

Maureen and Mike

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**Oral History Number: 378-007**

**Interviewee: Kate Kahan**

**Interviewer: Mary Burwell**

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**Project: Montana Feminist History Oral History Collection**

Mary Burwell: ...Mary Burwell interviewing Kate Kahan. It is April the 18, 2002. We're at the Women's Studies office on a beautiful spring day. And Kate will be talking about W.E.E.L., and also the Women's Center at UM. Kate Kahan is spelled K-A-T-E K-A-H-A-N, Kate Kahan. So, thanks for agreeing to be with me today. The first question I have for you is describe your initial involvement with feminism, or activism, or both in general in Montana. Or, actually, I should amend that – in Missoula, Montana.

Kate Kahan: Okay. I'm actually gonna start with a little bit of a personal story, because from my experience, it really determined my involvement in feminist activism in Missoula. When I was 18 years old and getting ready to graduate from high school, I found myself pregnant, and chose to proceed with the pregnancy and found a midwife, because I had been born at home, and, as had everyone else that I knew. And at the age of eighteen I had a pretty low self-esteem, and was – well, really, had always struggled with body image issues. Finding a midwife and determining my own setting and reality, and having many choices for how I was going to, where and how I was going to give birth was a very empowering experience for me. Giving birth on my own terms ended up being one of the most profound experiences of my life. I really see that experience as a concrete taking back of my body from the culture that I had been submersed in and very confused by, about because I'm...my...the issues I have with my body because I realized in the moment of giving birth that I was completely and totally powerful. That was one of the most transforming experiences of my life. From there, it just all kind of happened.

I started college when my son Elliot was four months old. I just took one class at a time. About a year in, I took my first Women's Studies class, and my life was forever changed. In that class, I became incredibly motivated. I also had, like, my first crush on a woman, and all these different experiences in this one, you know, six month period, or three month period of time while I was taking this class. The Women's Studies class was like a, the Philosophical Perspectives on Women.

I was so motivated that I started to get involved in the Women's Center. At that point, it was much smaller than it is now. It was in one of its other stages of life. It was like a little closet, and there were no windows, and very few volunteers, and I started to volunteer my time, and doing a lot of referrals for women who called and – a lot of them in a crisis. It was a big part of what I ended up doing as a volunteer.

I'll never forget the day that I realized that I myself was in an abusive relationship, and tried to start to figure out how to get out of that situation. It all came to a head, and I – I thankfully

knew enough to know that if I didn't get out, I wasn't gonna make it, and was able to leave. I will never ever forget the day that I called the crisis line for domestic violence, and said to someone on the phone, 'I refer people to you everyday. I can not believe I am calling here.' And she said to me, 'Kate, I've called here before.' In that moment, knew that I wasn't alone, and that it was even more important for me to be involved, and that it was worth it. That was a really, really important turning point in my life.

I don't know if it was a year later or something after volunteering at the Women's Center for awhile, I became the outreach coordinator. I grew up in a community environment, so people were really like, working it out, and cohabitating, and trying to figure out how to make something big keep going, and that's kind of a pain. But, I came from that sort of reality and understanding, background, and so I came to the Women's Center and recognized right away that it was pretty isolated from really anything else that was happening.

I should also add that when I left that violent home I got onto welfare. When I was pregnant, I actually tried to get on welfare, and was denied assistance because I had seven dollars too much in my account – in my bank account, which is amazing. After I left the violent home and was authentically a single parent, according to the state, I was able to get on welfare. That's one of the ways that I was able to get through college. I was a work-study student at the Women's Center, so that's my situation. I was the only person who was a parent that was involved in the Women's Center, and I was the only person who was poor, that was involved in the Women's Center.

So, I noticed that the Women's Center was very isolated from other groups and doing really important work, and, and that there weren't – there wasn't very much diversity. As a staff member, I remember the interview that we had for the Women's Center and they said, 'What do you think is the biggest barrier facing women today? Or college women today?' And I was like, 'Well, I think it's really about this lack of opportunity. You know, women don't have very many opportunities, and particularly poor women don't have very many opportunities...' And brought this whole sort of political element that wasn't there before into the consciousness of the people that were in the Women's Center. Then as a staff member, I just became absolutely bent on making sure that the Women's Center wasn't isolated anymore. And started to do a lot of outreach and sort of – leadership development within the organization about how to be consistent, and sort of have an ongoing set of activities, and people to answer the phone, and that kind of stuff, because then we would be able to have stronger, more clear presence in the community. And not just campus, because I felt like it – part of the reason we were so isolated is because we were on campus, that we were just so focused on our immediate surroundings, and that we really needed to reach out to the rest of the community too. There are a lot of really strong leaders that participated in the Women's Center in my three years as outreach coordinator there, and helped build the Women's Center up to the place that it is now, which I see Women's Center as a major player in all of the happenings that surround women and activism and feminism in not only just Missoula, but in the state of Montana. I think that's very

profound change from where it was when I came six years ago, or seven years ago the first time I set foot into the Women's Center.

