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Interviewee: Martha Newell
Interviewer: Mary Burwell
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Mary Burwell: ...for the Montana Feminist History Project, April 6, 2002.

Martha Newell: Well, I moved to Missoula in 1980. That summer I had heard that Ronald Reagan was in favor of a constitutional amendment to ban abortion, and when I first heard that, that was a clear indication to me of how removed he was from mainstream, and how little he was a threat, and it became apparent very quickly that he was part of a big movement that wanted to do that. I guess I was thirteen when the *Roe v. Wade* decision came, and so for – certainly for my reproductive life, abortion had been available, and it was really a wake-up call to me that it might become unavailable.

After I moved to Missoula I got involved in a Montana Pro-Choice Coalition. At that time, it was based in Missoula. Sidney Cogburn and Mary Ann Garrity were the co-directors, who coordinated that. I got really involved with that. It's hard for me to remember which was directly through the Montana Pro-Choice Coalition, how much was at the Women's Resource Center. I started going to school in '82 I guess here.

The first year, it was a legislative session, and I worked in the office on a really regular basis, and helped get ready for the session, and then helped do phone trees, and that sort of thing as the session progressed. Pro-choice was a huge part of my life in those times – working on...And I couldn't tell you what all were the issues in that session, or inquiry, and who knows? About the [unintelligible] inquiry. At the Women's Resource Center, you know, we had a lending library, we did outreach, there were a number of conferences that were put on during that time. Probably the one I remember, at least by name is, was about the New Right. It was a time when the Right was gathering speed and we had a conference about it.

The way I got into feminism in – happened in Missoula, Montana. I think that Judy Smith and Diane Sands used to co-teach classes, Intro to Feminism. I remember it was quite an eye-opener to me that definitely encouraged me to be more active, and develop a consciousness about feminism. I had been an activist in high school, but I had no kind of consciousness about feminism. One of the things that was so cool about that was that they made me appreciate my mom, which I hadn't really done before. That's good, so I'm going have to appreciate her for the rest of her life. A bunch of random details there.

MB: So are you currently – what organizations are you currently active with now?

MN: You know, at this point, I'm mostly working at my kids' schools, and so I – my children go to Sussex school. I've organized a number of fundraisers and activities, and I did the same thing

at Missoula International School, where I kind of was the board president, and did a lot of activities, which to me were really basic and to other people seemed amazing. It's because I did them all when I was at the WRC, and when I was at, and doing pro-choice stuff, so it's all just kind of the same organizing skills. I don't know what the rest of them were doing in those years, but I guess they weren't organizing raffles and events.

MB: And you – back to the WRC – (inaudible) Can you remember anything that stands out for you, like what, maybe, one element of the Women's Center that – like you keep talking about organizing skills. What did you take from the Women's Center?

MN: Well, one of the things that was most exciting to me at the Center was we put on a number of concerts. And I don't even recall. I don't really think they were fundraising events, I think they were just to bring these fine musicians to Missoula. I think that was kind of my first taste of working on an event, and building to a crescendo of the evening, and being so jacked as people... as ticket sales increased, and figuring out how to get the ticket sales up and stuff, and, and then it's over. That's how I prefer to do things. You know, that's been a definitely a lasting impact on me, is I like to do events. And it's very exciting to kind of build it, and have it become a big thing, and then it's over, and you can do something else.

MB: As far as how the Women's Center ran, right now, of course, I mean there's staff members and volunteers, and it's actually a student-run group, and funded by the University. Do you remember details about that aspect?

MN: Well, I know there were some work-study positions, and I know it seemed like at first it was Judy Smith and Diane Sands, and then it kind of just ended up being Judy again. There were weekly meetings, and ...I don't remember that much...

MB: Do you remember maybe what the atmosphere was like, was like in the Women's Center, or maybe from, feelings you got from outside the Women's Center?

MN: Oh, I think it was a great feeling to be in there for me. My guess is that it was intimidating to walk in for everybody, for people who weren't involved in it. And it seems like I recall some battles for funding, and stuff with the student government. But I can't remember things specifically. I think there were student directors in the center, that, my sense was that it was, the agenda was pretty determined, pretty influenced by Judy and Diane.

MB: You're working and organizing events with schools in town. Are there any kind of feminist organizations that you've been working with?

MN: No.

MB: Okay.

MN: You know, I remember thinking I was always – there was a lot of tension at that time, in my opinion, between the Women’s Resource Center and Women’s Place. And, well, really it was – they were very separate. But I always lived with Women’s Place members, and so it was interesting, because we would have parties, and people from both organizations would come, and that was kind of an unusual mixing that would happen sometimes. But I remember thinking that when there was the Take Back the Night march, and I remember thinking of all the women whose names I had heard that have been (inaudible) in the past, or as the years went on, have been active at the beginning at the time I was and then kind of dropped out, and thinking ‘You know, God! If we all just got active at the same time on these issues, you know?’ And now I’m one of them that’s not particularly active. But I’m still drawn to, in fact, changing the world, but not on a specifically feminist focus.

