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Interviewee: Deborah Tomas
Interviewer: Dawn Walsh
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Dawn Walsh: Hello. This is Dawn Walsh with the Montana Feminist History Project. I'll be interviewing Deborah Tomas today, and the date is May 29, the year 2001. We are in Deborah's office, which is at the YWCA, 1130 West Broadway, Missoula, 59801. Okay. Hi, Deborah.

Deborah Tomas: Hello, Dawn.

DW: Thank you so much for being here. I'd like to start out the interview with talking about some personal information of yours—the basics of where you were born, where you were raised, where you did your education, what you got your degree in—that type of background information.

DT: Ok. Most of my growing up was in western North Dakota in a Scandinavian, small, immigrant community. Ours was a working class family, which has had some effect on the development of my feminist theory. Part of my growing up was in western North Dakota where I got to be a cowgirl. That level of freedom from traditional role is what got me back to western North Dakota after having exhausted myself in New Jersey. I came to Missoula in '78 with my ten-year-old daughter, and just knew that I would be here forever. My bones will rest here. Two years after that I was hired—I think I was the last hiree under the CETA program. In August of 1980 I started. Then Ronald Reagan was elected in November, so that changed everything.

DW: Can you say the CETA program is?

DT: It was a way of putting under-employed people to work with federal dollars in nonprofit organizations, so that the nonprofit would benefit from that labor and so would—the people would be able to develop skills. I had a degree by then, but had been—I was ready for employment of some kind, but not traditional. So, it seemed like a great opening for me.

DW: And what was your degree in?

DT: Nursing and psychology.

DW: And then what was the position that you got under the CETA program?

DT: It was a health educator position, which described almost nothing about what I did. I was hired on as part of another large exodus of skilled women from Women's Place to other things, Dolly Browder among them, and she had done a lot of health education at Women's Place. That was her interest. So, that position had already been created by the person who had been there

Deborah Tomas Interview, OH 378-022, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.

before me. I kind of stepped into that, but in fact the organization needed a lot of help just staying open, so there wasn't really a lot of time and effort for such specifics as a Health Education. We were just trying to keep Women's Place afloat, and so did for the next—I stayed there almost 14 years.

DW: What year was that you said you came?

DT: [Nineteen] eighty.

DW: Ok. Before we start talking specifically about Women's Place and your time there, I want to go back to the development, as you say, of your own feminist theory. If you could just let us know how you came to feminism, your early feminist influences, what that was like for you to come across feminism.

DT: I think everybody has some formative experience or experience, and mine was, oddly enough I would say that I came to feminism through the back door. In a first and second-generation immigrant community what I noticed was a deep sense or injustice at the fact that the high school boy could go around and brag about their sexual pursuits, but the high school girls couldn't even be sexual. Of course we all were, but we weren't supposed to talk about it. I don't know that we all were, but largely that was the practice in the 60s. I didn't like that injustice, and so kind of broke with tradition and started talking about young women's sexuality. That was not a popular thing, and I didn't get to run for homecoming queen because of that, if you can imagine. So, it was formative. And that sense of injustice has kind of carried me through a lot in life, but that's kind of where it started.

My first marriage was very traditional, and I was chaffing at how restrictive it was, because I married soon out of high school—actually a year out of high school. It was a pretty amazing time to be in a repressive, restrictive marriage, one in which I was expected to be my husband's shadow, according to his description of my role. He was supposed to climb the corporate latter, and I was supposed to help him. I don't really have a temperament for that. And there was huge upheaval in the country because of the reaction to the Vietnam War and I wanted to be a part of that. Woodstock came on the television, and here were all of these people actually being apparently free, and I wasn't.

Then I developed a close and wonderful friendship with a bright thoughtful woman. We started talking about our restrictive and repressive marriages, and then "pow," out came the first issue of Ms. Magazine. That was pretty much it for me; there was no looking back. I wanted out of the marriage, and did in fact get out of the marriage. Got my own education so I could support myself and my daughter. My daughter was four when I left the marriage. So, that's how I kind of came to feminism through the back door, kind of in a sweep from immigrant North Dakota to Missoula, Montana.

DW: Yeah, that's a great story. So, how would you currently define your understanding of feminism? Maybe not the philosophy, like some sort of pat definition—I mean pat definition, but maybe more philosophically.

