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**Interviewer: Seena Kohl**

**Interviewee: Virginia "Lee" Niebuhr**

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Seena Kohl: ...is interviewing Lee Niebuhr about her experiences as an activist for women's rights and not only to change women's lives but also change public policy. I just asked Lee about her major events; major places where she volunteered; essentially your history of activism.

Lee Niebuhr: Okay, there are several things. As I stated, this probably won't be in chronological order. It will be as they come to me. When I moved to Great Falls in 1979, the first organization I joined was Business and Professional Women. I had come from St. Paul, Minnesota where, as you know, there are millions of people. Because of the time it takes to get from one place to another, it's very difficult to belong to a lot of things. The time involvement and also the level that you can really participate, I hate to say that you have to be born into them, but sometimes it's almost that way. Or you have to live in a certain area of town to be able to do those kinds of things. That's different from a small town.

SK: What if you were invited? Is that what you're saying?

LN: Yes, and to fit in, and for people to accept you and say, "Well, you know what's going on over here too." In a town that size there can be a lot of divergent communities. Let me back up a little bit. I got married when I was still a senior in high school. I didn't have to get married, but I felt the urge overwhelmingly. Of course, at 18 you know everything and I certainly did. So I got married when I was 18, eloped with the boy who lived across the street. We eloped to our church, which was four blocks away. He worked two jobs. He was going to a community college and worked two jobs. I was in high school and worked two jobs. So we kind of eloped and my mother didn't find out for three months.

SK: Where were you living?

LN: I lived at home and he lived at home. We were only across the street. At any rate, that marriage lasted seven years. I have a son, Chris, as a result of that. So I was a single parent from, let's see...1973 until 1984, during which time I moved from St. Paul to Great Falls here.

SK: Let me stop you here, what was the impetus of moving from Great Falls to—

LN: I worked for a large law firm, the Dorsey Law Firm in Minneapolis. They were opening an office here in Great Falls. They did a great deal of work. They did municipal and industrial bond issues for the state of Montana through D.A Davidson. So the attorneys would fly out like for two to three weeks every month. Finally they decided it was time to open an office here.

If you're headquartered office is not in the state of Montana, you have to have an official sanction from the Supreme Court to open up a satellite office. So they had applied and were doing that and did not realize that they didn't have that sanction when I moved out here. I arrived and they were scraping the name off the door because you can't hold yourself out as doing business in the state without that information okayed from the Supreme Court. We could only do business that had been generated from the Minneapolis office. It was a whole year before they got that sanction. Oddly enough they got that sanction a month after I left the law firm. I went into real estate and I was in real estate for a while.

SK: So you moved here by yourself?

LN: Myself and my son. I can't remember if it was a lady down the hall or how I got to meet a particular woman, Sharon Ann Ashton, and joined Business and Professional Women.

SK: Sharon Ann...

LN: Ashton.

SK: Astin, A-S-T...

LN: A-S-H-T-O-N. Her brother is John Ashton. At any rate, I joined the organization in '79 and I've been a member ever since. I was State President in '96 and '97, and helped them formed their business there, the Business and Professional Women's Foundation. One of the things that was going on at the time I joined was the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment. So I got involved with that and fought for it.

I've been raised largely by my mother. My father moved to California when they got divorced, which was when I was 12. My mother hadn't worked outside the home until that time. She went to a school for the power company in the Twin Cities and got a certificate as a lighting consultant. She got a job doing that. She was not paid as well as the men. So she started a furniture business for a short period of time. Then she went into floor covering, which was rugs, carpeting, linoleum, all sorts of floor coverings, and wall coverings. That was still largely in men's area. During the time when she was going, taking this class from school, she worked in a nursing home at night and on the weekends and various other places to help us get along.

I saw things—she could have gotten along—there were three children then. I had a brother who died when he was 15. He had open heart surgery and never responded. I had a sister who was four years younger. She was taking care of the three of us and got kind of minimal child support. She would have been okay for another \$50 a month. She could have gotten by. She applied and they would not give her \$50. She applied to the welfare system that was in place at the time. So she had to go to work. She would have worked anyway, but it would have been a whole lot easier if she had just been able to get the \$50, but it was one of those things where

you had to give up everything to get. Then they have to provide everything. It isn't what she wanted to do.

She was very humiliated at having asked that sort of thing—that very problem. She was very well known and belonged to business organizations in St. Paul. I saw her go through that. During this period, also, she had two mastectomies. I don't remember them as being terribly disruptive in her life. Maybe I just wasn't paying attention; I was too wrapped up in my own life, that kind of thing. The first one was when I was in high school; then another one 15 years later. Much later in her life, she contracted bladder cancer and they never removed it all. It metastasized to the liver; a year later that's what she finally died from was four bouts of cancer. Her life kept on, she kept working. She never stopped with that. The first mastectomy took muscles out of her arm. She rebuilt those by—she formed a bowling team and bowled and rebuilt the muscles in her arm.

SK: So really she's a very powerful influence, am I correct?

LN: Incredibly so.

SK: When you were in high school and she was working these jobs, how did you—I don't know what kind of a high school you went to, but did you feel embarrassed that your mother—that you were a child of a single parent? Times were different.

LN: Yes, I did. My mother dated. She rented a room in the house. We stayed in the same neighborhood, which was very unusual. Usually a divorced woman at that time would have to move, that kind of thing. Almost the entire neighborhood, with the exception of one neighbor, was Catholic. They all had five, six, seven, eight, nine children. At that point there were just the three of us. The family next door had one. So we were kind of the odd balls. Both of them—she was a teacher and he worked for a plastics company. When my parents got divorced, I wanted another family.

