

Oral History Number: 378-032

Interviewee: Joan Hurdle

Interviewer: Diane Sands

Date of Interview: April 17, 2001

Project: Montana Feminist History Oral History Collection

Diane Sands: This is Diane Sands interviewing Joan Hurdle. We're now up to April 17...something like that. So Joan, why don't you just start by giving a sort of a brief biography of yourself, who you are, what you do, where you came from.

Joan Hurdle: All right. I was born in Glendive (Montana). I was born in Glendive only because my mother went home to her parents to have her baby. My dad was in construction work. His father and his brothers were engineers, but he didn't go to college because I was born. He went to Boulder Dam on a freight train. I lived in construction towns all over the west. I lived at Boulder Dam, Parker Dam, Shasta Dam, Bonneville, Grand Coulee. My life was in construction camps. I was a really free child in northern California at Shasta Dam. We stayed there for four or five years, and I panned for gold and ran in the hills and built forts and swam in the creek and really had a wonderful time. I loved northern California.

Then we moved to Los Angeles and moved a variety of places, but I always came back to Montana in the summer because that's where my grandparents were. A set of grandparents in Glendive and a set of grandparents in Billings. My Billings grandparents had a cabin up at Red Lodge so summers were wonderful, just wonderful with all my cousins. Montana always seemed like home to me so it's not surprising that I ended up going to college here and making it my home. I was gone for twenty years from about 1955 to '75 and then came back.

DS: So what brought you back specifically?

JH: I was working in land use planning in Oregon. We were traveling around with the Land Conservation and Development Commission making videotapes, teaching people to plan and zone around communities. The Oregon people were kind of hostile, and they'd say...one day some woman said to me, "Why don't you go back where you came from instead of telling us what to do with our land." She meant California because that's where I had been the most recently, but I immediately began to think, "Montana". (laughs) Traveling around in eastern Oregon, it was reminding me of Montana. I can remember just sitting on a big rock out there one day and thinking, "I'm going back to Montana." So I did.

DS: So you came back to Billings?

JH: Yes. Came back to Billings, and got my master's degree in Special Ed in Billings because I'd gone to undergraduate there years before.

DS: And was that also in education?

JH: Yes, yes. So then after that I taught in Powell, Wyoming, for three years and got my administrative credential in Bozeman, Montana and ended up in Colstrip, Montana. I retired from Colstrip school district. I was in Colstrip for more than ten years. As soon as I retired from Colstrip I moved my trailer—of course you live in a mobile home in Colstrip—moved my trailer back to Billings. No sooner got settled in Billings than I realized that the representative who was representing the district I was living in wasn't representing me. So I ran against him in the Democratic primary. That was Tim Whalen (?).

DS: So you served in the legislature for—

JH: This'll be the end...right now is the end of my fourth term—

DS: For eight years.

JH: I served eight years, yeah.

DS: So what made you want to be a legislator other than you didn't like the views of the existing legislator?

JH: I've always been interested in politics, Diane, always. It's always been very interesting to me. I've often had the...I've just felt that we should all participate more in politics and working together's the way to solve our problems. Even Angela Davis said, "We have all the system in place to do whatever we need to do if we only had the will to do it."

DS: So how do you define yourself as a political person?

JH: How do I define myself? Well, I guess as a progressive, a progressive.

DS: What does that mean to you?

JH: That means the opposite of the good 'ol boy. (laughs) People willing to look at new ideas. There are some wonderfully progressive legislators, new Democrats I think, in the legislature right now.

DS: What are your roots that would cause you to be or the experiences in your past that cause you to be a progressive person?

JH: One memory stands out, well a couple. First of all is arguing politics in my family all the time. We always talked politics. My uncles and my dad would argue with each other. My grandparents would argue with each other. Talking politics was our form of recreation. But when I was living in Los Angeles in the sixties, I circulated petitions to help liberalize the California abortion law. It was amazing to me to realize as I stood out in the parking lots in front

of grocery stores and asked people to sign that petition that no woman ever refused to sign that petition at that time. Men were a lot more reluctant to sign it and a little more unaware of what it was about.

But at that time, before the whole situation became so polarized, no woman refused to sign it unless it was just somebody so busy they didn't have time to stop. But there was not the polarization. Everybody realized that this was an option that women need.

DS: How did you come to do that? Was it an organization? Were you in a consciousness-raising group? How did you—

JH: No, I can't even really remember. I think I just read in the LA Free Press that it was happening and wrote for a petition and started doing it. I wasn't really active in any organizations then. My kids were little. (laughs)

DS: When you went to Oregon, were you also similarly involved in any activities that involved women's (unintelligible)?