DT: How I understand feminism?

DW: Yeah, for yourself and in general?

DT: I think feminism is an effort to understand, to develop awareness or, to name the context of women's oppression in a hierarchically male-dominated, capitalist, repressive, role-repressive world. I think it's an effort to say the truth. The truth about women's experience and the context in which we try to shape our lives, and it's about naming the compulsory nature of being a woman in the western world. What are we supposed to be? And when we begin to be aware of what it is we are supposed to be and do, and we put a name to that and we can see that it is in fact optional, then we have a lot of other choices that we didn't have before. So, I think feminism is largely that process of being becoming aware of and naming, and then doing something about it. It is really a process of liberating ourselves from a world in which we are limited because we are told of what is compulsory. So, it's a process of getting free.

DW: Ok. Now when did you first start to work with feminism, with women's issues? You had your own personal awakening if you will of feminist consciousness as we say, but then when did you extend that outward to working with others on feminist issues and women's issues?

DT: Well except for some very fringy political activism before coming to Missoula, really my full-blown bath in feminism was at Women's Place.

DW: Well then let's just pick up there then. Now I'm not sure if this is true, I was looking in the Women's Place archives at the University, were you hired on with Lynn Stewart and Anna Salwick?

DT: Let's see? I think I came before—yep, I came before Anna and Lynn.

DW: I wasn't sure. Ok, never mind then. Let's talk about, you started to talk about your position at Women's Place when you were first hired on, and you mentioned that there was a lot of work just to keep Women's Place afloat and not necessarily to do the specific work that you were hired to do. So, can you just elaborate on the state of Women's Place when you came to it and what was happening and how you plugged in.

DT: A little bit I guess. Women's Place was largely run on CETA money. CETA stands for Community Education Training Act, I think. So, we had—Women's Place before I came on board had a very strong reliance upon these federal dollars that paid for employees. Then the Republicans came in and axed it, and it just was no more. So, finding ways to fund the organization was really, really challenging. The city and the county had minor grants that built

over the years, and eventually Women's Place became a United Way agency. That helped, and it helped to fund the Sexual Assault Program. We did a lot of calling people up on the phone and asking for donations in order to pay the rent.

I went to volunteer immediately. I stayed in leadership in the organization, but I think it wasn't very long after that that CETA was axed. I just stayed on. I'd had a little bit of savings from my work in New Jersey, so I just continued to work and so did other people. It was largely volunteer. I don't even think—there may have been a few part-time employees, but it was a volunteer organization trying to run a volunteer organization, and pay the rent for the office space, and the answering service and so on to run the crisis line. A lot of the worries were about money and how to keep it open. It was still—the Women's Place was a collective, so it was a consensus decision-making going on. There was a lot of camaraderie in those early times because of how really challenging it was. We had to lean on each other heavily in order to keep the organization going and open. I think we did a great job. It was a small group of committed people, and it was—we were all overworked, as women often are. Yet, we kind of pulled it together, and over time got more United Way funds. It was a long time before we went for the United Way funds, but we finally did get those, and got county monies, and continued with the city grant until the city stopped funding non-profits, private donations, fundraising. We did garage sales and all kinds of ways we ended up trying to keep the doors open. We believed in what we were doing so we kept doing it.

DW: So, how would you describe the mission, the philosophy of Women's Place when you came on in 1980?

DT: It was clearly a feminist goal, feminist orientation, and the work was done with feminist consciousness. It was, the intention was to provide services to rape victims and women who had been battered, and to do that with an understanding of women's empowerment and our own, but we kind of left that behind at times—all in service of the cause. We were rabid. We believed so—I mean really we were mad. We were mad. We were on a roll. We wanted to change the world, so there had to be education programs, and there had to be Take Back the Night marches, and there had to be interviews on the radio and the television. I'm not saying that these things are themselves rabid and mad—I'm not saying that. I'm saying that the fervor that we approached work with was remarkable, I think. Where do we get the energy? I don't know. But I think we were—you know it was a remarkable time. It was time of the consciousness of—I mean American consciousness was dawning. We started talking about child sexual abuse. I mean that was a huge thing, and it was never even talked about. When I came on there'd just been the beginning, the murmurings of it. Florence Rush and Sandra Butler were beginning to talk about child sexual abuse, and it was a really big deal. The compulsory nature of silence of women's oppression even as children, adult certainly and men are repressed in that too, was the only way. Silence was the only way. So, we just started to say these things out loud and talk about rape prevention, and deal with the police in the way that they interview victims. There was just no end to what needed to be done. We had to form some kind of alliance with other groups in the state that were doing that too and form some kind of state