MB: So, when did you first become a volunteer then? What year was that?

KK: Oh my gosh. '95 it must have been, and then in '96 I must have been hired, and then '99 I graduated.

MB: Okay. So you were on staff for three years, in the same position, outreach coordinator?

KK: Uh huh. It wasn't – in my time at the Women's Center we saw – I don't know if this is a question for – we saw...I came in right when there was the - it was the height of controversy about men's involvement in Take Back the Night. Some really significant things happened in – when I was at the Women's Center – surrounding Take Back the Night, that I think are worth mentioning. There was the whole men's involvement issue, and that was always controversial. So the first year we just sort of did it as is, and it was a women only event, and then tried to make space for men to be there. So instead of marching with us, they had their own event on this – you know, at the Court House. And we all marched and joined in. There was all this controversy, and it was taking away from the issue of violence against women. It was a very frustrating situation to be in, and try to figure out how to bring it back to the issue of violence against women, and not have, once again – the, the presence of men overshadowed the issue surrounding women that we were trying to address.

One of the things we did was an experimental thing where SARS, which was then called the Sexual Assault Recovery Service, had what they called safe-tents at the event. It was a tent that was on the grounds of the event, that was set up for anyone having a hard time during the event, because there was a speak-out component of Take Back the night that often got really intense. Just, people – a lot of people were crying, you know, end up crying, because it was a...really just touched people because it was people sharing their stories and just absolute (?) and sort of free-form. It was powerful. So the safe tents were set up for people if they were having a hard time and needed another space to go. What we learned from having safe tents was that two women were hospitalized from re-traumatization, from the experience of the speak-out. We learned that we needed to really reevaluate the structure and the event, and figure out how to make the event more safe, but still have it really strongly focused on a space for women to feel safe in the dark, and with each other, and a space to address violence against women in a pro-active manner. That was just a really big challenge for me. I was devastated to hear that there were women that were being – that were that profoundly impacted from hearing other stories, or from sharing their own story.

We had, of course, me being a collaborator, the ultimate collaborator, pulled together a committee of community organizations to really look at what we needed to do. First actually, one of the therapists from SARS, a woman named Kathy Joy, said, 'You know, there's a lot of disagreement in the sexual assault community about whether or not it's really helpful for

people to stretch themselves and share their story, or overhear other people's stories anymore. You know, this sort of notion of a speak-out, you know, getting up publicly, on the capital steps, and sharing something really hard, is a little bit outdated. And what we're seeing is that people really need to be supported in their retelling of stories, and maybe it's not the right thing for them to sort of bring it back up.' And so, that caused all of us around the table to stop and think, 'Okay, what are we gonna do?' I went around and around about it, feeling – taking on a lot of responsibility as the outreach coordinator, and the coordinator of the event that you're having and my first time. It really impacted me, and I thought, 'You know what? There is no way that we can move forward and do this event without asking the community what they want. And so I proposed a survey project to the community group and said, 'Let's bring this forward. And let's ask about issues of – not only the speak-out, but men's involvement. You know, what people think of this event? What they want to see out of the event, and so I didn't realize how much work that would be, right?' It ended up being really a lot of work, but really worth it.

What we learned was that the majority of people did feel like men should be involved in and talking about violence against and being a part – full participants in Take Back the Night. There was some disagreement in the area of the speak-out particularly, but the rally and the march people were unanimously in favor of having them involved. The other thing was that people said they really did like the speak-out. They thought it was helpful. So, as the coordinator next – the following year – again for the Women's Center and the event, I asked a lot of people for help in figuring out how to envision having a different setting or format for the speak-out, so that it felt a little bit more safe. What we came up with was that sitting in a circle, and people just sitting down rather than stepping up to a podium, or, you know, and having the microphone would be a totally – it would just completely change the dynamic of the event, or that particular part of the event. Then the other piece was having options for people, if they didn't want to attend the speak-out, to be able to go and do something else. That's where we set up across the street at a local bagel shop having musicians or other artists there for an option for people. Not only that, when I was there, I thought, 'Okay, how can we...? Really I strongly addressed issues of violence against women, but also talk about that there's this whole range of experiences that women have when they're in grieving, and addressing the violence, and that there are all those different stages of it. One thing that might be helpful to ask people to share their story, and then if they felt like it, share something also that helped them heal. We did that, and we had the event – the speak-out in that format, and it was totally different. It changed the way that the whole thing felt. The safe tents were hardly used at all, and nobody was hospitalized and re-traumatized, and people seemed to do okay. From there I think Take Back has grown, you know, in the past – in the year since then, but it has adopted some of that other format of really shifting our focus on the speak-out portion particularly.