My father had been the driving force. He was a genius. All through his life, which kind of—not all the time, but sometimes—is connected with not having common sense. He'd buy target rifles for \$2,000, but didn't seem to care whether we had winter coats or the refrigerator ran. He was a driving force in education. The plan was—and it was never, "If you go to college." It was always, "When you go to college," and I was going to be an attorney up until I was 12.

Even after that I wanted it to happen, but lots of ideas changed. When my parents got divorced, I thought, "I will never be what I could be had my father been there with that kind of an influence." My mother had the stabilization influence, but my father had the vision. He printed a letter to his mother when he was 18 months old that we have in the family archives. It was one of those things.

SK: So you really had—from very early—had a woman who supported you, was there, and worked very hard.

LN: Her mother ran the mom and pop grocery store here in Great Falls until she was 75. Out shoveling one morning she fell and broke her hip, at which time she moved to St. Paul in Minneapolis where my mother and her sister both lived there. She ran that pretty much by herself too.

SK: So, in terms—again, coming back specifically—

LN: Strong women influence in my life.

SK: Very strong. You're very fortunate. In terms of the Equal Rights Amendment and your concerns with the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), you had primary experience with the support that it could flow.

LN: Right, and I was divorced before I moved here in '79. So there were issues of credit, although my income went, of course, to pay family bills and things when I was married. Nothing was reflected when I needed to buy a car or anything like that.

SK: That was with the old days when women didn't have credit. Again: another impetus or a motivation. So was this part of the Business and Professional Women's organization when you joined, or was this something that you—

LN: It was ongoing when I joined. Today I ask young women, "Do you know what the ERA is?" "Is that the rifle guys?"

"No that's not quite it."

"Oh, well then, it's the real estate company that buys your homes."

SK: Oh my.

LN: I said, "Well you should be so fortunate." Then I go into an explanation that what you have, where you can go, the fact that you can go there by yourself and not have to have your father or your brother or someone else helping you. The college is that you're able to go to the occupation you're going to have, would not be yours had it not been for women's fights before that. It's difficult to understand if you've always had something; what it would be like without it. I try to tell them when I was State President for Business and Professional Women that was the year that the Afghani women lost all of their rights. They became chattel again. They had absolutely no rights, all their property and everything was taken away from them.

SK: What year was that?

LN: Ninety-six, ninety-seven. I said, “You look back at that and think it’s so astounding. Well, it could happen to you. The rights that we have are limited by time. They should not even be issues that we discuss, but they are limited by time. You may lose them. So you best pay attention to where you are and what you’re doing and about these rights that you have that are given to us by men who are the minority.” Since women, who are the majority, don’t always show up to vote and don’t understand that their rights are—everyone will suffer because of that.

SK: So, in terms of—again, I don’t know much about the Business and Professional Women. Have they pushed for young women to vote, or is this a personal goal?

LN: We did the fight for a while, then we got out to other issues of Business and Professional Women. It’s always been sort of a fight for me. There’s a program called Expanding Your Horizons.

SK: That’s through the Business and Professional Women?

LN: No, that may be where I first heard about it, but it was started in Great Falls I think in the very early eighties. I was not involved the first year, but I heard about it the second year and have been involved either as a committee chair or co-chairing or chairing it myself for every year until the last two. So I did it for 18 years. The program was designed—it was formulated by a group at Mills College in California. It was to encourage girls to take more math and sciences while they were in school, and also to encourage them to go into non-traditional occupations. It is still alive and well. At our high point we had 11 sites in Great Falls that this would take place. Excuse me, not Great Falls, in Montana.

This would take place once a year and we have always held it on the campus of the University of Great Falls. We’d have about 60 speakers; local women who would come in and talk about what they did. In the later years, we got into more demonstrations than just lectures. It was as important for the people that were speaking and demonstrating as it was for the girls.

SK: In what way?

LN: The connection that they made with each other. My one dream had been that we would do it three times. Once for the girls, once for the girls’ mothers, and once for all of the presenters because the presenters didn’t get to see each other. We would have kind of a get together about two weeks beforehand and get all of the presenters together so they knew who each other was. They got to meet each other and we’d always schedule it for a couple of hours. It took much longer than that. People would kind of tell a little bit of their story. If everybody showed up, half of the people showed up would just speak for five or ten minutes. It takes a long time. We all got interested. Everybody would say, “I want to talk to her.” Most of those connections, we were not able to make.

SK: It sounds great.

LN: It was. It lost some of its impetus when the school system—we also fought for Title IX. That's how it began, was in the state of Montana. It began through the Office of Public Instruction. Expanding Your Horizons—there was a grant that the Office of Public Instruction got and they hired a facilitator who went around the state and sort of trained the trainers. We'd do presentations.

SK: That moved to programs for—to encourage Title IX? What was the sequence?

LN: Okay, the reason they could get the money was the implementation of Title IX saying, "Women have the same opportunities."

SK: So it was a Title IX grant?

LN: I don't know exactly what the grant was, but something like that. It was a very good program. Now, if you—say you encourage girls to take a non-traditional job. Well, what's a non-traditional job? Twenty years ago you could name them.

SK: True. There's still non-traditional jobs.

LN: Not very many, and I don't know that girls are concerned about even trying to get into them. If that's what they wanted to do, they'd do it and not understand that it hasn't always been the case.

SK: I think you're right. Though in some of the high-paying trades, at least in Missouri, they're not very welcoming.

LN: Okay, when you say trades, are we talking about skilled or technical or—

SK: Skilled.

LN: Skilled trades.

SK: Machine and shop. Highly-skilled, highly-paid trades.

LN: We don't have very many of those in Montana.

SK: Yes.