JH: No, actually in Oregon I was more or less dropped out. We were building a house in the woods, and I wasn't even teaching. That was sort of a drop-out period, living in the woods in Oregon near the ocean. It was nice, but...Then I became involved in land use in Oregon, and that was really how I got back into being involved.

DS: So when you came back to Montana—you said you came back in 1975—there's certainly a lot of political activity, progressive activity, feminist activity going on. How did you enter that arena then in Montana?

JH: I was involved in the Billings Coalition for Women's Rights which was the forerunner of some other organizations. We had a Women's Center in Billings, and I was on my own borrowing equipment from Eastern and making videotapes about land use planning.

DS: So tell me more about the Billings Coalition for Women's Rights. Who was involved in it, what do you remember about it?

JH: Well, it was...let me see. There was a woman named Daphne (laughs) and Pat Regan I think was involved in it.

DS: Was it a coalition of women's groups or different organizations?

JH: No, it was just individual women. It was the predecessor to another women's organization, I can't even think. It might have been NOW (National Organization for Women); it might have evolved into NOW. I think it did, yeah, I think it did. Because my connections with women in

Billings were through NOW when I came back to Billings. After all those years in Colstrip when I came back to Billings, I immediately connected up with the NOW women.

DS: Had you been a member of NOW before?

JH: Yes, yes.

DS: Like a national NOW or something like that?

JH: I think in California I belonged to national NOW so I haven't belonged to national NOW for years, years and years.

DS: What is it about NOW that interested you?

JH: It was the most progressive organization that I knew of that was fairly effective. I think NOW has had a good reputation nationally and was able to take a stance that was well-known for progressive ideas.

DS: Out in Colstrip it was probably pretty—

JH: Well, it was interesting. We had a big NOW chapter in Colstrip. We did; we had a good NOW chapter in Colstrip. We had a lot of women workers, and there was a woman named Linda who was suing Montana Power Company for discrimination. She was...I can't think of her last name, but she was very active in organizing that. I was a principal of a new elementary school there, and I let her take her depositions for her case in the school. (laughs) Which certainly didn't make me popular with people. It took me a while to realize. There were a lot of Bechtel people there at that time, and there were people from all over the world and it was a fairly cosmopolitan place for a place a hundred miles east of Billings. I remember our music teacher kept a world map and put pins where all the kids were from, and they were literally from all over the world. We had some wonderful people at Colstrip at that time. So I didn't realize how controversial some of the things I was doing were.

For example we would have black history month for the whole month. We had only a couple of black families in Colstrip, and we didn't have enough kids to do black history month for a whole month unless we kept a lot of them in blackface a lot of the time. (laughs) I actually had NOW women come to the school and talk about women's rights and things to some of the older girls. This was in elementary school. So I was very controversial and didn't even know it.

DS: So what kinds of other things did the...and how large was that NOW group?

JH: I could remember a meeting with probably twenty women there. I took my granddaughter to one of the meetings when she came to visit me. I can't really remember any of the projects

specifically. I was really involved with my own job, so I just sort of attended the meetings. I wasn't an officer or anything.

DS: But that's quite a statement that a town the size of Colstrip could have a NOW chapter.

JH: A NOW chapter with twenty or so. I can remember even larger meetings than that too where we would have thirty or forty women. It was great.

DS: So when you moved to Billings, you became involved with the NOW chapter there.

JH: Yeah, and the NOW chapter in Billings was really kind of falling away at that time. I think part of the reason was because there used to be a lot of strong lesbian women in NOW, and once lesbian organizations got going on their own—PRIDE and all those kinds of things—then we lost a lot of strong lesbian women that we really needed to keep NOW going. But when I got back to Billings, I spent a long time and a lot of effort trying to keep NOW going. I put out a newsletter for about three or four years every month, every single month. I have all those old copies if you'd ever be interested in them.

DS: I would like all of them.

JH: Okay.

DS: Or a copy of all of them for official archives.

JH: All right. I've been wondering what to do with them in the last few years.

DS: They ought to be preserved forever.

JH: I saved them, and I printed each month. It was a one sheet newsletter, and I would have quotes from [William] "Red" Menahan, the legislator, things like that. I just made it up...I mean, I just did it.

DS: What years was this?

JH: Must have been '91, '92, '93, '94, along in there. About the time I was running. I think my first term I was still doing it, and I tried to get someone to take over it while I was gone. Once in a while that worked and sometimes it didn't. So my first term I was still doing that.

DS: And you were first elected?

JH: Well, I was elected in '94. I ran in '92, but I lost the primary. So I was first elected in '94.

