

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

Oral History Number: 378-057
Interviewee: Mary Stranahan
Interviewer: Diane Sands
Date of Interview: December 23, 2004
Project: Montana Feminist History Oral History Collection

Diane Sands: The Montana Feminist History Project on December 23, 2004 in Missoula, Montana recording an interview with Dr. Mary Stranahan of Arlee, Montana for the Montana Feminist History project.

Now that we've got this on, why don't you say your name into here and—

Mary Stranahan: Can I just sit like this and see how the sound goes?

DS: Yeah.

MS: My name is Mary Stranahan.

DS: Okay, I already put on there that I'm interviewing you on this day and blah blah blah.

MS: Okay.

DS: So, I wanted to talk to you for the Feminist History Project for two reasons. But first I want to remind you that I think to me the long term value of this is we're really speaking to women of another generation and another time. So it isn't as though this information is necessarily a great deal of use today or tomorrow, but for women 50 years from now or even 100 years from now who want to know who we are as feminists, what work we've done, what importance it's had in our own lives, what change we've seen happen. I think to me that's the real value of this. It's not so much about dates and places, as how it's changed how we think about the world, and how we think we've changed the world. Which are of course our own opinions but as valid as anything else.

MS: All in the eyes of the beholder.

DS: Yeah, most of it is, but a lot of it isn't like that status of women report. I mean we did actually show that numbers had changed because women have actually increased wages or have access to jobs or have access to abortions etc.

MS: Exactly true and those numbers are particularly true in the third world.

DS: Yeah.

MS: I mean they really dramatically change.

DS: I do think probably the public is not aware, and even sometimes we are not aware, that it really is a worldwide, that feminism, this wave of feminism or empowerment of women, is a worldwide revolution that has touched every corner of the world. As a paradigm shift, even if the reality of women's equality has not happened, the expectation of women's equality has happened.

MS: Absolutely. There's people (women) walking around in Iran and Iraq without their chadors (veils).

DS: Yeah, and hearing even George Bush talk about going into Iraq for women's freedom, which I don't believe for a second. But that's important to think that he thinks somehow that that's of enough value to somebody as an explanation, a partial explanation, for what he'd doing, that he would use it.

MS: I just, in all of this conspiracy stuff going on around the election, one of the analysis of the election was that he got the women's vote. He raised his percent of women's vote by 11% between 2000 and 2004.

DS: And you're saying you don't believe that?

MS: I don't know, I can't argue statistics, I'm not that sophisticated. But if it's true, it's scary.

DS: So let me start with one of the general questions I like to use, which is really, how do you see yourself currently as a feminist?

MS: I feel like I am just coming into bloom as a feminist. Because I've spent a majority of my life being a service provider and that can get you into ruts where you can't get into empowerment issues around a larger batch of issues. So right now, now that I'm retired I see, and I'm actually taking this as a model from my mom, I watched her facilitate people getting into spaces where they could really grow and really take the bull by the horns and charge off and make changes. So I see that the era I'm approaching now in my life is getting into that space, and it feels terrific. That's my current status on feminism, and it's people-ism.

DS: So how did you get to where you are? I mean, so many women of our age and generation, you're in your late 50s as I am, grew up in a time where some of us developed feminism and became feminists and others missed this concept totally. How did you come to be a feminist, and what has that meant, and how has that changed over time?

MS: I grew up with it. My mom, I grew up with stories of my mom marching in suffragette, being dragged by her mother to suffragette marches. When I grew up I was dragged to League of Women Voters meetings and I always went to the ballot box with my mom, and volunteerism from always. I was brought up that volunteerism was incredibly important and

you were expected to do it and I watched my mom do it. So it was from child-raising is where I got it.

DS: You think you learn that. Who were the suffragists? You're not from Montana, where was that?