network so we could have support for ourselves. But there was just so much to do. It was lovely and lively and mad and it was workaholic and it was fun and it was painful and it was life. So that was to answer your question about what was feminism and Women's Place whenever it came on. It was a lot.

DW: It's very tangible the way you talk about it. I can just about imagine that energy. And so, how would you describe the response from the community at large? So you all were out there trying to make social change happen, doing things like "Take Back the Night", which is very outward, it's in the community. What was the landscape, if you will, of the Missoula community with what you all at Women's Place were trying to do—responses from the media or other mainstream institutions that you all were working with, which is the public at large? Do you recall?

DT: Oh, yeah, I remember lots of things. I remember when a woman applied for a grant to do rape advocacy at the hospital and the county commissioners gave it to her even though we were the rape advocacy center and how her strong alliance with the police prompted her to batter and barrage the rape victim with all kinds of stuff and I remember that being a painful time for me. I'm sure my pride was wounded. From this older and hopefully somewhat wiser position I can see a lot of difficulties that arose from personalities, but at the time I thought it was all principled. But that's like an old painful thing. But I think in general people were nice to us. Sometimes they were patronizing, but they were for the most part, nice to us. I think that people had a difficulty understanding such things as a "woman only" space. We tried to maintain a "woman only" space, a women's place, because we wanted to serve women and most of those women that we were—many of those women that we were serving were literally victims, physically or sexually or emotional victims of men, and we wanted to create a space that was free of men's voices and energy, and we wanted to have a collective that was all women who served women and I think that that was hard for people to understand that and sometimes there were—you know, there was the understanding, or the presumed understanding that we were male bashers or that we were men haters, or that we held men responsible for all the evils of the world. So I think that for a time prevailed and I think that's a normal societal response to liberation movement of any group of people and so we weren't too surprised about it. But I think, you know, we were in a community that was for its time, I think for any time in a small, a small western town, really doing well. I mean, I think Missoula handled its feminists pretty well.

DW: And so, let's talk about the structure of Women's Place as the collective, which is a very feminist idea and I understand at some point, I think after you came, after maybe about ten years of the Women's Place being open, and it was maybe growing too large, consensus was getting too difficult to maintain, there was questioning of the collective model and there was efforts to restructure. So were you involved in any of that of that restructuring?

DT: Any and all. We tried restructuring many different times, because like you said, the pure collective model just didn't work. It was unwieldy. I like the model and I was one of its

proponents and believed that we should try our darnedest to keep it as a consensus decision-making model. But it was clear that the different levels of involvement from volunteers, paid staff, leaders, community—the different, all the different levels of involvement precluded full participation in each and every decision about the direction of the organization. And it just wasn't logical; you can't do it like that. The level of inefficiency is phenomenal. And then you end up making bad choices because people agree to things that they don't know the full meaning of or, in the case of Women's Place, things that really needed to happen were very difficult to adopt in lieu of people having a full understanding of what was being proposed. So we tried different things. I know in '83—I think it was in '83—we tried a restructuring model and tried to make tiers of decision-making and that worked to some extent. We tried a different form of that a few years later. You know, we were just trying to modify but trying to stay with the idea of people having as much voice in the management of an organization as possible. I, for one, believe that the heart of the feminism that Women's Place was called to do was, in fact, the growing feminist consciousness and practice of those of us who were involved.

So it wasn't just us, you know, people who got our stuff together delivering services to the people who have been abused or raped. That model was not palatable to me. I liked much better the idea that we are all in process. And so, the idea of including the volunteer members in as much decision making as possible was very attractive to me, because that is part of empowerment, that is part of learning to think as a decision maker, learning how an organization is managed, having opportunity to participate in different activities and that seemed to me as much a part of feminist practice as helping somebody who had been raped. So we just tried in every which way that we could. And it still was unwieldy and it never really worked well and yet somehow in 1993 we celebrated 20 years of Women's Place history. That seems to me to say a lot.