MB: (Inaudible)

MN: I became the escort coordinator for the Blue Mountain Clinic. There was an increasing threat of anti-choice demonstrators at the clinic. This was when it was on Kensington, and it was in a kind of a little shopping area, or office area. They (Blue Mountain administration) got a legal thing saying that they (the demonstrators) had to stay out on the sidewalk. Initially they were right up by the clinic. It was in the time that Operation Rescue and stuff and so, we had to get at least two people every Saturday morning to stand outside of the clinic, and be there just in case anything happened. Then they had an actual Operation Rescue, and it was really amazing. They stormed the clinic, and we - at that point we had like ten people locked arms across the door to prevent them from taking control of the door. The door was locked. They had been trying to promote themselves as really innocent, just caring for the little babies, and, and it was really – they were very scary people. It was, it was really amazing. I ended up actually getting locked in the clinic. So, I was in the clinic. We were trying to get the information out to the escorts who was the next client that was going to come in, and we had some kind of coded information for them. And we called each client and told them what was going on, and somehow the demonstrators got information, and so they got one of their picketers to come act like one of the clients, and we – our escorts escorted them around to the back door, and the escorts opened the door, and one of these guys fortunately yelled, ‘Go!’ or you know, ‘We’re going in!’ or something like that. And at that point the, the escorts were able to kind of tackle them, but these guys were huge, and it was a day that they were training abortion counselors, so there were like, I swear there were like sixteen women on the inside pushing. The door was open. These guys were trying to get in. They were pushing them out. And eventually they managed to get them out. And Michael Gallagher from *The Missoulian* actually was back there, and had this fabulous picture on the front page of these escorts, and Bob Rowe, Public Service Commissioner now, you know, with one gut on each arm, trying to keep them from going in. And that was very amazing. Then they finally fire-bombed the clinic. And we came, and (inaudible). The clinic had to be rebuilt, and is now built like a bunker, and located over on California Street. They haven’t had much protest since then either. I mean, it’s been a very interesting change. So that was a big part of my activism too, I guess. I’m looking for that

picture of Bob Rowe on the front page, because I'm sure that the picture that I drew of...Oh, here it is.

MB: Wow.

MN: This was guys trying to get in there. (inaudible) They all had bicycle kryptonite locks around their necks. They got in front of the door, and with these guns, so nobody could get in the clinic, and I was really impressed, (inaudible) Quite a bonding experience with the women learning – that I was inside with, that's for sure. Yeah. I've done a lot of pro-choice stuff over the years, but we've had – I remember putting this wire together. I don't know what year this was in. Montana Abortion Control Act. (inaudible) When I was working at the Women's Resource Center, I was taking a class on something like the economics of energy, and felt like it was really kind of a crisis thing, with this news, and that wanting to be more conservation-minded, and at the Women's Resource Center, they got a call from that Human Resources Council, Human Resource Development Council, and that they were looking for some women to be on their crew that insulated low-income housing. So I dropped out of school in order to do that.

MB: Really?

MN: And that was the end of my time at the Women's Resource Center. Pretty much the end of my time at college.

MB: It's interesting.

MN: Yeah. Yeah.

MB: What do you – do you know why they called for women specifically?

MN: I think they wanted to have some – yeah, it was mostly a male thing. At that point, I don't know if they had some grants, or what, but they were definitely trying to limit the... That seemed like more of an – I always got restless in college. There was way too much other stuff to go than go to class, and (inaudible)

MB: So how long were you at the University?

MN: Well, I went in '82, and I probably went for just a year or two. And then over time – I was going to go to business school, and I was volunteering at Freddie's Feed and Read, which was a collectively owned and run freshman book store over by campus, and they said to me, 'Why? If you want to learn how to run a business, why don't you run one, instead of going to school?' which appealed to me. So, I ended up being one of the collective members there for four years. After that I started one class per semester, business classes. I had my first child when I was junior, and it was going to take me ten years to finish. I really couldn't care less. I had run a couple businesses by then, and so, (inaudible). After I worked at Freddie's, I ran the Fair Trade

store at the Peace Center and I did that for six moons I think. So that was my last real commitment.

MB: (inaudible)

MN: Yeah, so I've definitely been trying to do work, you know, meaningful work (inaudible). And my partner, when he became mayor we ended up, a year after that, my income was stopped, and my kids were sick a lot, and I couldn't stand figuring out in the morning whether my kids were well enough so I could go to work. (inaudible)

MB: Maybe one final question, you know, I'm dealing with a lot of women right now who are very much into the pro-choice movement again...

MN: Uh huh.

MB: ...because of all the scrutiny it's been coming under, and the fact that we're one vote away from getting *Roe v. Wade* reversed in the Supreme Court, and...

MN: It gives me goose bumps.

MB: Yeah. Do you have any suggestions, or anything you'd like to say to them, or, you know, (inaudible)?

MN: I guess what I would say is that I still believe that the majority of people in this country are pro-choice, and that it's kind of a propaganda game at this point, and that it's really important to stay in the trenches. They have support from people like me who are not being particularly active at this point, but it's critical. Really critical. If we have to go back to a position of offering illegal abortions, that'll have an interesting impact on this country, because I think there are people who are going to be ready to offer them, and, you know, it's a very chilling time. Frankly it's really kind of depressing on a lot of different fronts. But, I think that in the last election people were saying, 'Oh, I'm pro-choice,' but then they voted for Bush. It's got to be people, it's got to be a more bottom line issue for people who might I think just...It's kind of a chilling time in this country for dissent of any kind, I would say. And at this point it feels like to be pro-choice, feels a little bit like dissenting, and that's still the law of the land. I think it's really important that we ought to be real vigilant and I think we need to voice that, as the right wing is gaining momentum in this country.

MB: I actually went to this pro-choice education program, community activist-run. Does that...? Statistics were amazing. Eighty percent of the young adults, limited from eighteen to actually thirty-two, don't believe that that right can be taken away. Eighty percent. It just seems like, you know, that's how awareness (inaudible).

MN: Yeah. Well, it...I mean, I guess, if it were overturned, it would be very interesting to see the response of this community. I mean, I think it's really important to maintain the current right, and yet if there isn't – if that right is taken away – it would probably be a pretty exciting time. You know? Hopefully things will hit the fan. But, it would be ridiculous for that to happen, but...

MB: Thank you very much. You have wonderful stories. It's – I appreciate it.

MN: Oh. Yeah. Yeah.

[End of Interview]