MB: And when was Take Back? What did you...? Did the Women's Center have that in the fall or the spring, because I know it switched around?

KK: Oh my God, I totally left that part out. That right when I came to the Women's Center, as a volunteer, Women's Place, which was the battered women's shelter here, closed its doors. And

they used to do Take Back, and they were a community organization, and they said – they farmed it out to us, the Women’s Center, because we were the most likely place for it to go. We were, like I said, small and in that little closet, and it was definitely not the resource that (?). It was a real little – really all the money and so what we did was, it was done in the fall, and we changed it to the spring to give ourselves more time. I volunteered that year, and then coordinated the event from the years on, so from our second year until ’99 I coordinated the event.

MB: That’s a lot of responsibility. That’s a lot of work.

KK: Yeah, yeah. It was amazing though. We learned a lot. And we also built our presence in the community beyond where it was before.

MB: Beyond the university?

KK: Uh huh.

MB: Which is nice.

KK: Yeah.

MB: Out of the classroom, into the streets.

KK: Right. Literally.

MB: Who were your other staff members the first and the second and the third years that you were on staff? Do you remember that?

KK: Yes. The first year it was Amie Thurber, as the volunteer coordinator, and then Jen Hisatomi, who was – then it was called the library coordinator. And then the second year it was – oh boy – it was Erin Kautz was the volunteer coordinator.

MB: Is she at Planned Parenthood?

KK: Yes.

MB: Okay.

KK: And Kristi Scheel was the office coordinator – it changed to being office coordinator. Kristi is now working for the Special Olympics.

MB: And the third year?

KK: It was Jordan Dobrovolny.

MB: Uh huh.

KK: And Felicia Fowler. And Felicia is doing AmeriCorps. And Jordan's...

MB: Jordan's out in the wilderness.

KK: Yeah. At- Risk-Youth Wilderness Prevention something?

MB: Right, right. And do you have...? Did you ever meet any of the other - the previous staff members before you came on? I mean, maybe I should ask you, the first year that you volunteered, who were the staff people?

KK: Mona Bachmann was the library coordinator. And I am not gonna remember the volunteer coordinator's name right now. I just saw her recently. Something Brown...oh.

MB: That's alright.

KK: Okay. And then Stephanie Grouse was the outreach coordinator.

MB: So, actually there were four staff members the first year that you ...?

KK: No, there were three: Mona, what's her name Brown, ...

MB: And Stephanie?

KK: Grouse. Correct. And then I ... That was when I first came, and then ... That was like, for the tail end of one of the semesters. And then for the next full year I was a volunteer. And it was Amie, and Jen and Stef - Stephanie Grouse - that were staff.

MB: Okay.

KK: And then it was Amie and Jen and I.

MB: Excellent.

KK: Uh huh.

MB: So, the Women's Center ...Was Take Back pretty much the - the big event of the year, every year?

KK: You know, it was one of our largest, but when I was there, we also started young women's day of action, and body awareness month started. And we started to have a more full range of ongoing activities. Love Without Fear was a big one. And Women's History Month was also really big. And when I was there, ironically enough, we started addressing Mother's Day. Because I was the only mom there. So, yeah.

MB: That's no surprise though.

KK: Right.

MB: I was gonna ask you are there any other activities that the Women's Center did? Did they get together for potlucks, like outside of the Women's Center? Were there any other, like, friendships formed, say outside the Women's Center, but with other women's groups or with other student groups?

KK: Yeah. I think ...Well, first of all, the relationship building with other student groups I think – the Women's Center was really quite deliberate about doing outreach to other groups and within they also said, 'You know, we're all into resource, but we should at least all be in it together. And let's all work together.' That's, I think, where the Women's Center started its real strong collaboration and those relationships seem real strong today. As far as the social interactions of the Women's Center, you know I think they were core. They were really core to the experience of being a part of the Women's Center, whether you were staff, or you were volunteer, intern or what not. Oh, the other thing that started at the Women's Center when I was there was the internship program. I felt like it was really important for people to get credit. And here I was, you know low-income mom, and I was thinking, you know, 'We can't pay volunteers, but they should at least be getting class credit for this work,' because there were so many dedicated people that came into that Women's Center, and put in time and energy, and tons of work. That's where the internship program actually got started, was. I came into Women's Center also with a personal need for...a personal understanding of the need for recognition, as a volunteer, because that's hard to find a lot of times. When you're volunteering, and you're dedicating yourself to something, it's not part of the institution of activism and feminist activism as much as I felt like it should be. That was something I felt was really important was to recognize volunteers, not only in just volunteer appreciation, you know, an ongoing volunteer appreciation, which was also something that was implemented when I was there because of the other staff members and dedicated volunteers putting vision into 'How do we make this a better place to be?' I felt like the people who were volunteering really needed recognition. That was one way to do it. So, that was there.

