials. That's the one thing that I just assumed, that there would be some editorial that came out, and maybe one or two weird phone calls. We had met with Linda

Gryczan(?), who was the lead plaintiff on anti-sodomy case from several years ago, and she basically kind of gave us this little pep talk telling us that she'd had one nasty phone call, and this was six years ago when things were a lot more closeted, and a lot worse in Montana for gay and lesbian people. Since she had, and all the people in that case had such little problems, we just figured that not that much is going to happen.

So, Wednesday, the 6th of February, I got a call from Scott Creighton from the ACLU, and from Adrienne Neff, who was at home, and she had just receive an Anthrax letter that said, "die dykes" on it, and contained a white powder. She had opened it, and the fire department was up there, and she called me up and said don't open your mail. Once I got that message, I just left work immediately and checked, and in our mailbox was the same letter she had described. So, put on rubber gloves, and went out there and bagged that up, and called the police. But that was sort of our first indication, that—oh, my god, somebody is so filled with hate, that they are really trying to intimidate us. We though, wow, this a little worse than we imagined.

On Thursday night, the four of us were together, Carla and Adrienne, and Nancy and myself were together in their house trying to figure out how public we wanted to be about the death threat that we had received in the mail. Did we want that in the news, or did we want to just keep that private. So we were talking about that, and we kind of laughed, because Adrienne and Carla, and Nancy all wanted to keep it pretty low key, so they had volunteered that I would be the spokesperson for the four of us. I said, "Well, you know, we can handle this like really quietly, but also do we want to make this public, and know how much hate is out there, and do we like maybe even hold a rally?" The just kind of laughed at me like, "No. No way. No rally."

So, then we went home that night, and by about four-thirty the next morning we got a call from Adrienne that said, they were out of their house and that somebody had set it on fire, and we had to get up and make sure that we were ok, and that our house was ok. By that time we were just in complete shock. I mean, from just the night before, talking about this letter, like things can't get worse, and then all of the sudden someone has arsoned their home, and threatened their lives. So, things shifted in big way about realizing how much hate was in the world, and how much hate and anger was targeted at us, just for us simply standing up and asking for a pretty basic thing, in a very legal way. In a way that you're supposed to go and ask for it, the way that our country is set up to go and be able to ask for those things. But, so how much more do you want with that?

DW: Well, if you don't mind sharing how that was for you personally, because I know that it was Adrienne and Carla's house that was set on fire, and it wasn't your and Nancy's house, and in those types of situations one can't help but ask why them, not us. So, how did you process through with that, and were you afraid at that time that it would happen to you? If you want to just talk more about those first few days after the fire?

CS: Yeah. Well, we were terrified. We went from not even locking our home, we didn't even know where the keys were, and we started locking our house. We just had this thought before

we went off to the file on Monday, well, maybe would start locking the house. So, that's sort of how naive we were, that like what was going to happen with all of this. So, we found some keys, and we started locking our keys on Monday. By Friday night, after the arson, we had a security guard outside the house twenty-four hours a day. Actually, it just started for twenty-four hours, and then went to just the evenings, at night we had a security guard. But, yeah, we were terrified. In the morning, I mean we waited by the windows all morning long, from four-thirty on, thinking that somebody was coming after us. We saw a car drive by, it turned out to be the newspaper delivery. We just totally freaked out, and were like thinking that, because they were kind of casing our house, and just thought, this is them. They're after us. So, yeah, we were definitely terrified.

We kept thinking about all the different ways that somebody could get us. I mean part of it, we kept thinking, well, at least—I mean, what's happened to those guys is horrible, but at least they know it's over. They've had their house burned down. Is a person out there thinking only half the job is done? So, we kind of started second-guessing all the time, are they going to blow up our car? Are they going to kill our pets? It's just, you know, it makes you ill trying to second-guess how a very sick person is thinking. I liken it to right after 9-11, what happened to our nation, is everybody's trying to think about what terrorists could do next, and thinking all these really sick things. It's terrible to have to sit there and think about all those types of things. So, yeah, we were really terrified.

