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Interviewee: Kelly Slattery-Robinson

Interviewer: Bryan Lida

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Bryan Lida: To start, could you describe your initial involvement with the Y, or with the feminist or activist movements?

Kelly Slattery-Robinson: My initial involvement with the Y was actually as a bachelor's degree, Social Work student. I came in 1988 and did my practicum here.

BL: Can you describe the practicum? What is that?

KSR: It's the requirement of the Social Work Department of the University of Montana, to do, goodness I can't even remember how many hours any more. That was a long time ago. Four hundred, I think, hours of direct practice work. And so I met Stacy Sanders, who was the director of the battered women shelter at that time. That's also what it was called at that time, and basically was really impressed by her in particular. I hadn't actually decided what I was going to do with my life, or what I wanted to do with my life, and basically found her very interesting. So I did my practicum, and then was able to be hired as the volunteer coordinator after that in '89, I think.

BL: Okay, and can you describe basically just a typical day, both inside and outside of work for you, with your initial involvement and how did that play into your personal life?

KSR: What the YWCA did for me was, I was starting to explore the whole idea of what feminism was, what it wasn't, and whether it was for me or not me. And I think that my attraction to the Y, like I said, was more based on Stacy, who was a very busy woman, just a couple of years older than me, very empowered, very with it, and who actually became my mentor and role model as I tried to figure this all out. Because of working with the battered women's movement, I got the opportunity to meet other women throughout the state who were similar to Stacy. So the typical day for me was coming to work, working at the shelter, working and operating the crisis line, working with women who needed help and mostly, at that time, just DV [domestic violence] victims because we weren't doing sexual assault work as much as we are now. And, so as I said, working at the shelter, maybe doing something with the kids, because we didn't have much of a children's program at that point in time, either. I did that about 20 hours a week, and then the rest of the time was doing classes and writing the big comp exam you have to do to graduate and that kind of stuff. But at the same time, with all of that, was also questioning a lot about who I am, what is the Y, what is this place, because it tried to do with feminist ideals even from the beginning or from my beginning anyway. It's had its ups and downs for sure as far as a feminist organization. But, I just became intrigued by the

whole issue of domestic violence. Is that what you're kind of looking for? Like I said, it was fourteen-whatever years ago.

BL: Yeah, sounds good. And are there any events relating to your involvement to the Y, or other factors that stand out along the way from then up until now?

KSR: I would say that being part of the Y, just in general, has always been interesting because it has *had* its turmoil and then probably the other biggest event as far as my activism was going to the World Women's Conference in 1995 in Beijing. But the Y has always made me think on all sorts of levels. What's ethical communication, what's not, what happens when it works well, what happens when it- you know? I mean, the Y has been a very big – the YW, not the YM, has been a very big learning ground for me on all sorts of issues basically always coming back to that whole idea of empowerment of women and children.

BL: And also along those lines, are there any troubles, specific events, or just troubles with your personal life, working with the Y that stand out from the beginning of your involvement until now?

KSR: The YWCA, like I said, has definitely been a learning experience. And there have been, personally not really *per se*, but the Y itself has gone – I'm trying to think of what year it was – a year or two after I started actually as an employee, so the early 90's. There was trouble a brewing between the board, the ED [Executive Director] and board, and some of the staff members, and out of that actually was a creation of the, we actually have a union body here, its called the Professional Office Workers Union. And that split up some of the staff, and I was kind of in the place that didn't necessarily want the union, but I was also one of those golden kids, I mean it was just I felt like I was back in middle school or something, you know where there was all of this inviting. People were talking behind each other's backs. And in the offices downstairs, you could easily hear through the walls, which just aren't exactly the most quiet and confidential places, especially when people are angry. So people were saying things about each other, and it was just, I mean it was nothing like I thought – you know what I mean – the YWCA should be. But what's been interesting about that process for me was that women who I thought really disliked me and women that I thought I disliked – after about a year of processing and healing, I think came together in a pretty good place. And I still consider several of those women good support systems and friends. And so that is what was a relief, I mean it was horrible during it, but as we figured it out, and like I said tried to heal and tried to move forward, that was really neat to see that happen.

Then the Y itself, also went through – I was gone by that time – but even in its most recent history had some things, and what was hard for me about that, in terms of the YWCA, was that here was an organization that I'd grown to love and care about. You know, it was almost like it was a person you know, not just a- it was its own little entity and that it was being – appeared to being – at least on the information I was given and seen, kind of almost destroyed, and that was really sad to watch. And then me having no control to do anything about it, and having to

be careful about what I did. And I had other people call me and say, "What should we do." And I'm like, "I don't know." And so that was an interesting process, like I said, to have this entity, that almost became human-like, being harmed.

BL: Do you feel that the Y is still divided, along those lines, today? Or is that pretty much over with?