But I think that the social aspect of Women's Center was really vital, because a lot of women were just coming into a whole other kind of consciousness. A lot of women came to the Women's Center and came out as lesbians. There was just a very unique experience, and it was really...I think it was – it was a place of support, and that – a big part of that was through social activities, and so there were ongoing...usually, in integrated work, you know, social potluck kind



of a thing, or people would like go out with one another for their birthdays, or those kinds of things were ongoing.

MB: It's pretty much the same too.

KK: Oh, and when I first was there, there were retreats.

MB: Oh yeah.

KK: There was... That's when it first started. They look different now than they did then, but ...Yeah, that's always been an aspect too, is to do some retreat, and some strategic visioning and planning and stuff like that.

KK: Did you incorporate being a mom with the Women's Center? Did you bring Elliott to the meetings, and to the retreats, and...?

KK: Yes. Yes. He was a – he was a vital part of the Women's Center, actually. That's how we got toys into the Women's Center. That was because – and kids' books – was because he was there so often with me. Just as an aside, it's pretty amazing what he's picked up in his time of going to meetings with me, and coming to Women's Center meetings and participating because when he was five, he said to me, 'Mom, we watched a movie today at school.' He said, 'But it wasn't ...'and he stopped himself and he said, 'Actually, it was sexist.' I'm thinking, 'Okay. This five year old is telling me this. Does he know what that means?' I said Elliott, 'What does that mean?' He said, 'Well, it didn't treat the women or the girls in the movie very well.' I thought, 'Okay, you know what? It's gonna be alright.' It wasn't, you know...that was because he came to all these meetings.

MB: Uh huh.

KK: Even to this day, he hasn't ...He's nine now. Then, four years later he has this amazingly astute understanding of, of reality, you know, as ...it's just, I mean, it's really incredible.

MB: Yeah. And that's a gift, I mean it's tough to get him...

KK: Yeah. Can I add something in, because...

MB: Yeah. Go.

KK: As I became active in the feminist community, I also started becoming very involved in the midwifery community, and doing an apprenticeship with a local midwife, who luckily shared my same beliefs about midwifery, that providing options and choices for families to give birth on their own terms was a feminist act, and was an empowering opportunity, or an opportunity for empowerment rather. That was what brought me to midwifery. My own experience of being so

incredibly empowered, and really having an option to take back my body, was very powerful, but also being really dedicated to providing that for other families was what led me to midwifery. So, in my time at the Women's Center, I was an only parent, I was going to school full-time, I was doing my work-study position at the Women's Center, and I was also apprenticing full-time doing midwifery. I also brought a sort of healing aspect to the Women's Center that often is, is not as noticeable in organizations as the sort of warrior, fighter, kind of element, righteous element, which is also really important. That was something different that I brought to the Women's Center definitely.

MB: So a typical day for you would be...?

KK: It would be getting up in the morning, and getting my son to his preschool, and going to classes, working in between classes, and jumping off campus and going to various prenatals here and there, and sometimes then getting called to births in the middle of the night, and writing papers on, you know, three nights with no sleep. And, you know, it was just a constant juggling act, and it was really intense.

MB: How many hours a week then did you work at the Women's Center?

KK: Well, I got paid for fifteen hours a week, and it varied between. Usually it was a minimum of twenty and a maximum of thirty-five, I would say, depending on what was going on. But it was, it was always more than fifteen.

MB: And you were going to school full-time, so that would be what, twelve credits?

KK: Uh huh. I usually took twelve – between twelve and fifteen credits.

MB: Twelve and fifteen? Plus parenting.

KK: Uh huh. And doing midwifery.

MB: And doing midwifery, sometimes.

KK: Uh huh.

MB: So would you say that Take Back the Night is your favorite Women's Center event?

KK: I think it's the event that I learned the most from, and so that's why it's, it's really a big one for me. I learned so much about organizing, and about the need for coalition, and lots of smart brains on everything, and just playing really well with other people. You know, little things like the first thing you do when you're gonna organize an event is you make sure there's nothing else going on the day that you want to do your event. I was learning those things the hard way. I think that really shaped my understanding of an organizer, to coordinate an event that was so

charged and loaded, and very important, and a tremendous thing for an organization that was in the place that the Women's Center was to pull off.