DS: So why do you think it was so difficult to, other than the issue of lesbian leadership, to attract new people into NOW? Or were you pretty successful in getting—

JH: No, we weren't. I don't know, Diane. It's hard to get people attracted to organizations and just come to meetings. I think there has to be an issue that people gather around. It's hard to find that issue. Women are just not going...people in general are not going to meetings and not supporting organizations the way they used to. I know the League of Women Voters is having the same problem. So many organizations are failing now because people are at home sitting on their rear looking at television. We're not desperate enough to join together, to work together to improve things.

DS: Some people may theorize that one of the reasons that someone's organization's fallen off is the leadership are also those of us who are over fifty and that younger women don't necessarily see themselves as feminists or are interested in women's issues or think the problems have been taken care of. What's your perspective on that?

JH: I think that's true to a certain extent. I think young women don't realize how much they have, and how easily they could lose it. Reproductive rights, for example, when you talk to women my age who can remember illegal abortions, it's a completely different story. It's all very nice to sit around and say, "Oh my goodness, abortions aren't nice." It's another thing to realize how important that right is. I don't know...I think young women just don't get it to some extent.

DS: So you mentioned that when you were in California, that's one of the first issues that you became an activist on. Can you tell me why that issue became one that was primary for you?

JH: I think that one is basic to women's rights, but I happen to be one of those people who has had both an illegal abortion and a legal abortion many years later in Oregon. The illegal abortion was a perfect nightmare of course. I remember attending one of these hearings my first session up here where some young women were talking about what abortion had done to them emotionally. I just felt that it was really too bad that they had to blame some of the other problems they've had in their lives on the fact that they had a safe, legal abortion. I mean, they should have had an illegal abortion if they wanted to appreciate what the right means.

DS: So what's the difference? Remember you're speaking to the women 50 years from now.

JH: An illegal, of course, you have no medical care; you just have some quack fishing around. It's an absolute nightmare physically, and you have no physical care. You have no doctor's care, no nurse to hold your hand. I had a legal abortion in Oregon many years later, and I was just stunned because everybody was so nice to me. The nurse did literally hold my hand, and I got a lot of physical care. They took my blood pressure, and they took care of me like a patient.

DS: And the illegal abortion? What was that like?

JH: That was just...as I said, some quack fishing around. You know what he said? Let me tell you what he said when he started to perform the abortion and first put that thing in my vagina. He said, "I bet you've had things in there that felt a lot better than that." (laughs)

DS: I take it this was not a physician or was this—

JH: No I don't think he was. I can't even remember his name or his status.

DS: California? Oregon?

JH: No, actually in eastern Montana.

DS: In eastern Montana? Billings? Was he one of my illegal abortionists?

JH: I think somebody traveling from Lewistown.

DS: What city did he do it in?

JH: Glendive.

DS: In Glendive. What year?

JH: Oh God, let me think, Diane. I hate to talk about this stuff because it's really hard even after all this time. (pauses) What year what that? It must have been about 1951.

DS: Because I'll go look for him in my records. Every community in Montana had people who were either coming in or regulars there doing illegal abortions. (unintelligible)

JH: I'll tell you if women today knew what illegal abortions were like, they'd fight for the reproductive rights to make that decision themselves and have competent medical care if you choose not to carry a pregnancy to term.

I really believe that is the woman's choice. The fetus is entirely dependent on her body for nurturance and it's when the woman gives that baby acceptance that it becomes a baby. If that can't happen, it can't happen.

DS: So why do you think young women don't become more active? We've had many bills in front of the legislature, and we see some young women but they're as likely to come in as a right-to-life activist or more likely in fact.

JH: I know, I know. It's really frightening. I think it's the power of the Christian-right political organization. I'm just appalled that people are gullible enough to believe that stuff. I think that

the Christian-right religious organization hooking up politically with corporate influence is just an alliance made in hell. The Christian-right is sort of sucked in by the corporate influence so that there's this alliance between extreme rich corporate influences and gullible people who think they're doing the correct thing religiously.

DS: So what do you think the Christian-right's perspective is...Contrast it with a feminist perspective of women and the Christian-right's perspective on women.

JH: In my opinion the Christian-right does not really have a view of women. Women are an appendage to their husbands or to the male people. Almost as if they were traditionally and as they still are in many societies, especially Muslim societies, that are really regressive. In regressive societies, women are not considered real people. Some of these bills we had, for instance, fetal rights. That's really frightening to realize that an unborn part of a woman's body could take precedence over the woman. That's scary. But it's all about people's attitudes towards women. Are women real people or are they appendages of men? Property of men or are they real people?