LN: So that's not a big issue. Although we do have women that work in construction. We have an organization here called Women in Construction who are in fact going to remodel this room to some degree.

SK: Obviously you're going to hire them as the—

LN: Right, and my connections—there has been one of our past board members here for YWCA—who also did a presentation here for me for Expanding Your Horizons—who for a dozen years has encouraged this group to get involved with us. So that is what's happening. They're coming to do something. That particular woman was an electrical estimator.

SK: So you're actually right. They don't; the young women don't know.

LN: They don't understand what freedoms they have, but are not guaranteed freedoms that will sunset. What's going to happen then? I have a feeling that society won't change much even though the dates go away. The law says that you won't have those rights after that date unless something happens like the ERA is passed through all those states. Some of those states have rescinded it that had originally had it.

SK: Has Montana?

LN: No. Not all states ever agreed to it. Then it would be a law. It wouldn't be an issue. We're fighting more for the rights of, or the battles for, in a lot of cases—Native Americans and black Americans have been more successful of those of women.

SK: Why do you think that?

LN: A lot of women are non-confrontational. They don't want to deal with it. They assume it will always be there. Women are, from what I've read, are more of a nurturing sort and compromising. We'll get along. It will be just fine. That kind of thing. They're swayed by the dominant male figures in their lives. Not all of those are positive in women's respects. While your mother stayed home and raised children, why do you have to go outside and work? Why do you need college? Your brother's going to go to college, but you're going to marry somebody who's going to go to college.

SK: Do you still think that's relatively common at least here in Montana?

LN: Yes I do.

SK: Again, I think it's in terms of the entire U.S. There's a variation.

LN: I do think that's true in Montana, but it's kind of led us to a different, to another aspect of it. Eighty percent of the businesses that are begun in the state are begun by women; cottage industries because they can do them and raise children at the same time where they don't have the expense of an outside office. We adapt. We can't adapt if we don't have the right to be there. That's my concern. Women spend more money than men.

SK: That's for sure.

LN: Why would men not want them to have their own credit and be able to go ahead and do this?

SK: I think it comes to the issue of control.

LN: Yes.

SK: I don't have to tell you that, though.

LN: I have my own problems with control.

SK: I don't have to tell you that at all. The other organizations in addition to the Business and Professional Women and—

LN: I was Vice President of the Montana Women's Capital Fund.

SK: That's right. The Montana Women's Capital Fund. And that was...?

LN: That was an organization that was created before I knew anything about it to be able to give money to women. It was originally created to give money to women to start and grow their businesses. The parameters were, if you had to go to a bank and if no banks would take you on—I think you had to be turned down by three. If you could get it a regular way, fine, but if you couldn't, we felt that your idea was worthy and you went through with the business plan and everything. It was kind of like a minor bank.

The maximum that would be loaned out would be \$35,000. Banks don't generally want to deal with that small of an amount on a commercial basis. So if all you needed was \$5,000 there wasn't any place you could go to apply except through us. We took collateral. I think we had a horse trailer. We had diamond rings. The women had good ideas and they didn't need a whole lot of money. Part of that was good. On the other hand, we don't think big enough. Particularly if they had been born and raised in Montana. Unless they've traveled and really have an idea, we don't look big here.

It was easy for me to President of all of these things that I've been President of and involved in. It's easy to be a big fish in the small pond. I never could have known this many people at these levels of business and politics and stuff in Minnesota. I never thought after I sold the house after the divorce in Minnesota, I never thought I'd ever have another house. I moved here in July and moved into a house in October.

SK: It's a different place; heavily industrialized, Midwestern.

LN: This is not the world that we were born into. This is all a new world. I have some very deep concerns about our future. By the year 2020, there's going to be one person in America working for every person who isn't working.

SK: Say that again?

LN: One person will be working for every person that is not working in America. That's rather frightening. Some of those people will be some who are in school. On both ends of the working spectrum. Prior to that time, the majority of people in America will be Hispanic. They'll be followed closely by Asians. Both of those cultures have very good things about them, but also they have different priorities and values than I do, than most of the people that I know. Those are the people that are going to be caring for us.

The other look at that picture is that the Baby Boomers; we had 87 million. The next generation has 40 million. They are going to take the technology jobs with the high pay because they are going to be so much in demand. Who is going to take care of us? Who is going to do that service job? We're going to have to bring those people in because they're not here. So many of us. I mean 87 million retired people added to the people who have already been retired. That's a great number of people. I'm not sure if I want to stick it out and find out.

SK: On the other hand, coming back to the kind of educational programs that you've been involved in; they're going on in other places too. So you would hope that it would not be just one small elite population that has the jobs and hasn't been able to spin off other kinds of opportunities.

LN: I would hope so. It's just that our children—we have half as many to deal with it just by sheer numbers. Those jobs will have to be filled by others of us or you won't see us retiring.

SK: That's very true.

LN: Of course the afforded look that you can live on social security, I hope people really understand that's not the case. That was made to be one third of what you retired on. That's not a practical thing any longer. That assumed that your company had a retirement for you and that you were able to put some away for retirement. Montana is at the bottom of the per capita income. Most of the companies in Montana do not provide pension plans or health plans or many other things. So there is not that secondly. Because of low wages, you can't put money away. So Montanans are looking at living on social security. That bar will not be raised the way things are.

SK: So you think Montana is much worse off say than some of the other places in the U.S.?

LN: Yes. There are some other states that are—

SK: The poverty states.

LN: The opportunities and things haven't been found. I hate to say they're not there. I hope that I don't know everything and that somebody else knows where they are.

SK: I think it's a very serious question and serious issue.