MB: Uh huh. So you weren't only just an organizer with the Women's Center and in charge of events like Take Back with other, I'm guessing, feminist leaders, but you also did outreach. Can you describe to me maybe what that job entailed, maybe a brief job description or something like that?

KK: Well, at the Women's Center, it was a typical, sort of commune situation, everybody does a little bit of everything, but as outreach coordinator, I was solely responsible for keeping the community and campus community aware of what was going on, and keeping in close communication with folks, and also working closely with the volunteer coordinator to do outreach to members and volunteers. I also did a lot of supervisory work at the Women's Center especially since I was the one who was so bent on making sure that people got credit for their work if they wanted to do an internship. I ended up supervising a lot of folks there, and I learned a lot about supervising, which was really actually very useful for me. Now, especially given what I'm doing now. So, I can't feel like I did everything as outreach coordinator, just as I'm sure that any volunteer coordinator or office coordinator from the Women's Center would tell you. It's well, you know...

MB: And you helped set up internships as well? Did you get credit for doing that?

KK: I did. I did some – I did get some credits for doing it too.

MB: So that's nice that you can do a little bit of both, and get credit for it.

KK: Yeah, exactly.

MB: I was gonna ask you maybe who your closest allies were – maybe not just on campus. We kind of touched on that briefly, but maybe even off campus? Were your...? Was your family – is your family supportive? Your partner at that time? And, the question also incorporates political opposition to your work. I'm guessing - was the administration more conservative back then, or...?

KK: Oh, my goodness!

MB: Go ahead.

KK: Yeah, we actually every year had our – one of our staff positions threatened. I heard that happened to happen this year, but it was intense. The Women's Center was really targeted by the ASUM Senate, and we had a lot of battles in that sense, and I think there's – really it's – there's something to be said for the fact that you the Women's Center in the seventies was huge, and incorporated a much larger space than it does even now. The space it's in now is

much larger than when I came. But that...It was very deliberate on the university administration's part to make the Women's Center a campus group, because it keeps it at a certain level of operating. I actually really believe that, because the Women's Center has a lot of power, an a lot of powerful people within it, and I think that the Women's Center has really shown that in the past six years or so, where it's really just bloomed and blossomed and become such an important part of the women's community. That was more the opposition, and then, you know, just sort of general anti-women folks, which we have plenty of in Montana, were huge.

I'd say that other universities across the country were allies to us, that had Women's Studies Departments and Women's Centers we worked with, particularly in incorporating things like Young Women's Day of Action, and trying to bring in speakers and those kinds of things, we worked with other, sort of academics, and college campus groups. I think that the Women's Studies Department was not an ally when I first came on to the Women's Center, and that was one of the first things that I noticed, was that we were very isolated and had a...there was a lot of animosity between the Women's Center and the Women's Studies Department. I just was completely convinced to change that. And luckily, when I turned over, I mean it became new staffs, the Women's Studies Department had a new staff as well, and so we just immediately built – started building a relationship, which helped a lot. The Women's Studies Department became a huge ally in helping set up the internship program and just generally supporting the Women's Center. And other professors, you know, people like Janet Finn. This was before Maxine was here, but Janet Finn was a really huge supporter of the Women's Center, and acknowledged – a big person who acknowledged the leadership that was coming out of the Women's Center and I really valued that. And as far as other community organizations, we worked with the battered women's shelters, and some with WORD, which started out of the Women's Center, but not as much as I would have liked because we were so busy just keeping our reality together – you know, that - that's something that I actually was challenged by constantly.

MB: That's interesting. Yeah, I mean, it's all interconnected. Yeah. And the whole work connection is really important too.

KK: Uh huh.

MB: That will definitely be acknowledged in the archives. Can you remember any of the speakers that you brought in, in those three years? Anyone that stands out in your mind? Either, maybe at Take Back, or other events?

KK: Oh, my gosh. I remember Gloria Steinem coming. I remember, oh gosh, I feel like I should remember...I'm not – nobody's jumping out at me right now...

MB: That's all right. Gloria Steinem's a big one.

KK: Yeah, definitely.

MB: So, are there any things that you would have done differently in retrospect?

KK: Yeah, I would have moved the Women's Center off campus, and had it be an autonomous organization, because I think that it would be much...I mean, I think it's incredible how far the Women's Center has come, but I think it would be a completely different entity and something that Missoula very much needs to have - an autonomous free-standing women's center. Now that I understand more, and my - because of where I am now - I understand how to do fund-raising stuff, and how to build something, build the foundation of an organization. I would have done that, instead of fighting with the senators to not cut our one non work-study position, I would have rather...rather just said, 'You know what? This is...We're not getting very far here. Let's...We have enough power to do it. Let's do it.