DS: The reproductive rights issue is been one you've been involved in throughout your whole adult life as many of us have. What other activities...Have you sponsored any bills? You, most of the time you've been here, have been trying to protect reproductive rights and be able to move it forward. So what, as a legislator, has been your involvement in reproductive rights issues?

JH: I remember my first term here, I went in to testify against some of the bills that...But I think that these last four terms have been an attack on women's rights. It's just we've been in a defensive posture trying to protect what we have. So I have gone in to testify against some of the bills, but that's really about all I could do. That and write letters and talk to people and try to help people understand how important that reproductive right is.

DS: Repeatedly they have tried, and actually have succeeded in the last few sessions in passing most of the anti-choice legislation of some of the worst only to have it struck down by the court.

JH: Right. During the last session when we had the partial-birth abortion bill as they call it, I said to McGee in Judiciary Committee—I think maybe you were there Diane—, “You know this is going to be declared unconstitutional at the court. Why go to put the people of Montana to all that expense to have to go to court over this?” His response was, “Well, if you think that, then don't challenge it.” (laughs)

DS: I don't think so.

JH: That's the whole attitude. I feel they're really saying, “Women shouldn't challenge what we decide.”

DS: I think that's well put.

So where do you think they'll go with this? You're an old, veteran legislator and you can see this pattern. So they've repeatedly tried and now succeeded passing measures that are unconstitutional because of the Montana Constitution as well as the federal Constitution, so they're blocked. At the federal level they're also blocked by (?) from being able to do the kind of picketing they would like to do of abortion clinics and harassment of physicians. Where's this going?

JH: Oh, Diane, I wish I knew. I don't know. It's really scary. We seem to have been able to hold our own pretty well in Montana. We're losing our abortion providers, that's the sad part of it. It's becoming harder and harder to make that choice when there are no providers. For example, this session we did defeat every one of those terrible bills, every one of them. They aren't even going to court this time. So it's hard to say.

DS: That's a major success, and clearly with the Democrats being in the minority, not that all Democrats are pro-choice because they're not, that means that there were some Republicans who supported those. Why do you think that happened? Are they pro-choice? Are they just seeing that it's fruitless to make this effort or to raise this issue?

JH: I think there are some pro-choice Republicans of course. It just seems to me that sensible people have either already realized that that has to be the woman's decision. I find that many people have come to be able to say that, "This is gotta be up to the woman."

DS: Well, thanks for all your years of struggle on that issue. An important one up here.

In Billings itself you have one of the leading women's reproductive health providers there, Planned Parenthood, which now extends across the state. What's been your involvement with them if anything?

JH: The first time I ran, Joan McCracken was my treasurer, and her name helped bring me funds and helped me get elected. I was really pleased that she was willing to do that because...In fact, Joan McCracken was a speaker at a Democratic breakfast one morning when I decided to run. The previous speaker had been Tim Whalen, and...

DS: Who was a Democrat and anti-choice.

JH: Anti-choice. Yeah, in fact he ended up being the legal council for Montana Right to Life. Then I did some...when they were doing picketing, I did some escorting and things for Planned Parenthood in Billings.

DS: What was that like?

JH: It was kind of scary because you had to go through those mobs of people.

DS: So describe one of those scenes for people who will never see one of those.

JH: Oh I hope not. (laughs) Well, we were bringing in people by car, for example, down the alley and slipping them into back doors because the front was just full of protesters who were handing out pictures of dead fetuses and screaming and praying and acting like nuts. For a woman who's made the tragic choice to have an abortion and the difficult choice to have an abortion to have to go through that kind of gauntlet is really difficult, really really bad.

DS: So you did that a number of times.

JH: Yeah.

DS: Did you ever feel your life was at risk or did you feel safe?

JH: Oh, no I certainly didn't feel safe. The other thing we did at that time was whenever anybody came in the door, we walked with them to the counter to make sure they were really someone who was supposed to be there instead of just someone walking in.

No, you don't feel safe in those kinds of circumstances.

DS: It's interesting we're not seeing much of that kind of activity anymore, and I think the federal case law is the most important for that.

JH: That's right.

DS: Billings Planned Parenthood has now branched out throughout the whole state so that we have Planned Parenthood providers who do abortions across the state of Montana. But Planned Parenthoods and other abortion providers have been the target of violence as you mentioned. Have you seen any of those in Billings?

JH: No I haven't. I haven't seen any of that in Billings. I don't know why. I don't even know if there has been any or not.

DS: None that I recall specifically.

JH: I can't recall. I know they have had to...They had terrible problems in Missoula with Blue Mountain Clinic and in other places and of course we lost the provider from Bozeman, can't think of what her name was. The war goes on.

DS: Do you see it as a war?