Also, it was really interesting, because our instant reaction is we're not going to back down now. We're not going to shut up and go into hiding. Part of what would happen is that Adrienne and Carla did have to kind of back off, for their own security and for legal issues, and the investigation and everything, they basically had to step back from being in any kind of media. So, I was kind of propelled forward into that whole role. I mean, I spent, after the arson happened at dawn on Friday morning, I spent the entire Friday morning talking to media people, or the entire day basically, talking to radio, and TV, and newspapers. So, I was just kind of propelled into this place of being a spokesperson, which in some ways has been this great gift to me, because I've realized that what I have to say matters. That people have to speak up, and the more we speak up, the more people are going to listen. In some ways it was terrifying, but it was also a gift to be able to be in that position.

As far as second-guessing why something happens to some people or not to others. I mean, we definitely batted that around, and our big reasoning is was that we have a dog. He barks when people pass by outside. I mean if you've cased both houses, they're both about the same distance from the neighbors. They live in a very similar neighborhood to ours. We do have a dog, and also we live up in the Rattlesnake, and there is only one direction for a car to get out of here. So, I don't know if that had anything to do with it. So, that's kind of what our reasoning was. But we didn't know, and we still don't know. I mean, there's somebody still out there. We have this fancy security system now, and pretty vigilant about keeping things closed up, and secured, and locked.

DW: Have those feelings subsided at all, since then?

CS: Yeah, they have a lot. In fact the—yeah, they have a lot—but they're really quick to come back up again. Especially, there was a—I can't remember, it was right before PRIDE and the fire walk that they were doing for PRIDE from here through Helena to Bozeman as a way to raise awareness. I spoke at a rally for that fire walk and I said, and they quoted a bunch of me in the paper, and they said, I said, "Homosexual love is a beautiful thing." That was in the Sunday paper, and we both kind of like reacted to that of, oh my god is something going to happen again. So, that fear can crop up again really fast. Like when Nancy left town, it was the first time I'd been in the house alone since the arson, it was a couple months later, and I was scared. I was here by myself, and just didn't know what was going to happen—so, yeah, definitely. I used to be a pretty, I don't know, I sort of walked through the world not worried about things. There's a lot of women that do, are really conscious about walking in the dark, and being on campus by themselves, and I've never really paid attention much to that things. But, boy, I sure do now.

DW: Ok. Well, bringing up the Fire Walk, as that was part of this year's PRIDE celebrations, makes me want to ask the next question, which was community response to the arson, both the LGBT community and the strait community. So, I do know that on Saturday there was a rally downtown at the Methodist Church, and if you could tell us what that was, and how that affected you, personally? How you experienced that rally?

CS: Well, the first we heard about it, I think it was Saturday morning there was going to be a meeting to help organize it, and figure out what we were going to do. So, we went to that meeting at Mona Bachman and Ruth Vanita's house, and realized the support was there was people who were motivated to do something. I mean, there were probably fifty of sixty people there, and so already we could tell how much people had mobilized. We just had to laugh, because when I had said this thing about, well maybe we'll have a rally, everybody's like, "No," and just laughed it off, and all the sudden we sat there, and realized a rally was going to happen whether we liked it or not, and it had nothing to do with what we thought about it. So, that was kind of interesting. But, you know, we were just in complete shock, and I think a lot of the community was at that point. I just remember that day as just kind of rolling along, trying to not—just being in shock. Also, we had had virtually no sleep from the night before.

So, we kind of just made sure we got to the rally in time to park, and have a space to park. We showed up, and I was absolutely overwhelmed at the number of people that were already there. I started walking in somebody said, "we have a space for you up front." All the sudden I was hit with media people saying, "Can you comment on this, can you comment on that?" I just was in shock, and was overcome by the number of people, so it was just really overwhelming. Then we sat at the front of that, and just realized the whole back was filling up. I mean I'd never seen that place so packed.

Then realized that we were going to say something. We were expected to say something, or go up front. So, Nancy and I are just looking at each other, and trying to scramble down a few words of, like, "I don't know what to say a situation like this," or anything like that. It was also the first time we'd seen, no we'd actually seen Adrienne, but it was the first time we'd seen Carla since the arson, and so it was really good to see them, and just kind of hold—we kind of just all held on to each other, like ok, we're all here and we're ok.