DW: Yes, definitely.

DT: So, and then, I don't know, there was something about getting to 20. I guess we were mature and ripe. And so the final effort to restructure and let go of the collective and let go of consensus decision-making and adopt a board was met with considerable resistance. I, actually, had been won over to that way of thinking, but it was a hard change for the organization and I left, in part because of that, because I just couldn't bear to see the organization choke itself into the ground.

DW: Oh no. It was over this decision to just leave the collective behind all together and go to sort of –an executive director was hired and a board—

DT: Right. Right. And then the organization actually did do that. They did adopt the model that I and a few other women were promoting. But, I think it was too late and the organization, well there's other reasons too.

DW: Yes, there's never just one reason.

DT: No. I really did finally become a true believer in the need to streamline and that it was time for us to take our full responsibility as an agency (I always hated that word), but still, we weren't any longer a grass roots organization dependent upon volunteers exclusively. We were now accountable to the state for statistical gathering, and we had employees and we had grants to answer to. And we needed to be able to do them with a greater amount of effectiveness and accountability. I was finally won over—kicking and screaming run over—to that idea. But it still had trouble flying. So that was place for me to retire from that feminism, that feminist activity.

DW: And so, what was the other side? There was a big schism it seems, people who wanted to keep the collective, and people who acknowledged or recognized the need to change and let that go. And you were on both sides because it took you a while to—

DT: At different times.

DW: —go over to the other side.

DT: Yes, change was always resisted.

DW: So what was the perspective of the other side of the collective who was continuing to resist the structural change?

DT: At which point? The '83 restructuring or the—you know, about every two or three years there was an effort to restructure.

DW: And so?

DT: Yes, change is very hard. You can imagine a collective, people who really do like the familiarity and the fraternity or the sorority. That feeling of being part of a group that is very cool, very loving, sweet and thoughtful and intelligent and powerful women. It is like moving some kind of ocean liner through the water, it doesn't move very fast. There has always been resistance to change.

DW: Elaborate more on the point you made about Women's Place, in a sense having a couple of different missions, if you will. One is to definitely provide direct services, but then also, as you mentioned, to do processing of the people who were there, volunteering, working, sort of a personal growth and development of the people who were servicing. So can you tell me how you all did that? Some stories or encounters of how that was structured within Women's Place? Tending to the people who worked there?

DT: Well, originally there were consciousness-raising groups. And that was the way that people began to look at their own lives and name their own oppression. When I came on board in '80,

Clear Water Collective, which was a group of women that had been a woman's place, were offering different workshops and personal growth opportunities, and those of us who were Women's Place then, their office was next door to ours, we sort of shared space. We took advantage of that. A huge piece of feminist consciousness development and personal development, which I see as being…A really big piece of that development of members happened during training. And this happened over time, training evolved over time, but it really got to be a way for people to learn about feminism and about its practice and think about things, and learn such skills as active listening, which doesn't maybe on the surface seem like a feminist activity, but it turns out it is because if you can listen to yourself and be able to assert what it is that you are thinking and feeling and wanting and be able to encourage that in another, it's really quite an empowering thing. Just as an anecdote about how that might happen.

So training got to be a really big deal and after a while it was 40 hours of training and that was offered to anywhere from 15 to 30 women in the community twice a year. There were a lot of women in the Missoula community and surrounding areas, maybe all over the country, who had that training and that was, for some of them, their introduction to feminism. It was very liberating itself. That was a big part of it. I think there is something about sitting around in a weekly meeting and talking about our lives and developing a social structure that is empowering to women. Different things happen in a group of women than happen in a mixed group. Often women defer to men in a mixed group and men have the opinions and women don't say much or they don't disagree. But, in a group of women, there is likely to be quite lively discussions and disagreements and all kinds of things going on. I guess those are the main things. We always had monthly potlucks, so that was a fun time to talk. We always had some kind of in-service and discussion afterwards.