MB: So was it frustrating for you, finding yourself to be the only mom, and Jewish descent, and...

KK: Oh yeah, there was that.

MB: ...and, you know, other factors? I'm, I'm wondering, did you come out during your stint at the Women's Center?

KK: Before I came to Women's Center.

MB: Oh you did? Okay. So you're an openly gay woman, lesbian woman, and you had all these other factors to deal with, plus being low-income.

KK: That was the biggest one.

MB: Okay.

KK: That was the biggest one for me, was being low-income and being on welfare, and realizing that the people around me didn't ...it was really, that was something I took personally I had to work through - that the women around me didn't understand their own privilege, and that they were able to go to college, and how amazing that was, because I barely got through by the skin of my teeth, like having to deal with a welfare department through welfare reform, and trying to keep in school. I just...It was real hard for me, and I - I felt really isolated about that. I remember—

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

[Tape 1, Side B]

KK: —and I had, a lot of my neighbors, my immediately surrounding neighbors, were single parents. Most of us were on welfare. When you were asking me about who were some of my biggest allies, it was those women in the family housing – particularly one neighbor of mine, and this is really funny because her family is sort of like your typical nuclear family. They were living in poverty, so we used to share food stamps and stuff, and help each other out. But she was one of the biggest supporters of my activism. And helped me out with childcare for my son, when I – so I could go to the Women’s Center meetings, or go do an action or whatever. She was super helpful, and it was really interesting because she is adamantly pro-life, and I am adamantly pro-choice, and we had a sort of respectful, mutual understanding that that was gonna be our right. In every other form, she was able to support my activism through and through. It was a really – You know, we have a real familiar relationship And so did our children. They were like siblings. And ironically her little boy, whose father is the biggest Steelers fan in the world, and you know, is really – just should have been raised to be incredibly masculine and sporty, you know, into sports, was a very, very effeminate young man. Refused to get his hands dirty, loved to play with dolls, you know, just sauntered, and, you know, he just would...And then I have this little boy who’s like very athletic, and you know, real sure on his feet, and can really kind of just excel at any sport. It’s just the irony of it was just amazing to see. We were able to really help each other out a lot.

One of my neighbors was part of this new budding organization called W.E.E.L., which was an organization that approached us early on at the Women’s Center when I was staff, saying that they were starting to address the issues that women were facing – that the women in poverty were facing because of welfare reform. I was on welfare at the time and didn’t even completely comprehend the dramatic changes that were about to happen in my life because of the welfare reform issue in Congress. This woman had been on – one of the founding members of the organization. I just kept saying to her, ‘Jamie, you need to come to the Women’s Center. There are no other low-income women that are parents there. It’s a really important – It’s really important.’ So she said ‘Okay, I’ll come to the Women’s Center to talk about W.E.E.L.’ She would come and she would just – she did her best. And she was really great, and we were able to sort of support each other some. We had another volunteer who was another neighbor of ours, who was also one of the founding members of W.E.E.L, single mom on welfare, and you know...So, a couple of us started to sort of infiltrate and that was a really nice experience. From that I got recruited to be on the board of W.E.E.L.

MB: And so, how did that process work? They came to you and asked you to run for the board?

KK: And I said ‘No. Way too busy. I can’t do this. You know, I’m not done with school. I’m not done with W.E.E.L., or I mean with the Women’s Center.’ And they just said, ‘No, you need to be on the board. You need to be on the board.’ Finally I was like, ‘Okay. I’m gonna check this out.’ I decided to get on to the board of W.E.E.L. in my last semester of college, or my last year of college. I did. I was the board secretary.

MB: Like me. So, can I ask Jamie's last name?

KK: Jamie Drakos.

MB: Okay. And who was your other neighbor? Was that Toni or Raquelle?

KK: Uh uh. Her name was Jen. What's her last name?

MB: That's all right.

KK: Ninnick? And both Jamie and Jen live in Portland now.

MB: Oh, really? Excellent. So, did W.E.E.L. give you a sense of place?

A sense of belonging? Or was it more...?

KK: I was totally confused. It was a really overwhelming to get into the intricacies of the welfare program, and welfare policy, and the situation – the drastic situation that women on welfare were facing. I mean I had – was experiencing it. But, very intentionally isolated myself from media. I didn't have a TV. I didn't read the newspaper. The only thing I ever did was listen to NPR. That was the only information I was getting, so it was like a whole new world of the public realm, of what was going on in welfare reform, and it was a really overwhelming experience.

MB: So when you and your...I should say Elliott's father, split up and you got a divorce, cause you were married at a pretty young age, and you had Elliott at eighteen? Is that correct?

KK: Yeah.

MB: And then you moved to student housing?