But going up in the front of that group, right at the beginning of the rally we were asked to go up in front, and it was just mind-boggling. People were standing up and cheering. I just got totally choked up, and could hardly take it all in. It was very empowering, and it helped a ton. We got tons of cards from people that we didn't even know, and calls from people. I mean we got a call from somebody in Washington, D.C. that just had heard about it, and wanted to offer our support, and thank us for standing up and doing this. So, it was absolutely overwhelming, and it really helped a lot. I mean it really helped our fear level. And the ways that people volunteered to, you know we were afraid to leave our house during the rally, and somebody volunteered to stay there, and somebody volunteered to help our with our pets.

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

CS: It was incredible, and it made a huge difference. It made me really feel like—at first I was thinking how could this happen in Missoula, you know how could this possibly happen in Missoula—and then seeing the community response, it's like ok, this is what Missoula's really about. I'd never seen anything mobilize that fast, I mean unbelievable.

DW: Because the arson happened Friday morning, and the rally was Saturday at noon.

CS: Afternoon. I think it at four of five o'clock.

DW: Or later. Oh, that's right, later in the day. On a Saturday at the Methodist Church, downtown Missoula, and how many people do there, about?

CS: Well, the news said seven hundred to a thousand, so it was a lot. You know, after that what got mobilized with what would eventually be called, Ken called the Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered Equality, was—I mean there were people from all sorts of different organizations that were there to say, ok, in the bigger picture of things what are we going to do. That support was just really wonderful to see. To see all sorts of straight people there, and all sorts of lesbians there that I think had been pretty closeted, or pretty stepped back in their life saying now is the time for me to do something. That was really empowering to see.

So, yeah, it was an incredible thing to be a part of. I think that energy really gave Carla and Adrienne, and Nancy and myself the energy to go forth from that, and sort of really build on that, for sure. Then Nancy and I kept, we spoke at—I'm trying to think of how many different rallies—we went to, well I went to Bozeman, and then we went to a rally in Butte, then we went to a rally in Kalispell, and there was another in Hamilton that we didn't go to. So, we kept speaking at different places around the state within the next two months, and every time I went to one of those it was just, boy, just filled us with power, and the ability to keep going on. People were just really supportive, and trying to think of what they could do in their own communities, and what could they do for Adrienne and Carla. So, yeah, it was really something to see that kind of community support come forward.

DW: And these were all rallies, where all of the rallies organized by PRIDE?

CS: They were all organized by the Human Rights Network, and PRIDE was a big part of them as well, but they were organized by the Human Rights Network. The one in Bozeman was actually organized by the, I can't remember what they call their queer student group, that was organized by them.

DW: So, I'd also like to share what this Fire Walk was in June as a part of PRIDE, and how this year's Montana PRIDE responded to the case and the arson?

CS: Well, the Fire Walk was an effort to make people across the state aware of what had happened with the arson, and the continued way that gays and lesbians in the state do not have equal rights. So, it started from Missoula, and it was a combination of people walking or riding bikes up through Clinton and over to Garrison, and then up to Helena. Then they had some sort of a declaration that they wanted to present to Judy Martz, the Governor. I'm not sure where they actually presented to, I don't think it got presented to her in person, but they brought it somewhere. Then, continued with bike riders that went all the way Bozeman where PRIDE was being on June 7th, of this year.

So, it was a real rally of people from a cross the state that sort of put all that together, and then culminating in the PRIDE celebration. At the PRIDE celebration they definitely did talk a lot about issues happening in Montana for Gays and Lesbians, Bisexual, Transgendered people, and they—we gave a workshop on everything that had happened in Missoula since the arson, so that was part of one of the workshops. Then, to our total surprise they presented Nancy and I with an Activist of the Year Award from PRIDE. So, that was really great. It was just sort of totally an unexpected thing to happen. Adrienne got to stand up and speak a little bit, and got overwhelming support there for her to. So, yeah, it was definitely a part of the whole celebration there.

DW: And did you walk or ride as part of the Fire Walk?

CS: I just walked right at the beginning of the week. I was a part of the rally, and then we were getting ready to leave town, so I just walked a quarter of a mile.

DW: Yeah. Well, it's a fabulous idea.