KSR: I think the YWCA, the people who work here, will always – I mean I think we're in a very, very good place. But, because we work with controversial issues and we really have started to even step further into those controversial issues, like racism and sexism and homophobia and all of that stuff, since we're moving further and further out into those places, I suspect that we're going to, at times, have pain at the Y. But I think what's different about that pain is that hopefully the current ED [executive director], and even myself and the board are able to work and process that as quickly as possible versus shoving it away and ignoring it.

I mean we recently did have a period where we had had a speaker come in and talk about lesbian battering and some things – one thing - was said during the training that was kind of inappropriate by one of the staff members, and other things had been said and you can just see. But what was great about that is that, and there's a lot of pain for the people who brought the workshop here, not the woman who did the presenting – she seemed to be fine although she's not a Y member, but it was just interesting to watch that be created and watch the divisions start to happen. But now its coming back together and we're trying to figure it out – you know everyone's got their individual safe zone about some of these issues. But, just what are we going to do so that we don't do that splitting stuff and that dividing stuff that's happened at least twice in my history of being, at least knowing that the Y's not being part of, but that's happening in the Y. But I think we've done a better job this time, hopefully.

BL: Are there any other primary goals, that you haven't mentioned already, both personal, and in the collective sense of the organization, both then and now?

KSR: I think what's become more now for the Y, and probably at the same time for me, has been the whole issue of the elimination of the -isms. The Y mission actually says the elimination of racism by any means necessary. The Missoula Y mission has thrown in sexism. But I think that our Y as a whole has, since all of that has been inter-connected – all of the -isms are totally connected, I think that we're trying to come to a different consciousness and trying to work on that. Which means, that if you're working on it at work, in some form or another anyway, you end up working on it inside and having to look at your own racist thoughts and beliefs, and sexist thoughts and your homophobia, and all of that stuff is hard. So that's one that I kind of mentioned but that I think is really, lately. And then the grand, huge goal of the elimination of domestic and sexual violence, which won't, unfortunately happen in my lifetime I have no doubt. But it's a goal that we've worked on for 25 years.

BL: And what are you most proud of, in your time at the Y, whether personal or within the organization?

KSR: With the organization, that we've been here for 90 years, and even when we weren't the most activist, have always gone back to kind of that activist role. Because we had our 90th anniversary last year, and we had a little get-together. And they pulled – we have all of these old, old, from the very beginning, news articles and pictures that were falling apart because they unfortunately weren't taken care of really great. But, they got out this archival material, and you've seen some of it in the center room, but one of the things I found most interesting is that in the early '30s, I think, we had YWCA sponsored dances, and letters to the editor were written by pastors of churches who were appalled by the fact that we were sponsoring dances. And it was interesting for me to see that even then the Y was willing to take a stance on something that, in reality seems minor, but when you think about a fairly small community at that time and how everybody knew everybody almost, that was actually a pretty big stance. But just in terms of the fact that I work for an organization that has been around for 90 years in the community and has tried to do good things and the right things really makes me proud.

BL: And what about personal accomplishments.

KSR: Oh, I'm so bad at this, that particular issue, Bryan, I'm so bad at it.

BL: What about how you mentioned how hard it is to overcome homophobia, racism, sexism, and all that. How do you feel you've come along there?

KSR: Yeah, I would say that, most recently, I can at least identify them and recognize them right away and say, "where does that come from?" and am able to put it aside or do whatever I need to do and shake it up a little bit. And I think the other thing that I've done recently is to realize truly that I can't get it completely because I've not ever been a black man or a woman, or a Native American man or woman who has had to see it [through their own] eyes. You know, I've had the privilege of being white and so I can't completely ever get it, which doesn't mean I can't be empathetic about it.

BL: Is there anything you would have done differently, not necessarily day to day, but in the course of your time at the Y?

KSR: No.

BL: Aside from what you've brought up, what contributions do you feel you've made to the Y or to feminism and activism, in general?

KSR: Well lots and lots of time. That's a silly one though, I'm just so horrible at this.

BL: Or what do you feel you could do or what would you like to do in the future?

KSR: Have world peace... do I sound like Miss America. "And what would you like?" "Oh, I'd like world peace." No, well as far as the Y-Kelly connection, because there is a big connection together there, I would like the Y just to continue to grow financially stable, continue to be willing look at what we can provide to the community and the people we serve, and always put the people we serve first and foremost over anything else, which I think the Y does, but to do that in the future, and continue to offer opportunities for young women to find themselves. I think we've done that through our volunteer training and other things here. I think that lies in part of my job now is to watch and to supervise. I supervise seven different people. Some of them have been here for a long time like Maggie Yopes. Maggie Yopes is somebody you may want to interview here. She's been here like fourteen years, or something like that, and is quite the character. You'd like Maggie. She definitely would give you - her interview would *this* long compared to mine. Just because she's - you'd like Maggie. So yeah, just to continue to be a place where young women, and men. We tend, because of the work we do, to attract more women and those types of things, who need to learn more about themselves and what feminist means, and what activism means, and all those things.

BL: And, for you personally, how do you view the position of women or their situations in Missoula or Montana?