MS: I was born and raised in Ohio. It was my grandmother who was out marching in Toledo, Ohio for women's vote back in 1910, 1912, etc. 1914—

[Break in audio]

DS: It has always concerned me that it's not inherently related to social progressivism, that extreme focus on individualism to the detriment of the collective good, but it is certainly part of the last forty years. That concept of giving to others versus just getting it for yourself.

MS: Well, I would not give it forty years, I would give it 25 years. I would say 1975 on up is when we got into that personal growth stuff. So finish your thing.

DS: I think that part of philanthropy is getting people to be really vested in the concept of the social good, of the common good, and our responsibility to the common good, that perhaps we're not seeing as much of in younger generations as we would like to see.

MS: I agree, but I think, the generation after me was playing with crayons and clay under the table when we were doing funding decisions around Needmor. I've now watched three relatives make their life's work progressive philanthropy and it's all around site visits. It's all around going and running away from the guards at Hotel Martinique or some poor grassroots thing in northern California. It doesn't make any difference. It was watching people struggle against enormous odds, and perhaps succeeding, perhaps not, but watching those individuals become within their own power by going through this process. So this next generation, so I'm gonna be sixty, so I'm watching like forty-year-olds totally making that their life commitment. I think, this may be too simple, but I think if you get kids out there and exposed to that struggle they'll go there. It's just we haven't done it.

DS: It's like the way you started this interview, by talking about being around your grandmother and your mother and having those values lived out in a way that you saw and were involved in as a child. That you were raised in that cultural value system, and that we need to do that for the next generation, it works.

MS: You were talking about your doing your Rhodes(?) interviews, those kids have all been activists. Something turned them on to their activism. It's all related to exposure. So we, our generation and the generation below us, need to make a commitment to expose our children to the struggle. I think that's all it is and you will get your activists and your will for the common

good and not so much 'my personal growth piece.' We all need to do our personal growth but we can do it on our damn time. (laughs)

DS: Growth to what, for what?! I think the other part that you bring up there is how the next generation actually takes some of these issues in different directions. I've never been on the Pride Board or the ACLU Board, but when you look particularly at say gay youth and how different they are from, I mean our generation we were the first generation to be out, to come out.

MS: Now we got to call ourselves queer. (laughs) That was a little bit of a jump for me to say, oh I guess, okay I'm queer.

DS: Just the word. And that younger people working in this area around queer politics and queer activism conceptualize the world and have such a totally different world experience.

MS: Absolutely, and we have to promote it. It's our responsibility to do that without. Certainly part of this, I think we're genetically wired to have rebellion between different generations so we certainly can't encourage our youth to be rebellious because then they'll never be. (laughs) But if they get exposed to injustice, they'll take it on, I think. I also think we're wired to try and fight injustice.

DS: Where do you think, say gay youth now see injustice, compared to where you first saw injustice in this area? I mean when you and I first started this, say when we started Pride ten years ago, we were unconvicted felons under the Montana law. Now we're talking about gay marriage.

MS: Have you seen the movie *The Sound of Silence*?

DS: I have but for future generations you might discuss it.

MS: It's a movie that was made 2 years ago by a high school graduate and his mother by traveling around the schools of Montana, from large schools to small schools, talking to gay youth about what their experience in school was. You start off by going blahdie, blahdie, blahdie, yada, yada, yada. By the end of this half an hour movie, you're clutching the arm chair going, oh my god, I can't believe this stuff is really still happening, and about the abuse that these kids are taking from their peers and their teachers. I don't know how much the word of that discrimination is out there. I know that shocked me, that movie. When I was growing up, we didn't talk about LGBT issues, it was not a topic of conversation and now it is.

DS: It was occasionally a joke or 'Thursday's queers day,' or...

MS: I forgot about Thursday queer day, if you wear green you're queer. That is what it was at my school. You must be queer if you wear green on Thursday. Now what the hell was that about?

DS: A little social message you don't want to be queer, but we turned out to be so...