JH: Yes I do because I think that women are really in danger of losing their rights. I'm really concerned about women's position in society because I believe that women are...I actually believe that women are godly because I think they're more nurturing and more loving so that I think the status of women should definitely be elevated in our society. The way to prevent abortion is to elevate the status of women and children in our society.

DS: What would that look like?

JH: I would like to see women really honored, really honored and really treasured for their god-like qualities. (laughs) Goddess-like qualities. I think that women almost need an awakening to realize how important they really are in the scheme of things. I can't believe they'd take such a backseat.

DS: Now, certainly, one of the ways that people...women have tried to organize women to take a more activist role. What impact do you think feminism has had in Montana on women, on their consciousness and on their rights?

JH: There are a lot of people, a lot of women who are feminists but don't even really quite consciously realize it. I think when I was going door-to-door the first time I ran, I would tell people right out, "I'm running against Tim Whalen because he doesn't believe in abortion for any reason, not even the health of the mother or in cases of rape or incest. I just think that's too extreme." When I talked to people really frankly—that was my rap on every door I knocked on—I was amazed at the response to that because I thought people were amazingly feminist and especially older women. I was really impressed with older women because they all got it. (laughs) It seems like a lot of the young right-to-lifers are just people who don't get it.

DS: I'm gonna flip this tape over so that we—

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

DS: So clearly you define yourself as a feminist, but how would you define feminism? What is it? What does it mean to you?

JH: I think feminists are people who believe and understand that women are full-fledged people, full-fledged people not an appendage of a man. Women need to step up to the plate if we're gonna do anything at all with the world and take the responsibility to make the world a better place by installing some feminine values. Because feminine values are the ones that are the good ones. (laughs)

DS: How do you see that play out in terms of legislative issues? You've been so involved in the last few years in public policy activism. Were there bills that you carried or bills that you supported or bills that you tried make sure passed or didn't pass? What are those measures that you think we've struggled to try to do either successfully or not to elevate women and children's status?

JH: One of the things I've been really concerned about is the idea of treating women in prison just like men in prison. Women are very close to their children, and their rehabilitation perhaps depends entirely on reestablishing that relationship whenever it's possible. All rehabilitation for both men and women depends on relationships. So with women, the idea that they're separated from their children as much as they are is just terrible. I don't believe that most of the women who are in prison should even be there. They should be with their children. But this is like equity with a vengeance. It's like, we'll teach these women if they want to be like men, and I think corrections is really quite guilty of that, equity with a vengeance. But so's a lot of our society.

DS: Well you raise the whole women's prison issue because several years ago we've moved the women's prison from Warm Springs where it was housed in basically an abandoned nurses headquarters to a newer facility in Billings so it's now in...Is it in your district?

JH: Yes, it's in my district.

DS: So what's been your involvement with the prison, with that system of moving with the establishment of programs?

JH: After my first term in the legislature, I went into the prison as a volunteer for over a year or about a year, and I went in every week to teach a writing class thinking that it would be a good way to have the women in prison express themselves. That was really a revelation because for one thing it was very difficult to work with the Department of Corrections to do that. But the really shocking thing was that when I went in there to do this writing class, the women befriended me and began telling me all kinds of things. A lot of stuff I took with a grain of salt because you have to in those circumstances. But one time, for example, one of the women told

me—in fact several of them told me—that some male guards had been invited to watch a strip search. I felt that I needed to make sure that wasn't happening. So I went to the administration and said, "This is what I've heard, and we need to make sure this is not happening." They really stonewalled it. They would not look into; they would not reassure me it couldn't happen. Finally an investigator talked to me, and he said, "We just don't have time to look into this." It was really discouraging. Then Sally Johnson came from Helena and came to the prison and said, "Look hear, Joan, asking questions like that you could be sued for libel." (pauses) Yes.

DS: She's the assistant warden or some title.

JH: Yes, she's the head...one of the top administrators in the entire Department of Corrections.

So I still persisted and said I wanted to know whether or not this could happen and make sure that it couldn't happen. Finally the investigator came back again and called me and said, "Well, we've looked into the fact that those particular men," I have names, "Those particular men weren't on duty that night so that couldn't have happened." But it turned out later, when I began talking to the women again, that there had been a workshop that night. Those particular men were in the prison. So I think it happened. I think some terrible things happen in prisons, and that's all the more reason why women should never be there.

DS: What's your view on whether men should be guards in women's prisons?

JH: There should be no men in women's prison in positions of authority. None whatsoever.