There are possibilities for advanced training too. For a while we had a child sexual abuse-counseling program. People could train specifically to be group facilitators and take part in that particular program that was a community-based program. There were all kinds of discussion group offshoots—we had book studies, we always had committee stuff going on, people were reading and reporting on different feminist tracks, we were going to conferences, many of us went to the state meeting, which always had opportunities for personal development. Let's see, there was some other detail I almost forgot, I guess I did forget. Stuff like that.

DW: A lot at any rate.

DT: Yes, a lot of stuff going on.

DW: So, in terms of the leaders and facilitators at Women's Place, you just mentioned you would—in terms of where you got your knowledge and training to teach or facilitate others. That happens, the conferences you went to, your own reading, and your own educating?

DT: We were voracious. We were reading and talking and thinking. I think about some of the personalities whose intellectual was delightful—Tananon(?), whose commitment to understanding feminist issues was strong. I just think about those wonderful people and how they helped. Lots of great people. A lot of people over those 131/2 years that I was involved in that organization.

DW: Now were you there—this is something I came across in the archives that sounded kind of fun—there was a party at some point called "Ladies against Women" . . .

DT: Oh yeah.

DW: What can you tell me about that?

DT: Oh, it was just a way to have fun. And there were some people who tended to be dramatic and this was a way for them to act all out. We would dress up. It was like a costume party. We would dress up and have fun. And you know, our bustiers, completely overdone makeup, beehive hairdos and mini skirts.

DW: So there is a feminist distinction between the term woman and the term lady?

DT: Well, yeah. We really tried to reclaim that word women as a good thing—that it is good to be a woman and we actually are women. We were always focusing on language. So, that was a way to focus on language. And what does it say when you call somebody a lady? Its origins are in class. You don't get to be a lady unless you are of a particular socio-economic class. So, you look at the origins of that. So, what is wrong with the word women? Oh, well, there is something sexual about it and women, I mean, ladies, aren't supposed to be like that. So you begin to deconstruct and do some consciousness about words all the time. It was just one way to have fun with that. And we all had a blast. We made ourselves laugh and invited everyone who wanted to come and have a good time.

DW: Great. Okay, so, you just mentioned the topic of class. Can you comment on your understanding of the intersection of race, class, and gender and sexuality? We know now, and probably then too, that you can't just talk about one without these others, that they are all intersected: race, class, gender, sexuality. How was that part of what was happening at Women's Place? Was there discourse around this at that time?

DT: Oh, yeah. I think we were largely white middle-class feminist, and the weakness inherent in that socio-economic grouping. A lot of the consciousness we did, a lot of training materials we did were about class and race. There was a whole long stretch of every training session spent on awareness about oppression and how people experienced that and being able to identify ourselves as part of the oppressive class, the oppressor class, if that fits, and being able to see what behaviors of ours are oppressive to people of different race, sex, gendered, class. My perpetual disappointment was the way that it was. There wasn't a whole lot that could have

been done about it. I just always felt like we addressed those issues inadequately. We didn't tolerate language that dismissed groups of people. We tried to be conscientious about that. I don't know. There is more you can do and I always wish that we had. Like, for example, even in talking about battered women, I don't know how you can ever talk about the phenomenon of battering unless you are talking about how economics affects it. It's like, yes, there is compulsory heterosexuality, and women are supposed to live with men and all men are evil and beat their women if they can and definitely want power, because that is what they are born with, at least minimally. Okay, okay, okay. But what about that whole fishbowl of economics that holds things in place and then women have no choice about being with men because there isn't a welfare program that will support them? It seems to me that a whole lot of social policy is based on how we can best use women and if we don't talk about that then we are not ever going to really make any headway in trying to get to a place of women being able to be who we were meant to be—be the great people that we were meant to be.

DW: The freedom and the liberation—

DT: The freedom to be creative and develop ourselves and change the world and be adventurous. If we don't talk about . . . economics and class have a lot to do with oppression.

DW: Okay. So, you left before Women's Place closed, but it sounds like not too much before.

DT: I guess it was about a year or a year and a half maybe.

DW: So, were you involved at all in the closing?

DT: No.

DW: Or in that decision to close?

DT: No.

DW: No?

DT: I was blessed. It would have been a terribly hard decision. It would have been a very hard thing to go through. I'm glad I didn't have to do it.