MS: Well, that's the way it goes. So I don't know, I don't know the answer because I can't walk in those moccasins, but it's a more lively discussion it's a more open discussion now than it certainly was when I was a kid. That's all I can say.

DS: So you're currently serving on the Pride board. Why?

MS: Because when I decided to go into activism it seemed like in Montana to be an openly lesbian person and to be an activist in the LGBT world was a little bit like being a canary in a mine shaft. So it felt like a good place to go because it was so boldly discriminatory here in Montana. If you go to the coast it's no big deal but here it still is. So that was a good place to be activist because I was queer, okay, that's a good place to go to try to push the envelope of social change. So that's why I did it.

DS: So how have you experienced discrimination or injustice as a member of the gay lesbian bisexual transgendered community?

MS: Well, when I was in practice in, up in the Mission Valley up in Saint Ignatius, I was openly with a woman. It was sort of like being in the military. It was like don't ask, don't tell type of thing. I didn't go broadcast it, but I didn't not, you know it was a don't ask, don't tell. So I'd have both our names on the check book and go pay for the groceries and all that kind of stuff and nobody asked me, ever, for twenty years, nobody said, "Are you a lesbian?" I had a lot of questioningly gay kids come to me as their doctor but nobody asked me. So I didn't have the discrimination. In fact I would have lost the business if I kissed my girlfriend in the town square. I definitely would have lost business but...

DS: That is sort of like the discussion we were having earlier off tape about illegal abortion, and the community where you don't develop a language around a topic of choice because it exists. People kind of know who you are and as long as you don't really push too much of the envelope or offend anyone or kiss them in them public square, kind of the old live and let live stuff, which isn't always true but kind of is true. But yet in that environment we don't organize ourselves in certain ways to push for justice and we don't develop a language around...

MS: Maybe that's another reason why I'm now an activist in the LGBT because I wasn't as a physician. I don't know if that's part of the inspiration or not, but it just seemed like a natural thing here in Montana. I've personally, as far as discrimination, I've seen the ugliness of people when you're in a march or something like that and you get some of this stuff thrown at you, I've seen that kind of discrimination. I've probably been exposed to this by patients' choices of not

coming certainly on the grounds that I was a lesbian. I'm sure that that happened but I didn't know about it. Again, no language, no language.

DS: Well, I know you need to be at another appointment but I want to ask one last question. So what gives you hope for the future?

MS: Well, I have a 13 year-old daughter so I'm vested in youth.

DS: Vested in the future.

MS: And that's vested into the future. I am watching progressives start to make plans like the Newt Gingriches did in the 1980s about investing money into think tanks and investing money into infrastructure. Actually following in the footsteps of the rightwing and investing in infrastructure that will support a much more progressive agenda than what we have now. I think we're learning from the rightwing. I have hope on that basis. I think we have to go... you have to give a lot of credit to the rightwing for being a hell of a lot smarter than we are about getting down to the grassroots and funding it well, so that they now have a juggernaut of an infrastructure that's gonna take a long time to come back. But I have hope that we will. We cannot as a world live with a perspective that the rightwing has. It's, you know, Armageddon's coming so what the hell, is their attitude.

DS: And our perspective is?

MS: That Armageddon is not coming and that we need to build for the future and do the seventh generation thinking that's required for us to survive. Because we're, I think we're on the cusp environmentally and economically and politically (inaudible).

DS: Well the doorbell's ringing, sounds like its time to end. Thank you Mary Stranahan.

MS: Thank you Diane Sands.

Note: End of first interview. A second interview begins with the same participants. The beginning seems to have been taped over.

MS: Let's see what was the other one, it was power and knowledge...

DS: And it was one-on-one.

MS: And so I said, I'm thinking I'm gonna go back to college, by that time I was pretty well worn in college and do pre-med and see. It was the gamble of going and doing all that pre-med and then getting into medical school before I really knew that was the right decision. But those were the three reasons that I did it. I had to face the anti-women thing around medical school, this was back, we're now up to '75, '74 where one medical school made all the women

candidates interview with a psychiatrist and the men candidates could interview with all sorts of people but not the psychiatrist. So it was an interesting experience.