LN: If we have to bring people in here to do it, if we bring them from places that are more—I don't want to say more poverty stricken necessarily—but from cultures that require less than we do monetarily to survive, they don't have to have all of the things that we take for granted. I used to hear the Chinese or the Japanese would come over and in two years they owned four houses and two apartment buildings. They played the American game. They would get along in a house that had no more than a bed and a table in it for five years. Are you willing to work with that? Most of us aren't.

SK: By and large, that's been the history of all of us immigrants.

LN: You were willing—

SK: Trade off. Exactly.

LN: The Americans have been so, "I had to live this way so my children won't. So I'll make sure that they don't." We still expect them to have those same values, and how can they when they didn't have to work for it?

SK: So, you are really concerned about the future of the contemporary, young, middle-class or upper middle-class, or very wealthy—

LN: In a way because that's where the money comes from. One of the jobs that I had was—I was a legal assistant in a company that only did tax returns for the Weyerhouser family. At that time there were 123 family members and, we did tax returns in 14 different states. Those people invested in things all over the country. We wouldn't have roads here, many of them in Montana had it not been for Weyerhouser family buying the industrial bonds that covered those things, and for building schools, airports, and those kinds of things. That's not going to come from the main middle class, and that's certainly not going to come from below that, you know?

The money's got to come from the people who have it, and fortunately you stay in their good graces or they have managers that will understand where this has to go and see the ultimate results. If the people who have the money don't invest in those, it will deteriorate everything that got them to the point where they have the money. I would believe that most of the people have that, that they know that. We just get mad about where they put their money because

“it’s not for my cause” (laughs) sort of thing. They’re taking care of the infrastructure of America. I remember a line, I guess it was from *Wall Street*. Michael Douglas was in that. It was a greed—

SK: Oh, *Network*? Yes, was that—

LN: No, that wasn’t *Network*, but it was something about the majority of money in America belongs to widows and idiot sons. I’d like to believe that that’s not true. If you look at all the money in America from what I read, the majority of that truly is owned by women—widows, daughters who didn’t remarry and inherited it from their parents, that kind of thing. But women do not control the money, but we have it.

SK: Who controls it, then?

LN: We give the authority of control to men.

SK: In terms of your own organizational affiliation—the business of professional women or for that matter even the why, which we don’t usually think in terms of that population—is anything going on in terms of, I don’t know, managing money or—

LN: We try to be more aggressive, but once again, women—the majority of women—don’t see a bigger picture. We try to manage within what we’ve got here in Great Falls. Well, Great Falls is a dot compared to what’s out there. We need to think bigger. Yes, there are things that we can only do here. I can only do so much in this building. I can only do so much with our budget, but where that budget comes from, there are feeling women, there are sensitive women all over the world and all over the country and all over the state. There is a lot of money in this state in individual pockets. Some has never been asked for and some has and they’re not responsive obviously, but that money goes to other places outside of Montana because they have concerns there.

SK: Do you see this as one of your new, or maybe it’s an old goals?

LN: I think it’s growing, yes. I don’t know. I see a lot of need for social change, but I’m one of those people that I’m not sure how to change it. What does it say about a country, about a state who spends three times as much on jails as they do on schools?

SK: What does it say about the U.S.? Forget about a state.

LN: I don’t know all the U.S. stats, but I know those are the ones in Montana. That’s pretty disgusting. It’s pretty scary. How do you change that? How can that happen? We watched it happen. We let it happen. It’s there because of us, but how can we change it?

SK: I know that you're on the women's lobby board. Is this one of the thrusts or would it be one of the areas that they would look at or consider?

LN: I don't know. We're kind of reactive. Once we know what the legislature is going to discuss, what bills have been brought up, then we react to those. We can bring issues from others groups to the legislators to try to get activity going on that. I know how much time it takes to do things like that. I don't have the time, and I'm not sure I want to saddle somebody else with it, but if we all think this way, it never gets addressed, so I'm kind of like this on that deal. Had I had the time to do more in Helena during the legislative session, I would have. I presume, as long as I'm able, that I will get in there and do those fights. To stay in touch with everything as we age, that view changes.

Business and professional women, we talk about, "What have we got to entice young women to come in?" Well, the majority of our members are the same as they were 70 years ago when they did a study. They're still 55 and older.

SK: Really?

LN: Right. Okay, so if you're 55 and older, what's your incentive to deal with the women who are 20 to 30 coming in? You don't even know what that world is. The only thing we can give our children, in my opinion, in school are transferable skills. Most of the children that come out are functioning illiterates—that's my view of high school and of college. I know very many teachers that are wonderful, but I know a lot of them that it scares me to death. They are no longer role models. When I was in school, they were role models. They are not any longer. The children do not see them that way, and it's their response that's going to matter. You can tell that by the young people that come in here to apply for jobs or anywhere else. They go to apply for jobs in shorts and tank tops, things that well certainly when I was young, you wouldn't wear those away from the yard if you were going to do something. I know that those are play clothes now, but most of the companies are owned by people of my age, in their 50s. Now, you may think whatever you want, but if you're going to work for me, this is how you're going to do it. They don't seem willing to make an adjustment.

SK: Now, I know that in some places, and again, there are programs for young women-

LN: We have programs. There are programs that do that, and we have a wonderful job service here. I know that Easter Seals, Goodwill has a wonderful job service program. They're available. I don't know how much the school gets into that, but that's a transferable skill. They can't communicate. If we let them in the door, they can't communicate. They can't write a determinable sentence. So what they do know, they can be like my father. They can be geniuses, but if they can't communicate it or write it down, it ends there.

SK: Do you see any kind of volunteer programs that may be a way of not adding to what they've got from school?