DW: But nonetheless I imagine you were still aware of Women's Place and that it was about to close and when it was closing. And so, from your position on the outside, if you will, how did you experience the closing of Women's Place and what was your view of that event?

DT: Well, I just think it was too little too late and probably unavoidable. A friend of mine and I have talks about whether or not it was inevitable, and I tend to think that maybe it wasn't. She thinks that Women's Place had done the job that it had set out to do and it was time to move

itself along and come to a nice little closure and maybe she's right about that one. But it was a loss. It was, I'm sure, to everyone.

DW: And so you think about it in those terms, even today? As a loss?

DT: As a loss?

DW: Yeah.

DT: I don't anymore. I guess I don't really think about it very much anymore. I think maybe that it was. Women's Place was. It just was and it was an entity and it was a phenomenon that took place in a particular time and space and era and accomplished and failed to accomplish all of these various things, and helped and didn't help all these various women and gave meaning and depth and lack thereof and all of the various contradictions that are involved in trying to hold an organization like that in one piece that is so non-traditional and so organic and so rebellious and so everything. If it had succeeded as a non-profit agency with a board of directors, I imagine that ultimately it might have lost its feminist radicalism. I don't know, maybe it was good. Maybe it was good that what we have—maybe it did do its job. I don't miss it. I don't think of it as a loss anymore. I've moved on and I think we all have. The YWCA is doing a pretty darn good job of providing the services the Women's Place did. It's a pity that there hasn't been some other more, some kind of organization, loose or otherwise that has sprung up to promote more feminist education. But, you know, these are not the times of feminism. This is a post-feminist year. We do what we can.

DW: And so, you have moved on and now can you talk about the work you are doing now? Is it still women related? Feminist related?

DT: It is. I have it in my blood. I don't know how you can see; I mean everything exists in a context. As a counselor, I would be doing the people I work with a disservice, if I didn't help them see their lives in context and help them name what is that context and how are they existing in it. So, I don't know, it's part of what I do.

DW: How do you keep yourself well read on feminist theory? It's interesting to think about being in a post-feminist era now. At the same time, feminism in a university setting continues to grow and there are a growing number of PhDs in women's studies itself. It is becoming its own discipline. So there is still all of this new thought, discourse and theories coming out. And even though feminism is such a—you know, the "f" word—there is some ambivalence about that word. So it's happening and its not and you talk about it, but in a different way. How are you staying abreast with feminism?

DT: Well, to tell you the truth, my interests have varied. Whereas at one time, virtually everything that I read was either feminist fiction or feminist tract or this pamphlet, or yet another Barbara Ehrenreich book or yet another socialist feminist doctorine, doctrinaire, that's

not my only interest. So I read a lot more varied things than I used to and try to get a little bit broader view of this world than my rabid self at once was.

DW: So I want to talk about being a mother to a daughter and what that's been like for you raising a daughter while you were so involved with Women's Place and feminism was just so intricate into your life. You want to talk about that relationship at all?

DT: Sure. Yes. I'd talk about mothering and grandmothering forever. I think it's a remarkable way to grown oneself up. When I decided not to use power control as a means of controlling my daughter, it was quite an eye opener. I mean, I hadn't…I think everyone who uses different tactics to keep other people in line, even if they are your kids, you don't see what you are doing until you take that option away from yourself. I did, and my relationship with my daughter has changed dramatically since then. She was about 11 I guess when I made that decision. Was she 11?

Well, anyway, I finally decided that I wanted to do the work that I was asking other people to do and what other place to do it than in your own parenting style. She benefited from that and raises her children in a non-violent way. She has three of them. I get to take part in that and those relationships with those amazingly exuberant, creative, and unruly children (bless their little hearts for being unruly).

It was hard. It was very hard to try to answer to my calling, or what I thought was my calling, with so little income. It was very hard being a single mom and try to do what I thought I had to do and still support my daughter. Some of the choices that I made I would probably do differently now. I think I would be more self-caring and therefore would probably be a better mom. I wouldn't be so all consumed with Women's Place the second time around. I think I would be balanced more. I think that my identity would be dispersed a little bit further from just feminist activist. I think I would maybe have a broader base of identity. That's probably what I would do. I would be less anxious, would play more, and would spend more time with my daughter. But, that can't be, so I play more and am less anxious and am more loving to my grandchildren.