KK: I lived in student housing. We lived with Elliott's father.

MB: So previously. So then you got your own place? And so you had some support of neighbors. Did you have anyone telling you, 'You can't do this. You're on welfare.' I'm just wondering if you got any negative feedback at all?

KK: Not so much, no. Not so much. But the situation in the family housing was a really – a hard one though. I mean, it was in some senses I found community, but in many senses it was also really devastating, and a barrier to me for succeeding. I remember the first day that I lived in a family housing. I walked out my door, and this little boy walked up with no shoes on, crying, and it was a real cold November day. And I was like, 'Oh, my God, you know.' Just come to find out after dealing with the situation that his parents had left him home alone. It was things like that, or like the neighbor upstairs being abusive to his wife, and hearing that, and having to call the cops. I mean, there was also that element of it that was really devastating. I was that

lesbian on the end that didn't let her kid watch TV, and ate tofu. I definitely had a reputation. I think it helped me that I was on the end, because I felt like a little bit more close to the world, you know?

MB: Sure. Sure. And, so at W.E.E.L., you became the board secretary and then, and then it kind of spiraled from there?

KK: Well, what happened was after I graduated from school, and I stopped doing the Women's Center, I went into the job market. I applied for a couple jobs, and I got offered this executive director position at the Missoula Parent Co-op, which was – used to be a project of WORD, and separated off to become its own entity. They offered me this job. It didn't pay very much. It paid eighteen thousand dollars a year. I called W.E.E.L. to say – because I figured that W.E.E.L. worked with the Missoula Parent Co-op, because it was geared toward helping low-income parents swap some childcare so it wouldn't be so expensive. I called W.E.E.L. to ask them about this organization, and whether or not I should, you know, accept this position. They said, 'Oh no. Don't take that job. You need to work here.' I was like, 'What?' And from there, they'd started to recruit me actually for a staff position, and then we went through the interview process, and I got hired on as co-director of W.E.E.L.

MB: And what year was that?

KK: '99.

MB: '99?

KK: June 21<sup>st</sup> of 1999.

MB: June 21<sup>st</sup> – the solstice. And so now you're the sole executive director.

KK: I am. Yes. Correct.

MB: And your job... Well, I can't even describe your job even though I'm on the board. I should know, but you're still very much connected I think, in my opinion, with other – the other women's organizations in town on a variety of levels. There's WVE, there's WORD, there's the Women's Center. But W.E.E.L. definitely has its own niche. And tell me a little bit more about the structure of the Women's Center, as it compares to the structure of, say, W.E.E.L.. Cause I think there's definitely some similarities.

KK: Well, I think that both organizations are in an ongoing sort of challenge to figure out how to do a different model of leadership, and a different model of leadership development. It's often frustrating at times, but I think it's really ultimately worth it. Part of it is not having a hierarchical model of leadership. That was one of the things that I think I brought from the Women's Center to W.E.E.L. We each have our own areas of strength, and we should be able to



work in those areas and contribute to each other's work with that kind of expertise, have more of a linear model rather than having a sort of a top-down approach. I think that's something that the Women's Center and W.E.E.L. both have in common. Then there are little things like, I came to W.E.E.L. and thought, 'Wow! You know, the book that – the log book that the Women's Center has to take messages is really smart. Let's have that at W.E.E.L., and so things like that have been replicated. But the other thing is that when I became staff at W.E.E.L., we had a practicum student that was also a volunteer at the Women's Center. So there were two of us who kind of came from that Women's Center model, and were collectively trying to figure things out and do empowerment, leadership development work. We – the two of us together I think helped really change the tone of, of W.E.E.L. from when I came. It was really kind of a little place, having a hard time and struggling, and pretty isolated from other organizations, and – and pretty isolating of its leaders actually. But I think that changed over time.

MB: Yeah, I know...I have noticed the log book.

Just two more questions since we're running short on time. What lasting legacy to your work has endured in Western Montana, Missoula, or elsewhere in the region? And what remains to be done? So maybe some...Think about your gifts and maybe what your challenges or your goals might be for the future, as a feminist, as an executive director, as a lesbian woman, or...?

KK: Oh boy! I think that one of the gifts that I bring to the work is an ability to see the big picture, and how the work that we do now affects the work that will happen in the future. That's something I don't see very much of. I think that's something that I really left at the Women's Center, was don't forget that what you're doing now will influence what happens later. That's good. That's important. Leave your mark respectfully and, and be thinking about the ramifications of what you're doing now for – on the future, and not just now, and not just your time as a volunteer, and not just your time as, as staff here and...That's one of the things I get feedback actually about a lot at W.E.E.L. is that of the ability to see the sort of bigger picture. I talk about the welfare system as an economic development program. People are like, 'What?' You know, that's so long term. We don't think like that.' I'm like, 'Exactly, that's...We need to start thinking about that, and potential that we have to really make good and something good can come out of this hard situation.