CS: Yeah, it was a really, it was a novel way to sort of make it public.

DW: So, can you tell—we've been talking pretty local here, which is good because this is the Montana Feminist History Project, and a subset of that is talking about some lesbian history—but, I'd like to talk just for a little bit more nationally. How you've gotten involved, or not, on a national level because of this situation?

CS: Well, nationally I think, basically we've gotten in touch with all sorts of people that it never would have thought of being in touch with before that are activist all over the nation. Part of that was when Kim Gandy from the National Organization for Women, she's the Executive Director that came here, and we met with her and talked about gay and lesbian rights nationwide, and what was happening here and why this was important. She really pointed out that violence against gay people happens all over the nation, but what she thought was really different about this was the community response, and the way the community was reacting to that. To keep putting that forward that here in this small town in Missoula, Montana, that we can be a model to other people in the nation about how we're not going to stand up and

tolerate this. So, that really brought a big national perspective in for us about how this was a special case, and what's happened here was really important nationwide.

We also talked to the Western Regional Director of the Human Rights Campaign. We talked to him about how this case sort of comes into play, and how people are really paying attention to it. So, in those ways of just meeting some of those sort of more national players we've put in our two cents worth, and been able to hear their perspective on what's happening out here. We've done some national press releases from here about what's happening in Missoula. For the queer press, we've been in contact with a lot of them, and they've called from like the Washington Blaze and I can't remember what the one in San Francisco is called. So, some of the press, we've been involved with that.

It just, for me personally it's made me realize that that all seems so big and out there and unpersonal, and I never really thought that I could be involved in activism in that kind of level. But I realized now, very much so, it's just ordinary people in their daily lives doing things, and standing up for what they want in their lives, and what they should have the right for that really is making a national movement. When Holly Near and Chris Williamson came here, I get to go have lunch with Holly Near. That was such a, just to hear her perspective on what was happening here, and about how to keep your spirit up and to keep motivated, it was—to talk with people like that who have done so much over a thirty year span is just really motivating.

You know, I really do believe that this case, I mean not just because of the arson—because the arson it's gotten a lot more attention than it would have—but that this case has the potential to make a significant impact, not only in the state, but in other places. I think particularly, because they look at a rural place like Montana, and think, well now if that place can acknowledge that we need to give gays and lesbians, because of the Montana State Constitution that gives people individual dignity and rights for everyone, if it can happen in Montana it should be able to happen just about anywhere.

DW: Ok, so the next question, Carol, is just where to go from here, and wanting to ask you how you're feeling personally about this whole case? I want to point out how striking it was for me to hear you use words like lucky and opportunity and fortunate. That's a very, very positive stance to take in light of a lot of tragedy and horror and fear, so if you want to just elaborate some more on where you are now with the case and being the lead plaintiff given all that's happened?

CS: Well, it's interesting because all of the activity and the intensity and everything that surrounded the arson is definitely subsiding, and yet the case itself is just getting started. So, I think it's going to take a lot of patience and a lot of riding waves of different levels of activity, because the lawsuit itself is just getting started. It takes an incredible amount of time for the lawsuit to continue, and before I get results. I mean it will be at least a year. So, I think for me it's just holding my stamina for being involved in that.

Part of the problem with that is the Coalition for LGBT Equality, which basically came as a result of the arson, has done an incredible amount and we're really looking toward the future about not just about this case, but how can we work for equality with in our own community. The amount of people when it started off, the first meetings there was fifty-sixty people, and we couldn't find a place to meet that was big enough, and now six people show up, or five. Six of us are doing, continue to do all the work, and at times we get really worn out. The amount of my free time that I spend doing that now is just incredible. So, I think part of it is just pacing myself, and keeping up my stamina, enjoying myself.

A lot of that work has been crisis oriented, and really thinking about how much farther we have to go. About a month ago Nancy and I held a potluck just so we could have fun together, because we realized that we need to celebrate all of the little steps that we come through. I think that's part of what our work is, is just to make sure that we celebrate where we're going and celebrate the process, because if we're going to now celebrate until the end, it's going to be a long time before we have any fun. So, I think part of that is just gauging my stamina.