LN: Volunteer programs too, but why would that have to be a volunteer program? Why is that not something that's instilled in the children? We instill history. We give them history. You don't know where you're going if you don't know where you've been kind of thing. When we're in school, I have to admit, I was one of those, "Well, I need to know where I'm going. What's happening now, what's in the future, not what happened before." Of course, now I realize the error of my ways. (laughs) We also have to teach them, and I thought that that was being taught in school. My son got it because he got it from me. There are certain things, when you deal with people that will allow them to let you deal with them. How many people in Great Falls know how to set a table? It may sound like a minor thing, but this is a small world. I'm involved in two international organizations. I've traveled around the world. You don't know what a difference it can make, just the way you eat. We think it's different that they cut up sandwiches instead of pick them up in their fingers in Europe. That's minor. What happens when a table is set formally? And it's one of those things, it never changes. It's like getting dressed. Once you know how to do it, you always know how to do it. How long does that take to teach someone? A child should know that the first year that they're in school. Things like that. The fact that we don't require students getting out of high school to have more than one language is a total disservice to them and us. We used to say, "Well, look at the way the Japanese work. They have all these work ethics," and that kind of thing. Right, and they laughed at us and they taught right around us, and that was our fault, our arrogance that they would learn English. Well, they did to our detriment. We let that happen.

SK: Well, see I would say, I'm not so sure it's to our detriment. I think—

LN: At that time, at the beginning, we could have been further. We could have dealt with them and learned more, faster, had that not been the case. Our detriment to our children. The tests that say when the children get through school in Japan or in the Asian countries, they are so far ahead of ours. Well, one of the main reasons is they go to school two and a half years longer by the time they're 18 than our children do. Well, that's not the kids' fault.

SK: Right, yes. So again, coming back—

LN: It's competitive. Sorry.

SK: No, no that's all right. Coming back to...I mean, these are very serious problems.

LN: Children should not be—here's my control part—allowed to get out of school (laughs) until they can demonstrate the transferrable skills. They must be able to read and write. They must be able to communicate thoughts, even if they're not thoughts that they'd like. I'm taking a class now—it's not a class, it's a one-on-one session—about anger management. I didn't learn that. It's made a great deal of difference in the last couple of months. I'm 55.

SK: But everybody continues to learn or vegetate.

LN: Right, but the young people don't even know that that's even a skill. In some schools or some organizations they've gotten into negotiative skills, that kind of thing where it's kind of peer mediation, that sort of thing. That's very good. But also so many things go on with your body and your mind when you're going through your teens. You know, hormones run rampant and do destructive things to you, that kind of thing. I don't know where the logic factor is there. How can you make them understand what a difference decisions at that age will make? That was part of Expanding Your Horizons. We started doing high school. It went sixth grade through high school. Well, we cut that out and focused on middle schools. At the end, we were thinking maybe that was too old.

SK: Get them in—

LN: Right, give them—

SK: —early.

LN: —an idea that something exists. Maybe they don't pick it up right away, you may not see the results for 20 to 30 years, but to lay the seed that you do have control over what you do, you really do.

SK: So has that been initiated in the school system?

LN: No.

SK: Oh.

LN: It's just—

SK: It's just what?

LN: It' just what I want.

SK: It's just what you want, okay! (laughs)

LN: It's what I want. If they only knew, really the control that they have. Young girls, by the time they reach puberty, they lose self-confidence. They're very concerned about themselves the next few years, then they get concerned about boys and their image to other people. It's not that you shouldn't be concerned about that, because it does definitely make a difference in your life; however, you're still in control of those things. When something bad happens that you don't like, you can be miserable about it for just as long as you want to. If that's very long, you won't have very many friends left because they'll get tired of listening about it. You can change it, just the moment you decide to.

SK: Do you have programs for girls, this middle-range age here at the Y?

LN: No, we don't. No. The only children's level programs that we have are we have four hours of karate on Saturday for four different classes—about 40 kids there. We have about 40 girls in baton. Before I got the job a couple years ago, I thought, I thought baton died when I was a kid, when I had to take it. (laughs) But no, it's there. We've got 40 girls, and they participate in about 12 events throughout the city. They do parades and things.

SK: Do these girls, what do they learn? Do they learn?

LN: They learn discipline, they learn teamwork, they learn that they're good at something. That's one of the things that you have to value in instructors. You try to recognize that, that no one's not bad. Everybody doesn't have the same coordination level at the same age. The littler they are with those things, people will—

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

SK: —the interview between Seena Kohl and Lee Niebuhr.

LN: Thank you.

SK: So, successes, failures.

LN: Successes. Once again, going back to Expanding Your Horizons. In the last year, because I was involved for about 18 years, but in the last couple of years we had women come back to present who had participated in the program when they were in school.

SK: Oh, that's wonderful.

LN: That was successful.

SK: Yes.

LN: That was a good thing. In the last couple of years, we had boys and girls come from the Hutterite colonies.

SK: Really?

LN: Yes.

SK: Wow!

LN: Yes, yes, and we considered that successful.

SK: What did they do- for the Horizon Program?

LN: For Expanding Your Horizons, yes.

SK: They came?

LN: Yes. No, we could never say that boys were not invited, but usually they would come and see the first hour and then they'd take off because it was majority of girls. We really preferred not to have boys or parents. Some of the mothers wanted to go through, and we would not allow that to happen because girls won't talk up. They're intimidated by having the boys around, particularly at that age kind of thing, or having an adult around. They won't ask the questions, they won't get involved, but if it's just the girls, they will. But the young Hutterite children, the girls actually enjoyed having the Hutterite boys there because they never got to talk to Hutterite boys. They'd heard all kinds of myths and things. These were young boys who

didn't even know that they were maybe, that they didn't fit in, really. I don't want to say not fit in, but they didn't...I think because of their culture and the things that they have to do, there's so much gossip and ostracism and that kind of thing about the Hutterites, just the way that they are. Maybe they're used to that kind of situations. When I grew up, it was the Jewish children.