DS: Had that school then, was it moving away from quotas for women? Or was it still...

MS: I actually ended up in an osteopathic school and only because I knew I could get in, because I was definitely a late bloomer. I graduated from college with a 2.2 average, so when I went to pre-med I had to get a 4.0. And osteopathic school had 50% enrollment of women in the 1920s.

DS: Right, those irregular physician roles.

MS: Right, so they also had a big family practice emphasis as well, it was not going into the specialty type of thing, so without me knowing it I fell into the right irregular medical education. I think osteopaths were not 50% but I think we were 30. And by that time I was older and had been out in the real world and that was a real advantage going to medical school. You know you had a little bit more experience under your belt. So I fell into the right school.

DS: And then spent...

MS: Well, two years of pre-med, four years of medical school, by that time I'm 35. One year of internship. And I said at 35, fuck residency, I'm going out in the real world. I knew having lived in Philadelphia that I wanted to go to a place where it was rural, it was beautiful, that had mountains, where you were needed. That was my criteria. My only experience with the West had been out in Colorado. So I went out there and there was nothing. If it had mountains and it was beautiful, it was way over-doctored or it was over drugged, one of the two. The last place I wanted to end up was in Telluride as the only doctor in town in a total drug culture. I said no, I'm not going there.

So I got in my car and I said, I don't know anything about Wyoming or Montana or Washington or Oregon and I just went to little towns and looked for white Hs on a blue background. It was an interesting way of checking out a town. And ended up in St. Ignatius in 1981. It took a year to figure out where the hell I was gonna settle my roots. Then you have about 2 years of abject fear while you're getting your experience under your belt.

DS: You think you're what, going to kill somebody?

MS: Oh my god, you're going to make a horrible mistake. Well, we were running a whole ER, so I was picking up bodies off of (Highway) 93 and trying to patch 'em up to get them down to Missoula. Seeing some pretty ugly shit.

DS: Your office is right there where...

MS: So we were, and it was insane, it was every other night, every other weekend, babies, emergency room. So you know lots and lots of times it would be 36 hours before you got to bed.

DS: So what was your experience moving on to an Indian reservation?

MS: Fell into it once again. It's been, that's part of the story of my life is falling in to good stuff. I didn't know anything about Native Americans, not a clue. I grew up in Ohio. I knew there was a little action about Native Americans in Michigan but I really didn't understand anything about it. So I went in and said well, there's only one way to find out, just go experience it. I figured out in the first twenty-four hours that it was, this is my analysis, was it was like being in Alabama. The racism was so open and I remembered the kids in Philadelphia taught me, most of the black kids in Philadelphia were from the South, and they'd recently moved up and they hated it in the North because the subtleties of the racism were too hard to read and they wanted to get back down to the South because you knew where you stood.

That's exactly what the res was like, you were either a god damn drunk Indian or a god damn white honkey and there was no in-between. I'm going holy mackerel, what have I gotten myself into. That was in twenty-four hours. I went, it's so wide open. That was my first experience of the res, how wide open the racism was. I thank my kids in Philadelphia for forcing me to look at racism so that I could get it (snap) like that, as to how open it was. I just said well, I'm gonna remain neutral here. I'm in a profession that's gonna be serving both and I'll be damned if a) I don't believe in taking a stand on either side of that and b) if I'm gonna be a good service, I'm gonna be absolutely neutral. So I was. I mean I didn't put up with anybody calling me a god damn white honkey and I didn't put up with anybody calling anybody a god damn drunk Indian. But I didn't take sides. I just said I'm not going there.