The other part is that I had this experience when Jim McGrath, who is a City Councilperson, was asking for help within the City Council to get same-sex partner benefits for the city employees. This was a whole spin-off of what happened since the arson, and since our case was filed. Those types of things, it just fills me with power to realize that this has a ripple effect, like Helena is looking at city employees, and other places are looking at benefits for their city employees or county employees for gay and lesbian people. So, when Jim asked for help and he wanted people to go to the City Council Meeting, I just assumed a whole bunch of people would go. I was really tired that night, and it was going to be 7:30 on a Monday night, and just decide okay, well I'll just go and see who's there, and sit for a couple of minutes, and maybe I'll say something, and tried to think of a couple things to say. I showed up to the meeting, and I was the only gay person there. I looked around, and I realized that I was the only person there that was going to speak on that issue, assuming that there was going to be at least ten people there.

So, I stood up in front of the City Council in the public period, began to speak, and looked at them all and told them that I wanted them to approach this issue, and I wanted them to take it up. Within the next week they had decided to meet on it, and he had been having—the committee had been stalling about meeting on it for a long time. It wasn't everything that I did, just my work that made that happen, but I realized that I had big impact on that happening. I realized that I was just one person, and I showed up on Monday night by myself, and I said something, and it mattered. It was really powerful.

So, the question about where do we go from here, it's like—wow, I matter. That's the big thing that I've been trying to get across to other people too is like, our voices matter, just one at a time we matter. So, I think however things turn out, that is the big thing that I've taken away from it, is like—ok, I've got to speak up, and I've got to say what my opinion is, and say what I think I deserve, and speak up for whoever is disenfranchised. So, I think that's one of the big things about where do we go from here.

DW: Thank you. So, is there anything that you would like to talk about or share or say—that I haven't specifically asked you about—that you think is important to get on tape?

CS: I think the biggest thing is that, to realize that when you go through something like this, and you've seen that amount of hatred happen, you realize that—well, it impacts you for a long time. I mean it's changed me for sure to realize that that kind of hate is out there, and it's made me realize that I'm going to have to spend the rest of my life working to educate people that I deserve everything that other people deserve. So, I think just witnessing that kind of hate and being that close to it, I mean I think people think, well you'll get over it and you'll go on with your life. I know for Adrienne and Carla it is going to take them years to process through having their lives threatened. I think for Nancy and I it will take, I mean I will always now be more fearful. So, hate crimes really do impact people and impact communities for a very long, long time.

DW: With the remaining time that we have here, I'd like to talk more generally about being lesbian, being a lesbian activist in Missoula, Montana and what that's been like for you. Did you have, was there a time you lived in Missoula when you weren't out versus a time when you came out, and how has it been being a lesbian in Western Montana and Missoula in 2002?

CS: Well, I've pretty much been out since I've been here. I mean, you know that being out is something you have to gauge sort of day by day, because sometimes you are more out than other times. You're always deciding where are you out and where are you not. But I've been pretty much identified as a lesbian, and I'm probably more out, obviously, than ever before.

When I first moved here, for almost six years I lived up in Potomac, so that's about thirty miles east of here, a pretty rural area. There was other lesbians and gay men that lived out in that area, and what I really found out is that that whole idea of Montana sort of judging you by neighborliness and just letting people stick to themselves as long as they're good neighbors that pretty much holds true. That people don't, I mean they might judge you a little more behind your back, but they're not really going to treat you any differently. I've never really felt persecuted here.

I mean, I've felt that it's always been a pretty safe place to live, and safe place to be, other than that the laws don't have provide equal access to a lot of things. Every once in while through the years there's been editorials that come up, and anti-gay rhetoric about something, and they hit me pretty hard. Just reading about that that's really what people think in Missoula, it kind of hits me. But for the most part, I've just gone about living my life. I guess the big thing that happened was when Nancy and I decided to have a commitment ceremony. It was going to be out of town by about an hour and a half up in Ovando, Montana, and we created quite a ruckus up there.

DW: And when was that?