SK: In Great Falls.

LN: Well, no in St. Paul.

SK: Oh, in Minnesota.

LN: Right, right. The neighborhood that I came up in was a classic WASP neighborhood. I think there was one black family, but there were a couple of Jewish families. Those kids were always more outspoken. They always were more self-assured and had more confidence, and I think we held it against them. We didn't realize that's why, but we did. They walked in there and they knew what they were doing, well, who likes that? You know, I'm sitting here wondering. (Laughs) I think part of that came through with the Hutterite boys. At the end, we asked them...I asked them specifically, "Well how did you"—the boys and the girls—"Did you have any problems?"

"Oh no, everything was just fine. Everybody told us what to do, and how we had to do it." The boys were just as excited.

I liked that part, and I said, "Well everything"—because I was the emcee for all of these things and at the end I said—"For the boys who are in the class, remember that all of these opportunities are available for you too. So everything that I'm talking specifically to the girls about, certainly apply to you as well. In your future, all of these things can happen." Used to be you'd say, "I want to be a doctor." Well now, you have to be a whole lot more specific. There's 125 different classes of doctor under that. That wasn't the case when I was growing up.

SK: No, but they still have to follow a precise program to get even to be—

LN: Right, but there was maybe a handful of different kinds of doctors that you could be. Now, if you want to be a sports doctor, there's different things that are applied to that. It's much harder to get into veterinary school and dentistry school than it is to medical school. Okay. Goes off in another direction.

SK: Coming back...I mean, looking back what would you have done differently? If anything.

LN: Well, I had a psychologist tell me once that I was really never going to be satisfied until I went to college. I've tried to make up for that in all other kinds of ways, but maybe if I had figured out how to do that, I would be more self-satisfied.

SK: What would you have studied?

LN: Then probably law or something, but I've worked for 30 years for attorneys and they're not really a happy lot. They've gone into either the wrong area or they're just kind of burnt out or they have personalities that make them very good in court but miserable sons-of-a-guns to deal with in the other arena. I would have traveled more younger.

SK: But you had a child.

LN: I know.

SK: You would have taken him?

LN: I would have had to.

SK: Yes. You could.

LN: Right. There is such a difference between the people that you meet now, well, 20 years ago—those who had traveled and those who had not. The acceptance of people in general, the acceptance of cultures, being able to see a bigger picture. The younger we do that for people, the better. I often think when we're driving through the state of Montana, what if children from, well, even from inner city New York or something, came out here and just saw that there's blue sky, that you don't have to have buildings over seven stories, which is, I think, the tallest one we have in Great Falls, or from Japan.

SK: Well, there are these exchange programs, but they're very few.

LN: Right. They're usually participated in by the people who can afford it, and the child would probably get it one way or the other. If each child just had a glimmer of what the possibilities are, of what you could do. I entertain a lot. Last Friday, we had 40 people for dinner. It was the beginning of the Mountain Bluebird Trails Conference for the state, or for the region actually, and my husband is president of that. He's very much into bluebirds—North American Bluebirds Society trustee and all that kind of thing. The entertaining part, it's fun, and a lot of people don't do it, not to that extent. Not with that many people or as often as we do. We probably have 1,000 people a year that we have come. The whole world would be different if the doors were open.

One of the organizations I belong to is the Friendship Force, and the motto is "A world of friends is a world of peace." We specialize in home stays. We're in 90 different countries, and each organization has an incoming and outgoing exchange every year. There's more than 200 organizations in the country—in the United States. We have an outgoing exchange to St. Petersburg, Russia, in August—a week in St. Petersburg, a week in Korolyov, and a week in Oslo, Norway.

SK: Now, this is for adults or children or both?

LN: It could be both. They just have to be members. Actually, you don't even have to be a member anymore. Friendship Force international puts you in touch with the people in an organization in the other city, and they organize the best transportation, ways of transportation, that kind of thing. When you go, you'll stay with families in each of those cities. In October, we'll have people coming here from Sydney, Australia. Last year, we had people here from San Paolo, Brazil. The prior year from Japan.

SK: Okay. Now when do these people come, they stay in the houses, do they do anything in terms of any commitment to talk for organizations?

LN: No. They're kind of here, it's sort of a vacation for them. There isn't a theme, a directive. We can do that, but many of them don't speak the language or speak very little of it. Because of my involvement, and I'm president of the Friendship Force for the second year here in Great Falls, I testified before the city commission, and we now have a city advisory commission on international relationships and I'm vice-chair of that. Just within the last two weeks, we had five women come over from Russia. The facilitator spoke English, a couple of them could understand a little bit but could not read or converse in English, and we hired an interpreter from Helena.

That particular program has been open for about four years, and the United States brings over about 3,000 Russians. It's an open-world Russian leadership program. The theme of this one was "Women as Leaders". So we took them around to talk to women who, the ones that own businesses, ones that were managers. We took them to the health complex. Cindy Kittredge, who was the director of the High Plains Historical Society here, her family was homesteaders, so she had seen the development of women in the area and she'd spoke to that as well as her job, which is a, should we say in quotes, "prestigious" job. Just lots of things like that. I had them come here because I could talk to them as director of the YWCA and the Mercy Home, which is our largest program. It's a shelter for abused women and children. They were very interested in that kind of thing. I was not aware of how many social things there are like that in Russia. Last year, the city advisory commission brought over five judges from Russia, three of whom were women. Now, I thought that was unusual, but the Russians have accepted women in those kinds of jobs long before we did in America.