DS: Creating a third option there. Well, I really want to spend most of our short time in this interview, at least we can take up some of these other things, talking about two aspects really of your life: one is as an activist and the other as a donor. I think and we've done a lot of interviews with activists and I want to ask you about your experience with the ACLU and Pride and some of those things, but also as a donor because none of this activity would have happened, you can have all the volunteers and the work, but you do have to have some money occasionally in these things. At least it does seem to go quite a bit better if one does have some funding. Sometimes they're grant funding, sometimes they're individual funding, but the role of various grants in making all of the different feminist activity that's happened in this country owes a lot of its debt to all kinds of grant funding, whether it's the Committee for the Humanities or the Needmor Fund or private contributions. I think that doesn't often get recorded.

When people think about how did all of this happen, we talk about these individuals who went out there and did this great work and volunteers or whatever, and I think it's not really an honest representation of what it has taken over all of this time to put these pieces together. I

know your role and I would think of you and think of Lucy Dayton in particular as sort of two of the more out there philanthropist donors who have organized that segment of our life in Montana, or who can talk about how that came to be and how you've seen that role evolve over time as a person working on social justice and feminist issues.

MS: Okay, well let's talk about the Needmor Fund because that's a family foundation run by my family. Started in the '50s and really didn't become functional until the 1970s. So as I'm going through all this other stuff around trying to create revolution and going to medical school etcetera, I'm also doing at least twice a year, if not four times a year, meetings and site visits around what the Needmor Foundation was doing. I never gave that up in my entire time as a doctor or anything else. I did give it up a little bit in medical school.

We ended up not too, in going from a non-functional organization to an executive director and narrowing focus, through a couple of false starts and stuff, we ended up funding community organizing and realizing that funding activists who belong to organizations that they own, that does leadership training, that is related to social justice issues around grassroots organizing is where the biggest bang for our bucks was. We saw in doing site visits to Brumley Gap, West Virginia that was fighting the American Electrical Company putting a dam in. Going to Hotel Martinique in Manhattan and working with welfare women, and running up the stairs while the guards were running behind us with their walkie-talkies because they were going to arrest us. I mean some wild experiences as a site visitor.

DS: An incredible education.

MS: An incredible opportunity of education. Bottom line of seeing people grab on to a baton and go for it. How life changing that activity, of somebody going from being a housewife to actually speaking in front of city council, it's a radicalizing experience. That's what we were funding was these radicalized experience of people realizing that squeaky wheels get the grease and you need to be a squeaky wheel in this society. If you're gonna promote democracy you have to be the squeaky wheel. So that was throughout my whole background of being in social service was this other part about community organizing.

So I was a little bit of a donor. Mostly started off just totally being in the closet in Montana as a donor. I mean also as a lesbian but that closet is so much bigger than the closet of being a donor, I can't tell ya (laughs). That's really true. I don't think so much anymore but it used to be that way. So slowly but surely my reputation come out that I'm gonna actually give money. So that's ACLU, MEIC—I actually got thrown off the board of MEIC because I was non-attendance because I was covering the ER too much—were no brainers. When I retired I said okay, now I'm gonna become an activist. I never felt like I was an activist as a physician or as a teacher or as a board member or as a funder I don't think. I think the next evolution of being a funder is to be a donor activist. And that's where I'm heading. That's where I think I'm blooming.

DS: I think that's an important pairing because it isn't being able to both give money but also to broker money, which I think is the other function there, is very much of an activist role.

MS: Not only just brokering money. Because of having my binoculars on the Needmor Foundation, which is a national organization, I actually have some knowledge that is givable as an activist as well because of different perspective. So that's part of the activism aside from just being a donor. The networking is so important. Bringing the right people together.

DS: Building those relationships. I think that part of the activist role within the donor philanthropy community and the more grass roots community is really an important part of trying to understand how those changes come to be because people tend to think it happens only in the city or not to really realize the depth of the relationships that exist across the country and across the world in many ways. At many different levels they have exchanged ideas and shared models of things that work. All of the different ways that has happened, certainly through alternative media but also through all these relationships, that people like yourself and many others who travel and are involved with and have an opportunity to know what else is going on in the country and various areas and can bring that back.