CS: 1998. We ended up, we were going to have our ceremony at the Whitetail Ranch Bed and Breakfast, or Whitetail Ranch, it's a guest ranch, and the community got wind of this. A Baptist preacher gave a sermon about us, and ended up asking his congregation to call and write the Whitetail Ranch to tell them that they really shouldn't allow us to do this. So, they started getting some hate calls and hate mail.

In the end result, they ended up having an entire town meeting about us, and about our ceremony. It really made that community pull together, and talk about something. The gist of it was that there were a lot of people that had a lot of anti-gay bias up there, and they really didn't want this to happen. It was mostly within sort of a small group of religious people, the Baptist group. There were a lot of old-timers from the valley that had lived there their whole lives, and thought it was nobody's business but those two women—us—and the ranch about what we were going to do up there.

I kind of came away from that with the whole idea, once again of like people really care more about just letting people be their own selves when they're not messing with other people. But it was another situation, we didn't know if there were going to be like picketers out in front of our wedding, or—we didn't know. So, every once in awhile we seem to get ourselves into these situations where we're just kind of living our lives, and asking for something sort of basic like we want to have a ceremony, or I just want to ask for benefits for my partner that says you give them right here on this piece of paper. So, it's been...

DW: Then big things happen.

CS: So, it's been an interesting journey that way for sure. But, I think it's a great place to live as being a lesbian.

DW: So do you want to talk about the lesbian community in Missoula as you have experienced it in your time here?

CS: Sure. When I first moved here, I couldn't find it. I was desperate, and I went to a Take Back the Night March. I had moved here in like August, and went to Take Back the Night in it must have been in October or something. Well first I went to a Lambda Meeting on campus, which is the gay and lesbian student group. There were nineteen young men and me, and I'd just turned thirty. So, I thought well maybe this is really not where I'm going to find my community, but it's great that all those young men are involved. So, then I went to the Take Back the Night March, and I was like spotting them in the group. I said here's the lesbian community, they're out for this thing.

DW: And what year was this again.

CS: 1991. Then they all, the thing was ending, and they were all like going back into the woodwork, and I didn't have any names or addresses or anything. I was like, "no don't go away. How am I going to find you again?" At that point Kelly Sax was just starting to open the Catalyst, so I'd go used to hang out at the Catalyst. That was sort of like the place that people would go and hang out and try to find... But there wasn't you know there wasn't a really, there were people here that had been here for a long time, but it was really a hard place to tap into.

Now, people come here and they look in the phone book, and they find the Western Montana Gay and Lesbian Community Center, and I think that is an incredibly powerful thing. They look in the paper, and it says the Coalition for LGBT Equality is meeting on such and such a day. We've had people show up at that meeting that are new to town and want to get involved, and it's like ok, there it is in the paper, and I can find it. You can go to places and ask is there any lesbian or gay things happening here, and there's a whole array of things that you can find. So, that has been a huge, huge difference that I've seen in the eleven years that I've been here. Huge. That when you move here you can find people, and tap into what's going on.

DW: Excellent. So, the last question I want to ask is given the nature of this project, we're recording your story and it's going to be archived at the University of Montana Library with the idea that people in the future are going to listen to it and do research, imagine somebody, a young lesbian woman listening to this tape fifty years from now or one hundred years from now, what message do you want to convey in terms of being a lesbian in Montana in 2002?

CS: That I just hope and pray that people keep working on all these issues, so that fifty, a hundred years from now that being gay or lesbian isn't even anything you define. It's just that everybody has the same rights, and people can just choose to love who they love, and it's not even a question about who's gay or who's lesbian, or just any of that. I just, you know we have a long ways to go yet, and it seems like it's coming in such little tiny bitty steps that we have to work so hard and so many people have to put in so much effort just to try to get equal treatment from the police, equal treatment from the law, and now we can't even feel safe in our own homes.

I think back to civil rights for African Americans, and I just—I mean that was almost fifty years ago, Jim Crow time when people were worried about lynching and being run out of their homes, and yet I see the lack of equality today, still, for people of color in Montana especially. I just hope that there are openings, and that people keep becoming aware of how different groups of people are disenfranchised. I think transgendered people are another generation behind gay and lesbian people, and so I just hope that gay and lesbians can keep working on issues for all sorts of people. So, that's what I'd like to see.

DW: Thank you.

[End of Interview]