DW: It's nice you have a lot of forgiveness in you.

DT: Yeah. I get to do it over. I get to do it right this time.

DW: And what's your daughter's name?

DT: Christian.

DW: Christian? Was she at Women's Place with you?

DT: Yeah, a lot.

DW: Did she come?

DT: And she knew all the principle characters all the time. She once told me about some friends that I was hanging out with at Women's Place, close people that, people that were really close to me, and therefore spent time at my home and so on. She once told me when she was pretty little, "Mom, if you ever be a lesbian, I will just have to divorce you".

DW: Oh my.

DT: Because it was so . . . she was just going into the pre-teen, conform to everything and I always remember that. Uh-oh, we're going to be in trouble here, friend.

DW: So does she consider herself a feminist now?

DT: Yeah. She's very conscious person. She's remarkable, a remarkable mom, a remarkable person.

DW: Okay, we are kind of winding down, so I wanted just to open up some space if you want to talk about or say something that I haven't asked you about that you feel is important to say or talk about.

DT: I guess in talking about race and class, I wanted to talk about heterosexism and homophobia. I think that was one of Women's Place strengths. I guess I want to brag about it a little bit. I think that we helped many people to see another one of those compulsory things, that heterosexuality is considered in our culture compulsory and that maybe we could question that because as long as it is the only way, then we, as long as heterosexuality is the only option, then it is no option and women's lives aren't filled with options, such as celibacy or serial monogamy or lesbianism or bisexuality. I think that in order for women to truly be the peer of men that compulsory nature of compulsory heterosexuality must be stopped. We just can't go on like that. We have to have the option of saying no to men.

And I'm proud of that part of Women's Place function. That we really did do some consciousness raising and some thoughtfulness and tried to live and incorporate our ideas about homophobia and heterosexism and naming it and dealing with it in ourselves and trying to make women's choices broader.

Is there any other thing? Let's see. I didn't talk much about the difficulties of many women trying to operate an organization, many women of different class and race and age and background and ideas. It was really hard. It was really really hard to try to come to consensus about important things when people have such different levels of involvement and then are such different people. And I think it's remarkable that we tried. I think it was a grand experiment. And I think learning about that model about collectiveness and learning about the

model of consensus decision-making is really an important part of learning about how do people function and what works and what's been tried and what were their difficulties.

And I think, too, that in an organization like Women's Place attracted the most wounded of us and that made it very hard to function from a place of any kind of logic. And yet we needed to function from a place of logic and we didn't have the facilities to be therapists for each other or to provide therapy within the organization. That wasn't our calling and that wasn't what we were supposed to be doing. And yet, here we had as our members the most wounded of women. I think that an organization that deals with the wounding of women will attract wounded women. We're all wounded to some extent. I wanted to say that about how challenging that was to try. There was a reason for our anxiety. It was hard and yet so interesting. It was phenomenal. The things that we tried to do in the face of eons of hierarchical organizations and top-down management and "you do it the way we say you do it." And we tried to do it from the bottom. We tried to make it grass roots and women empowering. We tried to include people. It was remarkable. It was a remarkable experience and I benefited enormously from it. And I hope lots of people did. I think they did.

DW: I think so. I love being around town and seeing the twentieth year anniversary poster.

DT: Yeah. It's a nice poster. Besides, can you believe it?

DW: Yes. We have just a couple of minutes if you want to do any more reflection. You were just saying how you have benefited immensely from that experience and I imagine other experiences since then doing other work with women on women's issues. And so, do you want to share any sort of wisdom or meaning that you have gained out of all your years working on this issue?

DT: I like it that I got to come of age, if you will, come into maturity at a time when adventure was the code. And we got to try new things and we got to think new ways and I really appreciate having been a part of that. And I think if there was any wisdom to pass that would be it. Try—go for it. Try something different, try new. Connect with your sisters. Try ways of being and living and doing and thinking that you haven't tried before. Create, create something new. And don't just accept the status quo as being the only option. Try other things.

DW: That's great. Well, thank you very much Deborah.

DT: Thank you Dawn.

DW: You're welcome. This is Dawn Walsh with the Montana Feminist History Project ending an interview with Deborah Tomas.

[End of Interview]