SK: Yes, they have, but also women have a very hard time in many other areas.

LN: Right.

SK: I'm sure you've heard a lot about that.

LN: Yes, but in some of those higher areas, they've been much more accepting of the talent from the person. One of the women that came was...she's 27, and she is head of a department for...gastro internalization. That's not right. Gastro-something-or-other.

SK: Gastroenterology?

LN: Something like that. At 27. Well, from—

SK: She's an M.D., isn't she?

LN: Yes. At eighth grade they put her in medical school over there.

SK: It's a very different educational system.

LN: Right, but one of the places that we visited was the farm of Aimee Hachigian-Gould, who is a...Bone doctor's not right. She's a surgeon—

SK: Osteopath?

LN: -Surgeon at...Oh I'm sorry, it fails me at the moment, but at any rate, she's also a rancher with her husband, and they produce certain kinds of cattle. They deal with the farm and things. Amy grew up in Chicago. When she got out of high school, there was a certain program going on in Chicago, and she went right into medical school from high school.

SK: Oh my.

LN: Yes.

SK: I've heard of that.

LN: They don't do that anymore but—

SK: Yes, no I heard that.

LN: So that was a unique opportunity.

SK: Yes, that is a...We haven't followed this nice, neat outline.

LN: I'm sorry.

SK: No, no, no, that's fine. I'm thinking in terms of, what are your goals for the future? Or your plans.

LN: Personally?

SK: Yes.

LN: Oh.

SK: Well, in terms of, you know, your view as to what should be done or what could be done—

LN: On a social level?

SK: Yes.

LN: Okay.

SK: As well as a personal—

LN: Were not just talking about my job, okay. I feel a little hindered because I'm in the public a lot. One of my goals here at my job is to be in the newspaper at least every five or six weeks in a good sense, (laughs) and I have friends in the radio business so I can get on talk shows at least once a month.

SK: These are topics that deal with what?

LN: Most of the time with the YWCA or the Mercy Home. Sometimes I can get off on other topics. I'll do one for Friendship Force when we have a group coming in, that sort of thing. I'm connected—in the last two years, and it's been my business to do this—connected with the YWCA. I don't want my views to be taken as those of the YWCA and create an issue for them.

SK: Right, no, that becomes important.

LN: Yes, it is for the Y, and it could all just jumble together and be a big mess because that is not the view necessarily of the YWCA. I think one view that I had was that we, in schools, that when every child comes in that we put something in the water. They have to drink the water. It makes them sterile and calm until they're 18. (Laughs) You know, until they graduate.

SK: Forget it.

LN: Yes, that won't happen.

SK: You can't even do that with your own children.

LN: Prozac and something else, right?

SK: Forget it.

LN: It's those kinds of things that I may say in the privacy of a setting, but that is not what the Y is about.

SK: Do you go to the national Y conferences as well as local?

LN: In the last couple of years, the YWCA has kind of decentralized. We still do have a main office, but we've gone to regions because they're very different. How we deal with things in the west is different from the east, and I've fought that for years with organizations. You say you can call a meeting next week and you can have it. It will take us until next week to get the places to have meetings in Montana. You can't do it in two days. You're not talking about; well, I'll come there tonight or tomorrow afternoon.

We're taking two days off to get to the meeting and two days to get back. People often in the east don't recognize the distances here that we have to deal with. So we're trying to help ourselves in a way that we can do it. I think it will be very, very beneficial. In fact we've already seen changes. We meet once a quarter in our region. Our region now includes Alaska, which is interesting. A lady comes down from Alaska for those meetings.

SK: That's good.

LN: We all wonder, but very few of us ever get there.

SK: In terms of programs, where do you see the Y going? Where would you like to see the Y going?

LN: Even after two years and eight years on the board, I'm not sure I know well enough. Until I became Executive Director, being on the board—other than communiqués once in a while—I never was aware of our connection with national other than we paid the dues. We always complained about paying the dues. We had to be accredited, which means you have to pay the dues. Supposedly the executive director was supposed to go to training. The president was supposed to go to training, but that never happened until I came on as director. When I was President I fought hard to get us accredited. After I got through with the presidency—apparently that wasn't kept up. When I came on as director, that simply was not the case. It is now. The point I was getting to; that the national offices have directed—well, the national organization, because it's member-driven, has determined that every organization, well, every building unit, will have two hallmark programs. One of them is women's economic growth, women's development.

SK: Which you, of course have been doing all along.

LN: Well, yes, but there are differences in how that is determined. Many of the Ys have daycare centers. They're not considering that as part of helping women. We have a little problem with that because we think it's helping women.

SK: I think so too.

LN: We don't have a daycare center. We do have the shelter. So in some direct ways we are helping women, but for a very short period of time. Here they can stay here for 45 days. That's not very long to change a life around.

SK: No, it's not.

LN: Get an apartment, change your children to a different school if that part's necessary, find a job, maybe get registered in school if that's what it is, and make you realize that you are okay—that you have broken the cycle, now keep it broken so that you can continue. There's a whole lot of issues that go into those things. We were the first 24-hour staffed shelter in the state. We are the only one that allows boys up to 18—

SK: Oh really?

LN: —to come in with their mothers.

SK: That's unusual.

LN: Yes, most of them over 12 are not allowed, which means the child either has to—well, they have to go to a relative or someone else, which may be where they're fleeing from. Or, they have to go to foster parents. We believe that it's more important to keep them with the mothers. That's one more thing for her to have to deal with, if they're not with her. Quite frankly, we've had many fewer problems with boys than with girls, ever.

SK: That's interesting.