The other thing is a comprehension of the connection between all of our issues, whether they're poverty, environmental, women's issues, choice issues, whatever it is, like they're all really, really closely related, and that it does not help us or any of our community, members of our community, to not see those connections and not work with one another. So a real strong collaborative spirit. I don't believe in doing things in isolation at all. And believe in calling on other people's expertise and asking for help when it's needed. I think that's a really powerful gift. I think those are just like sort of...That's, that's what I bring. That's my style of leadership. And I think that that means that therefore I contribute that to the community.

MB: So you see yourself more as a visionary, or do you see...more analytical?

KK: I'm much more analytic.

MB: Or were you also a healer?

KK: I was a healer when I first came into this work – full on. I've actually become much more intellectually analytical, I think in some sense just to save my own heart from the pain, and fighting, and challenges, and just to kind of survive, because I've gotten into a pretty intense situation doing my – this job and working on the national campaign. So I'm definitely one of the people that stops and weighs all sides of issues, and can like see everything from every side. That has its advantages, but I recognize full well that it – I need visionaries, and warriors and healers to work with me or its not gonna be a whole thing, because, you know, ability to see all sides as forming one, one piece.

MB: So you went from being a single parent and mom, obviously, single parent, fresh mom, to being a student, to being a volunteer, to being on staff at the Women's Center, then transitioning on to the board, and then transitioning off the board into staff at W.E.E.L. What's next for you?

KK: I don't know. Actually, my long-term vision is to open a community health clinic that's focused on a comprehensive, holistic, healthcare for women – the entirety of their lives, and not just near childbirth, or menopause or whatever it is, but the spectrum of women's, women's realities...

MB: The big picture?

KK: Yeah. Thank you. To ensure that community health clinic is accessible to low-income women and low-income families is absolutely a vital part of my vision. And I think that will happen in maybe five or ten years? So, I'll have to go back to school in that time. You know, finish my midwifery, because that's a part that I really miss in my life, and this job took me – brought me into traveling at least once or twice a month, often to the East coast, and then I couldn't do midwifery and be on call anymore so, it's taken me away from that which has been a sad thing, but something that I will always come back to.

MB: Right. Something to look forward to. Is there anything else you'd like to add? Anything...details, or do you want to clarify anything?

KK: I don't know. I don't think so.

MB: You're not getting married this summer? That's something to look forward to.

KK: That's true. That's true. And over the course of the years of my activism I've come to realize that I also don't need to be totally isolated and doing everything by myself. And as I made that realization, like 'Oh, I don't have to do this alone. Like, I can actually trust someone else. And I don't have to be a martyr. But, let's see. What do I want to do here? And somebody amazing

came into my life. And it took me a while to realize that, but yes, I am going to have a commitment ceremony this summer, and that's a big shift. I no longer can really call myself an only parent.

MB: That's right.

KK: And that's been a huge shift for me. It's actually been one of the biggest areas of personal growth for me, aside from adapting to being a parent.

MB: Right.

KK: It's adapting to being not an only-parent.

MB: Right. And I remember your goal being that you wanted to be more social.

KK: That's true.

MB: Things kind of started snowballing, so...

KK: That's true. One of my New Year's resolutions was to be more social. To get this job that I took with W.E.E.L. overwhelmed me to the extent that I was just like, 'I got...I can't...I just have to be with my kid and be with my job, and that was all I had for awhile. I realized that I was really undermining my leadership and my ability to do a good job.

Mary Burwell: And it's important to do self-care and have balance, and I think you've achieved that.

KK: Thank you.

MB: And doing a great job.

KK: The other thing I think is this. The connection between W.E.E.L. and the Women's Center is very strong. And I think it just barely started when I was at the Women's Center. When I was at the Women's Center, I was on the board of W.E.E.L. I started the campus chapter of W.E.E.L. from the Women's Center and I used the Women's Center bylaws and a lot of the – this gets into one of your earlier questions – a lot of the structure, of the student structured campus organization structure to start the campus chapter of W.E.E.L. So that started. Then also we've been able to draw in really good volunteers like you to come and be involved and carry the message of W.E.E.L. to the Women's Center – 'that poverty is an important women's issue, and we need to be addressing this as well. And don't forget this is happening.' That's really important.

MB: Yeah. And family formation. Right? Yeah. No, I see that connection too, and I think it's very powerful. Nothing less. Is that it?

KK: I think so.

MB: You think so? Excellent. Thank you Kate.

MB: Thanks Mary.

[End of Interview]