DS: Remember that was all a discussion. When we were in the planning process for moving the prison, part of the discussion was 'what should the model be?' Is it a women's model or is it putting women into a men's model of prison as you were saying earlier? Early discussion with some of the experts around the country was: because the women's lack of self-esteem and the conditions that they came out of that many of them needed to have good strong women role models etcetera and so having women as a warden—women correctional officers—while they're not perfect would be definitely preferential to having men.

JH: Absolutely.

DS: All of those were rejected as a possibility.

JH: As I said it's equity with a vengeance. "These women wanna to be like men, we'll treat 'em like men." It's just vengeful, and women can feel vengeance in prison.

DS: Many of the women who were there disproportionate number of Native American, and you have a significant Native American population in your district as well. What's been your involvement in those issues?

JH: Specifically what issues are you thinking of?

DS: Or just experience representing Native American women's issues.

JH: Native Americans are treated very badly in prison, there's no question about that. They suffer bias wherever they are. There're way too many. I think that Indian women particularly, it seems like they get a double whammy when they're sentenced. Diane Bolcomming (?), for example, getting forty years for accountability for robbery or something. Wow. And then she had...She's a very intelligent young woman, and she finally got herself to the point where she was in a pre-release and she was attending college at Rocky when the Mickey Gamble thing happened and they took...She was one of the women that was taken back from the pre-release to the prison in chains at that point.

DS: This was all because of—

JH: That was because the Corrections Department had changed their policy after Mickey Gamble, and they decided that people who had that much left to serve shouldn't be in a pre-release so they chained 'em up and took 'em back. I mean that's just punitive for pleasure.

DS: This was the Mickey Gamble incident of taking women off to Red Lobster for dinner and the reaction of the public and the state of "too soft" on women prisoners.

JH: Right. Too soft on women prisoners.

DS: There are a lot of other economic issues that you've been involved in advocating for women. Are there any of those that you'd like to talk about that you've been doing as a legislator and an activist?

JH: I wonder why I can't think of anything. I'm kind of blank. What are you thinking of?

DS: I'm thinking about you've carried a lot of different bills over the years some of which have to do with women's healthcare, some of which have to do with...What was the one that? Go ahead.

JH: I don't think I've carried any on women's healthcare. I don't think I have. This time I carried the tobacco bill. I'd like to see the tobacco settlement award funds being used for healthcare rather than just being used to balance the budget and general fund. But of course this administration has gutted the Tobacco Prevention Program as well as, except for the forty percent—thank god that we got passed as an initiative—the forty percent healthcare trust. The other sixty percent just goes into the general fund to balance the budget, which is bad because there are so many important things we could do. There was a bill that, I think it was Michelle Lee's bill, to expand CHIP to the point where the mothers would be covered. That would be a

wonderful thing to do, and there would be funds for it if we were using the tobacco money for healthcare as we should be.

DS: Why do you think we're not?

JH: I don't think that women and children are a priority for these conservative Republican legislators. There are priorities are tax cuts and things like that.

DS: Let's go to the issue of...and I know you've worked for a lot of other women candidates and progressive candidates, and we currently have a woman as governor who is a Republican and one of the people who's refused to fund these programs that you're talking about. What is your perspective as a feminist who's worked for women to be in positions of power of watching the first person be a Republican, conservative Republican?

JH: I've really been disappointed in Republican women in general, including Judy Martz. But the Republican women in the legislature this time, you know I don't know what is wrong with them. They just sort of do as they're told. I've actually seen some of the men go over with thumbs up or thumbs down and show 'em how to vote. I don't know what it is. The Republican women are really disappointing. The only one that can even speak for herself at all is Cindy Younkin and she's another lapdog for industry so I'm just very disappointed. Clarice Schrupf is a retired teacher, and she just voted against education every time. When that list came out with her name as having voted against education, she was just in shock. I don't know whether she didn't realize that she hadn't been doing that or what.

DS: That hasn't always been the case. There've been strong Republican women legislators.

JH: I know there have been. Toni Rucell (?). There've been good strong Republican women. I can't think of any other one besides her, but I'm sure there have been.

DS: But much of them before the rise of this sort of Christian-right.

JH: Yes, this Christian-right alliance with the corporate interests is really, I think, really frightening.

DS: You certainly see it up here.

So are you still involved with the women's prison in some capacity?

JH: I had a bill this time to try to get them to expand their visiting and to do something with reuniting mothers with children or any care-giving custodial parent with their child. It could be a man who's taken care of his children to that extent and he would have been included. But the Senate judiciary killed it. It got through House judiciary and passed the floor of the House and got to Senate judiciary and Rick Holden and Al Bishop and Grossfield killed it.

DS: Why?