MS: You're a student of the feminist movement and the history of the feminist movement. You know it was all about who you knew and the networking and that kind of stuff, so and so was doing this activity over there. I was a bit of a student of the civil rights movement, knew about the Highlander Center and all of the stuff that came out that teaching organizers how to organize. That's what it's all about, getting those people out there, telling their politicians that I ain't gonna put up with this shit anymore.

DS: I think of the role of the Ms. Foundation, I mean certainly is the one people most know about. Now it's funding in the state, whether it's the women's economic development corporation—

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

DS: —role of the Ms. Foundation.

MS: What now?

DS: Yeah, and they also brought the Judy Smiths and the WEDCO (Women's Economic Development Corp) people to their national conferences to do training and model that idea across the country. I mean WEDCO was one of the national models for that. But the role of the Ms. Foundation, to make that something that people across the country could learn from as well as funding it in the state, was incredibly important. I think it's not immediately obvious to most people the connections between the funding world and these various program ideas. There are many wonderful ideas but if they can't get legs and they can't get enough funding to happen, it's not very likely they will succeed.

MS: But there's a line a funder shouldn't cross too. I'm totally aware of that. When the funder starts dictating the agenda, then you get into some deep trouble. I'm watching some nonprofit groups that I'm associated with now getting on the grant squirrel cage cycle of having to kiss too many agenda items that then take them away from the real mission that they were at. I think funders need to be informed of some of their misuse of power too. Kellogg is one that's coming to mind as we speak, around this food policy stuff that they're putting way too much of their own agenda onto an issue and making the people who are doing the work in the grassroots level follow their agenda when it doesn't really suit the issue.

DS: Well, I think that's one of the almost historic tensions between social change organizations, not just social change, I mean Ford and Kellogg are as likely to do it as the Ms. Foundation probably or ATR. Always in some ways their particular interests as they change over time are wanting to know the sexiest, latest thing verses just funding basic programming that's at the core of what needs to be done. There's a little tangent...

MS: One of the problems with foundations is that they are only accountable to the IRS, they are not accountable to anybody else. I don't know what kind of system of accountability should happen but I think there should be a system of accountability. When you think of the billions, trillions of dollars that are in foundations that are sitting there—you have your own experience right now with the community foundation—and what that could be out there doing stuff and they're not, or they're dictating the agenda so much.

I was on a committee, a citizens committee for the Robert Fitzjohnson Foundation and their agenda item was an RFP for states to come up with how to provide medical care in the rural areas. It was a fifty state RFP and this was a foundation at that time was giving 187 million dollars a year away. I was working with these staffers and we were interviewing these states and Idaho was one of them. So I was sitting there talking to the governor and the head of the medical school and all these high mucky mucks and I said, 'Where's the people? You're doing all

this planning, but there's no people in this room!" This was an initial site visit and it was a real impact for me as power of the funder. I dropped out of the process because my sister was dying and the whole process took two years. A year later they said, "Are you willing to come back in?" I said, "Oh yeah, sure." Idaho was a finalist so I ended up at a site visit in Idaho, and god damn it, the people were there. There was Driggs, Idaho and all these people from all these little towns I went, alright. It was a lesson for me, just by asking this one question: where are the people that you're planning for?

DS: But that's part of the creative part of it too, like you were saying, the accountability goes both ways. The impact a foundation can have by saying, so where are the people here.

MS: Oh I'm just a flunky for the foundation though.

DS: I know, but in terms of thinking about, ATR, Territory Resources, a foundation out of Seattle (?).

MS: I remember.

DS: Of which I've been a member and done a lot of work for over the years. When they moved to putting on their request for proposal forms, the questions about what percentage of your staff, your board, people you serve, are people of color. Asking those questions it sort of sets the agenda in these states like Montana that are predominately white, but it focuses attention on something that really needs attention focused on.