LN: Yes, I found it interesting. I always thought, "Oh boy, we've got a 16, 17, 18-year-old boy. Okay, what are we going to do now?" The biggest thing is, hang the sign on the door, because most YWCAs that we've built before 1960 were built as residences. So it's kind of—we have one bathroom.

SK: That's a problem. (Laughs)

LN: It certainly can be. They worked it out and that's not been an issue. The one program is the women's economic growth, and the other is to eliminate racism. That's been our one imperative for years, for many years. That means something else—something different in each

part of the country as well. In the east, they'd hardly ever say—Native Americans, even in the mix, as a minority are hardly there.

SK: Right, unless there are little pockets, but not in certain places.

LN: If you said one of the minorities that would not be the first five.

SK: No, that's right.

LN: In the big cities. Here, it's that and African Americans. I really don't know how many are really from Montana or come from the base. We had the big military base here with 3500 people. We have that flux, too.

SK: Right, right. Then of course I would assume you still want to keep—racism becomes important, but you still want to emphasize the feminist emphasis in terms of your work.

LN: We really haven't gotten the directives to know how to implement that. If it's just a matter of having seminars regularly about things, that's one thing. If it's something else, then we have to create a program or something. I don't know where we're going with that. That's part of what we're still meeting about.

SK: Nationally or locally?

LN: Nationally. National meets, and then the regions meet. So the region will be helping us disseminate whatever the national puts down because we are doing our own peer reviews.

SK: Right. Well, that makes sense.

LN: It just will be different. There are four YWCAs in Montana. The one in Helena has been a residence for over 100 years. It's on the historical registry. That's what it is. They don't have any other programs.

SK: That's what I gathered.

LN: So they have to bring the men to remain a Y. They're working hard at that. Kathleen is trying very hard to make that work. We also have a computer center here that when I came on two years ago there were four computers. I now have stations and computers for 10 individuals. So we can have classes here. And during the day, as long as I have someone who will volunteer to monitor in the room, they're open to the public from 10 to five Monday through Friday.

SK: Do they have to be members?

LN: No. No cost, you just walk in the door.

SK: So it's a public—does your library also provide this, your public library?

LN: They do, but they only have a couple of computers and people are generally lined up, and then they come over here. So this is a better alternative for them. We have a **wise-buy** store. By the way, we have classes for the computers in the evenings. Soroptimist has given us funds whereby women who want to take classes don't have to pay. They certainly can if they wish. Our courses generally cost like \$25. Not terribly expensive. Sometimes that's the difference between dinner every night that week, over a class.

SK: That's right.

LN: That organization has helped with that.

SK: That's good. Are they active here, the Soroptimists?

LN: Yes, they are.

SK: Are they also connected in any way with the [Montana] Women's Lobby?

LN: No.

SK: No, they're outside.

LN: Right.

SK: Is the Y connected, a member of the Women's Lobby?

LN: No, this Y is not. You can belong—there could be four members, four YWCA members, you know; one from each of the Ys could be members. They could be the corporate members—the company members as opposed to individual members.

SK: So, I guess my last question is, what advice for young women would you give, or warnings to young women—16 to 19 year olds? What would you tell them? You said some of the things earlier.

LN: If we could compress the knowledge that they will have at the time at 30 into their young minds, it would take away the pain and just put in the knowledge. Be mindful of where you are and really know that there's a lot of control that you do have. Certainly over what you do individually. Make that control constructive. Sometimes it acts itself out in ways of anorexia. That kind of thing. Work it out in constructive ways. If it has to be physical, fine, form another group. Volunteer with the Boys and Girls Club. Help girls do things.

There are simple skills all of us can learn and pass on—how to read. I'm not just talking about reading the words. Read as though you were reading to an audience. Learn how to do it. Learn what the inflections do. That will make a difference in someone's life. How many times have we heard the little exercise, "Say 'oh'?" How many different ways can you say "oh?"

SK: Were you ever a drama teacher?

LN: No.

SK: That's strong.

LN: It's just those little things, and how you read to a child, how you react to a child.

SK: Do you have any—I don't know, babysitting classes, or that kind of thing?

LN: No, the Red Cross-

SK: The Red Cross does that.

LN: -has babysitting classes, right. We have, here at the YWCA, we have four support groups a week. Mondays and Wednesdays are support groups for domestic violence individuals. Tuesday is for parenting. It's an education support group. Thursday is a sexual assault, rape support group. They're walk in. You don't have to pre-register. You just come in as you wish. During all of those classes we provide childcare. There's no cost.

SK: That's crucial.

LN: I keep having to look for money for them. There's no cost to the participants.

SK: That's important, the child care.

LN: Yes, many people can't come: "Well, if I go to this course I really need, then I can't work. If I don't work, I won't have a job." So which is more important?

SK: Eating.

LN: Right.

SK: We know that.

LN: Right. We also have a store here. It's all run on donations. This is by far the most incredible generous community that I have ever even heard of. The people who have the least by percentages give the most.

SK: Isn't that interesting?

LN: If they have two they will give you one. Someone who has 10 will give you one. That kind of thing. It's just- there's over 100 human services organizations in Great Falls. Most of us run with volunteer help and donations. What does that say about a community that's only 65,000? Quite a bit. They're very, very generous and caring people. The majority of all this kind of work is done by volunteers. So they're giving the time.

SK: Is the majority of the work that's done by volunteers—they're willing?

LN: Sure.

SK: Okay, anything else you want to—

LN: Well, I don't know how many people hearing this will remember Woodstock, but he said, you know, "Pick an age and stick with it." You don't have to get older. So do something you like. You don't have to get old.

SK: I like that one.

LN: Remember, no matter what, people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. So speak with passion.

SK: I like that too.

LN: You convince with passion.

SK: Thank you very much.

[End of Interview]