JH: I don't know. Al Bishop probably just because it was my bill. He and I've clashed a number of times in Billings on various issues. I think they basically don't understand. I think Rick Holden was afraid that it would turn out to be something with the Department of Corrections would have to do that women would sue them over. (laughs)

DS: So are you welcome to go visit the women's prison?

JH: Both Carol Juneau and I have an appointment with the new director, Slaughter, in a few days, perhaps today or tomorrow. We're going to be discussing that with him. I've had a problem getting inside the prison because if I'm not...if I haven't been cleared as a volunteer then I have to be on someone's visiting list, and once you get on someone's visiting list then you can't visit anyone but that one person. So it's very difficult, and I would like to try to find a way to overcome that so that I can go in and visit with the women in the prison more freely.

DS: Seems absurd that as a legislator you can't do that.

JH: Yeah, so that's something we're gonna talk about.

DS: (unintelligible) future right there.

JH: Legislators should have access.

DS: Any other state agents do.

Didn't you for a while also organize a group of people to be somewhat of a watchdog on the prison?

JH: I had some prison meetings after my third term, I think you may remember talking to me about that.

DS: They were in the paper I believe.

JH: People were really interested, but that whole thing ended kind of pointing toward the restorative justice idea, and the whole fact that we probably shouldn't have so many non-violent people in prison at all. We should save our secure cells for violent people who really need to be separated from society. Restorative justice is a model to look at that kind of thing and such a bill did pass. Christine Kaufmann carried it. I was just thrilled at the way that that bill passed. In fact, that's one of the things I'd like to try to do when I get back to Billings is do some kinds of case management or supervision of people who perhaps don't really need to be in the secure facility.

DS: It needs to be done.

JH: Maybe work with the jail people. I don't really know. It's all just in an embryonic form now. But I'd like to do something like that.

DS: What groups are you currently a member of? Contribute to?

JH: League of Women Voters, Montana Human Rights, AAUW (American Association of University Women). I'm still a national member of NOW. (laughs) I'm involved in the Southside Task Force; although, it's very frustrating. Others, but I can't think of them.

DS: So what's been your role with the League?

JH: Mostly I am just a member. I go to lunch and once in a while I've been the speaker.

DS: What about with AAUW, American Association of University Women?

JH: I've always stuck with them because they're so interested in education. They've got quite a going group. I think a lot of organizations went through cycles. They're going through a pretty positive cycle right now in Billings, but they're not...none of those organizations are really political enough for me. I just don't know where to go with organizations.

DS: And the Human Rights Network?

JH: There's no chapter in Billings now, and I guess I'm not interested in trying to start a chapter and do an organization, getting people to come to meetings. I just kind of tired of all of that.

DS: Does it still meet in Billings?

JH: Nope, no meetings in Billings at all.

DS: Are there any far more informal meetings of women or feminists in Billings currently?

JH: Not that I know of. Not that I know of.

DS: What does that mean?

JH: I don't know, Diane. I don't know what that means. I've gotten interested in a little church in Billings. I go to the African Methodist Episcopal church, the little frame building on the Southside. I lived with a black blues musician for a number of years you may know, and actually we started going to that church together. I find a lot of companionship and friendship there, and I find it's a way to sort of keep track of what's happening a little bit in the religious

community. I'm really concerned about things that are happening in the religious community, and I almost feel you have to be involved in the churches to see that and to even counteract that a little bit.

DS: What is going on in that community for you that you know of?

JH: Every once in a while you run across some written information that's been put out by some church in Billings that says things like, "They've taken God out of the schools." I think it's really important to counteract that, and so I go around saying, "god is in the schools." (laughs)

DS: What's the role of women in that church?

JH: That's another thing that concerns me very much because another thing we've got going in Billings now is Reverend Moon was there, you know. A number of the Southside churches joined in with a big gigantic ceremony and of course, that's all about the subjugation of women. I personally feel that the institution of marriage is about the subjugation of women. So I guess I just feel like I need to be there.

DS: Interesting, I didn't know that they were that active there.

JH: A number of the churches in Billings have grouped together to talk about the importance of marriage even going so far as to say the women should serve the men and things like that. I guess I just feel that it's important to be there to speak out against that kind of stuff.

DS: So there's a discussion group going on in your church relative to that topic, on marriage?

JH: Only informally. Only informally.

DS: Did you say you thought marriage was an oppressive institution?

JH: I think historically it is. I don't think it needs to be, but historically I think it is. I've been really interested in the idea of gay people wanting to be married. I think that's really important. I think it's important for gay people in Montana to take a positive stance. You know, we've spent so much legislative time fighting against the deviant sexual conduct act and fighting against this and that. I think that's a really positive approach. I happened to be in attendance when the woman was talking about the law in Vermont, and I think that family values are important. Family values are important and religious values are important, and somehow we must have those values for ours. We can't be cast out from them.