KSR: Okay, I was going to say, "on what scale?"

BL: Yeah just Missoula, or Montana, or Western Montana as a region.

KSR: You know, in some ways, it's interesting because in terms of where I live and what I do personally, I get to be involved with so many great, empowered women that it feels like it's okay, to a certain extent. Do you know what I mean? Just because I'm always around all these great women, but because of the work I do and the other part of the work, I know it's not okay. And I think the biggest issue for me at this point, besides just the whole issue of violence against women, is poverty. I think if we don't do more about that issue really soon, we've just got a whole generation of young w- well children, who are being raised in poverty-stricken situations, you know. There are people who definitely overcome, quote-unquote, those types of barriers, but it's very difficult. I just think - it makes me very sad and sick actually that there are people that may not feel like they have any choices or are feeling completely disempowered before they even get a start. As well as the women involved in raising those children and trying to make the best that they possibly can. So I think that poverty and violence, to me, are the two. And they're so intertwined.

BL: So you'd say that poverty, I don't know if I mean it contributes, but it has an effect on the degree of violence?

K: I think so. Well, don't think, "Yeah, definitely." I mean we know domestic violence, sex abuse, and all that stuff is on all levels. But what I think happens for women is - and actually Naomi,

who works here, and I were just talking about that. If we took out poverty, and the women who leave abusive relationships are more than likely going to end up in poverty, if they aren't already there, but are definitely going to end up there because of leaving that relationship, what would happen to abusive relationships? And they're so intertwined, you can't figure it out. You know, if we were to eliminate poverty, would women have to have – and I don't think women – women do stay for other reasons, too. But if you eliminate the economic part of it, what would happen to some of those relationships? Because you know, I think - I've *seen* women go back at the shelter because they have no choice. You know, they've been there the sixty days, and we wish we could serve them longer, but for all sorts of reasons we can't. And they have no choices, and the choice is to return and it's horrible. Horrible, horrible, horrible. And I don't think Missoula is the only place that that's an issue. But as far as what I see, in Missoula and Western Montana in general, it's that issue.

BL: And are there any other factors that you think contribute to either poverty or violence as far as a society – Missoula as a society or Montana as a society?

KSR: Well, I always go back to just the way that we solve our problems, you know what I mean, whether its media, locally, all of that fits into the whole, we solve our problems by using violence. Which isn't really the Missoula community, but the bigger outside community. And just in relationship to the whole issue of poverty is the fact that we just don't have – you know, the Super WalMarts of the world aren't going to feed the children. We need some sort of good, economic, solid base and a pay that's going to help. I don't necessarily mean big factories that are going to come pollute these rivers, and things like that, because that's not going to solve these problems either, but some economic base that's going to help the women and children in Missoula and in Montana. I mean, we've lost so many young people in Montana, because there's no place for them to be and work. And so, they leave.

BL: Do you think those things need to happen through some sort of government agency or does it need to happen through organizations like the Y, or ...

KSR: I think it needs to be a partnership. I think it needs to be business, non-profits, and governments working together to solve the problem.

BL: And is there anything else you think can be done, inside the Y or outside the Y, in Montana?

KSR: I think the Y itself needs to be conscious of who and what we are, and not forget who and what we are, continue to be mission-driven, and be a good place for women and children. And outside the Y, there's a million things. I think more women need to be involved in the political process. I think the political process needs to be cleaned up on all sorts of different levels. It's amazing to me that in the state of Montana, with not even a million people, that you need millions of dollars to run a senate campaign. Its appalling, you know? It makes no sense in my head. I mean, I understand it, but I'm just in that sense of: Why? Why do you need millions of dollars to run a senate campaign? That same million dollars build all sorts of houses. And the

reality is that, once one candidate does it, they both have to do it. I mean I recognize that. The whole political process needs to change. There's just so much. There would be lots of different things. But I do what I can and the Y does to.

BL: Is there anything else you'd like to say that I haven't asked you? I know I haven't covered the complete extent of the Y or feminism. But anything you'd want to say to people, say 50 years from now about your time at the Y, or the situation of the Y, feminism, or violence?

KSR: Well, it'll be interesting. I have a feeling that the Y will probably still be here, because I don't think these problems are going to be solved. I guess what I would say is that you've got to look at the little victories. You've got to keep the big picture too, but if you continue to look at the big picture, you're going to get frustrated, overwhelmed, and saddened. But if you look at the small victories, like that one woman who leaves that abusive relationship, then gets out on her own and starts feeling good about herself and her life, you've done a lot. Or whatever the Y ends up doing in 50 years, it may not be doing DV or sexual violence work – it probably will be. But yeah, that would be it, to don't forget the small victories, because it can be frustrating, and you feel like giving up sometimes with the bigger picture occasionally.

BL: Well that's all I have, unless you have another statement, or comment, or anything?

KSR: No.

BL: Well, thank you very much.

KSR: Thank you.

[End of Interview]