MS: Absolutely, or diversity around LGBT.

DS: Or ruralness or men and women or whatever it might be. Those problems are not yet solved but that continual focus that foundations can bring to addressing certain problems has changed how we in Montana and everywhere do our activities as social change groups. I mean in the last year around different proposals I was looking at or working with Action for Eastern Montana or things around the Women's Foundation, we asked the question what percentage of your board, staff, etcetera are American Indians or people of color or whatever. Here you have organizations that are predominately white male organizations saying they serve American Indians and yet you don't see it when you actually look at the numbers.

MS: Where are the people?

DS: Where are the people! I think that part of activism, which isn't all that flashy in some ways, but is really fundamental in terms of all of us holding organizations accountable within the social change movement to walk the talk is really a critical one. I'm glad you brought that example up and I think there are probably some others that could certainly come up.

MS: I just had one, I mentioned to you earlier that I was a member of the women's donor network, and we just had our meeting the weekend after the election. This is a group of wealthy women from the coasts mostly and so I'm a minority inlander. They always do this exercise of how much money you have and how much money you give away and then kind of tally it up. It's usually an eye opener for the people in the room. This time they added a third question, how much money did you spend on the election? There were 12 million bucks in that room spent on the election, and I mean talk about dropping your teeth.

I got to thinking about that later. There's a list serve so I emailed everybody and I said, look if we spent 12 million bucks as a group, we should get a seat at the table and get those god damn Democratic leadership council people talking to the people instead of being so right wing. That created a lot of flurry. Then I'm in a study group with Jean Hardesty and she brought up, this was through (?), she said, "Well, you have two choices." She said, "First of all you need to know that power corrupts, so if we get a seat at the table, power will corrupt, I promise you." Then she said, "But should it be you at the table, you being the group of women that were at her study group, or should it be the grassroots? What about funding the grassroots to get at the table?" I went, oh my god, she's so right, otherwise it's just one elitist group taking over from another elitist group. She's absolutely right.

DS: One happened to be women instead of men.

MS: Right, I went, oh my god, she's absolutely right.

DS: Well, that brings up maybe a good example to talk about fairly currently, the Montana elections: the last elections in Montana Women Vote and the effort by that coalition of women's groups across the state to register more women, turn out more women, elect more women progressives in the state of Montana particularly to the legislature, to empower women to be more active in the political process. I know that could have been, used to be sort of a volunteer effort by say the League of Women Voters to turn out more women voters. God knows we all have done that for the party or whatever, but to have an organization that's a coalition of...

MS: How many organizations?

DS: It's at least ten. It's kind of the old women's lobby organizations, so it's domestic violence and the YWCA and...

MS: NARAL

DS: NARAL, so the panoply of women's justice organizations working together to register and turn out particularly low income women who tend not to vote, particularly in targeted districts around, not telling them who to vote for but telling them that they can vote, that it makes a difference.

MS: Educating them on issues.

DS: Educating them how to be involved in the political process. Seeing a pretty good success of increasing, their goal is to increase the turnout by at least 5% in those targeted areas. In Montana where we have control of the house currently, on Lake County around five votes cast in the last election, five or six, seven votes, every vote does make a huge amount of difference. Has that changed, and the funding of that by ATR, was what I was going to say, the fact that Territory Resources has given them a three year funding grant, one of their significant ones, allows them to have some infrastructure, some staffing, some continuity of presence, that for example the women's lobby, running legislature for legislature, could never get that traction in-between to have an ongoing presence.

MS: Here's what funders need to do, they need to fund general operating support, they need to do multiyear grants, they need to butt out of the agenda issue, that's just key. The fact that ATR gave a three year grant gives a breath of life to an organization. It's incredibly important and incredibly empowering.

DS: I would say ATR, for its being a regional foundation, has probably had the most impact on a lot of, for small grants, for a lot of these women's organizations in the state over the last 25 years or so.

MS: I would say so too.