DS: Which seems to me to be one of the early effective strategies of the right, is to try to define those as theirs and not ours.

JH: Right, they've claimed religion and they've claimed family values, and we can't let that happen.

DS: That's one arena that they do it in certainly is marriage as a sacred institution.

JH: Right.

DS: You were president, or you said when you were involved with NOW, Gloria Steinem came to Billings.

JH: Oh yes.

DS: What do you recall of that? What effect did that have?

JH: That was wonderful. A lot of us came from Colstrip. I was living in Colstrip then, and people came from all over this part of the state, of that part of the eastern part of the state and up from Wyoming. There were a hundred people at that dinner, and she was a marvelous speaker. She said, "It's very important that you do something outrageous everyday." (laughs)

DS: You heed that advice, Joan? (laughs)

JH: I try my best. (laughs) It was wonderful, and afterwards there was a dance. It was just great because nobody had ever seen anything like that at the Holiday Inn in Billings. It was wonderful.

DS: Really energized people.

What keeps you going? I mean she talks about doing an outrageous act as a way to remind yourself of who you are and where you are in society. What do you do that keeps you going, keeps your visions, and keeps you from being discouraged that so many people get particularly when they work in this kind of political arena?

JH: Of course I do get discouraged, but I think speaking out energizes me. Yesterday when I stood up on the floor and said, "There are no women on these energy committees," that was my thing I had to do for that day. Hanging onto this doing something outrageous every day is the way I get by. (laughs)

DS: Oprah was saying on one of her shows that I happened to catch that there was a singer that was there. This old black spiritual is called "Just Stand." She was talking about that. I thought that was so important in terms of the work that we do is that often you don't win but you're just required to stand.

JH: That's right.

DS: Just be present to these issues.

JH: That's right. It's important. It's important to present a different kind of view, and I guess if I've had any role in the legislature that's probably what it is. Just to present a different kind of view.

DS: And are you confident that others will carry those general views forward when you're not here?

JH: Oh I hope so. There are a lot of good strong women in the legislature right now, Diane. I'm amazed. I'm really pleased.

DS: Do you intend to be involved in some capacity after this?

JH: Probably. I don't really know what I'm going to do. It's a wonderful feeling of freedom right now I can really do anything I want to do. But what I feel most is I want to hang around at home with my cats. (laughs)

DS: Some people speculated, of course there are so many of us that are now either retirement age or approaching retirement age who have these long histories as activists, there'll be some kind of a resurgence of activism particularly by older women, particularly when you look at the economic status of women, older women with lack of access to healthcare and economic security.

H: Yes, I'm very impressed with older women. I find myself getting really annoyed at the youth-orientation of our culture. After all, young people haven't had enough experience to know these things. People are saying, "We've got to get some young people involved. We've got to get some young people involved." We do, that's true because they will gain the experience, but older people are not appreciated as they should be. Youth is highly overrated.

DS: True. Well, are there other areas that you might have mentioned that I don't know if I followed up on. One was you talked about the Women's Center in Billings. What do you know about that? Were you involved in that?

JH: At that time in the seventies in Billings, there were several different places. We had an upstairs place down on Montana Avenue, and all it was was some furniture and a bookcase and some feminist literature. (laughs)

DS: What most of them were.

JH: Then there was another one in some old building where you used to get driver's licenses up on about Sixth Avenue North. It was just a struggling thing trying to keep the place open where women could go and feel at home and find a good book.

DS: Why did you go there? What did you go there for?

JH: To talk to other women. To talk to other women.

DS: Did they have meetings on different activities or potlucks or what was the order of things?

JH: One of the things that we were doing at that time was training people to act on the hotline for the rape task force, and so we had some training things there. The rape task force was just starting in Billings then, and that was a really energizing feminist thing I think.

DS: And who all was involved in that? Do you remember anyone who was involved in that Women's Center?

JH: Yeah (pauses) Beverly Ross...

DS: Bev Ross.

JH: Bev Ross was involved in all of that so she might remember more names than I would because it seemed like I was always flitting in and out. But Bev was really involved in that. She'd be a good person to talk to. Bev is always been a strong feminist and always been a great sport. She always contributes a hundred bucks to my campaigns. (laughs) And she's just a wonderful, wonderful woman.

DS: Well thanks for...Are there any things you would like to say to the women of fifty years in the future about your experiences living in this time and this place?

JH: Nope, I really just feel that it's important for all women to hold their heads high and have pride in being a woman.

DS: You've been one of the role models on how to do that so thank you.

JH: Thank you.

[End of Interview]