DS: They're not huge funders, but they're significant beginning funders.

MS: Yeah, NEEDMOR's funded in Montana but it's not been around women, it's about grassroots. They funded MPA, they did a disaster in Butte one time.

DS: Oh, the Butte Community Union.

MS: Butte Community Union.

DS: But the Butte Community Union was really an important thing because it challenged the constitution's definition around providing public welfare for general assistance.

MS: Until the executive director walked off with all the funds.

DS: I know, but it changed the constitution.

MS: I didn't know that.

DS: For the worse. I was involved with that as an oral historian. Twice Butte Community Union sued the state when the state decided it wasn't going to provide general assistance for people who were low income who didn't have children. It's the reverse of the TANF Program. Butte had sued them and won in court. I actually testified as an oral historian, went and interviewed a number of women, who were adult women who didn't have children who were thrown off of general assistance. It was a small percentage of that population but there were women who said, "Well, I'll either go out and get pregnant because that's the only way I can afford it, or I'm gonna be on the streets." A lot of them were domestic violence victims, older women who had no other choice or would go into prostitution and testify in court. People were just like astonished, they had no idea that women were going to be impacted.

So since we won it in court, the legislature then put a constitution amendment on the ballot to change the state language, because it had said the state must provide for the general welfare and it now says the state may provide for the general welfare. That allowed the state to cut off that entire program and population and fund at whatever level it darn well pleased, instead of it shall provide for this. So the Butte Community union for its other promise had a really significant organizing impact.

MS: Well yeah, they were an incredible collection of people. They were all characters. I used to do the site visits and I would go, oh my god!

DS: The "oh my god" really gets to it. Sometimes we want to think these groups are lead by people who are all, got it together or whatever, but they don't. People are just people and they have all of their various odd flaws. Particularly these grassroots groups, you're not talking about the cream of the town or whoever thinks they're the cream of the town. You're talking about a bunch of just ordinary people who inspire themselves, can get themselves together to create social change.

MS: That's what it's all about. That's what democracy is about.

DS: That's right.

MS: Well I'm glad you told me the BCU thing because I was the one who always said, come on we've got to keep funding these guys, cuz they're doing good work. Finally when they imploded I took a lot of hits from my peers about, "what were we funding this group for?" Now you've given me a story I can go back and say, "look this is what they did."

DS: Yeah, I think it was important and it was an important part of sort of that low income organizing of the time, where women who certainly didn't call themselves feminists but were taking leadership roles in a lot of those low income organizations in the state.

MS: And WEEL was the other one we funded a lot too, in the modern times.

DS: Right, and WEEL. The women, let's see if I can get it right.

MS: Women for Equality and Economic Liberation.

DS: The empowerment word I always want to put in there. I was on their early board and helping them too. I think here's a group that's changed the national definitions around what welfare is and organizing regional organizations in every state that are welfare rights organizing. That would not have happened without the support of a lot of incubator support from a lot of women's groups, but also the funding that they did from Norsource(?) and ATR and other sources that allowed them to have enough staff and enough stability to do that work.

MS: I actually was the initial funder. (Laughs)

DS: As I recall, because I interviewed, both Toni and I interviewed all of them and so there is a record of all the development of WEEL. Not the most current year stuff with Kate Kahan being in DC working with what's going on there. As a model of a women-led low income organizing...

MS: It's a fabulous model.

DS: It's a fabulous model.

MS: Because you know about JEDI Women in Salt Lake?

DS: Yes, in Salt Lake, yes.

MS: Justice, Equality, Dignity, and...

DS: Incorporated or whatever.

MS: Independence or something like that. Only in Salt Lake would you say independence.

DS: But I think the fact that in most of these cases, like in Montana you see these social change organizations and women's organizations being so starved as an organization. We create nonprofits in this country, you know 10 before lunch. I used to do it all the time. They have no staff or part of a staff or one staff and they just...

MS: Limp.

DS: They limp along for a while and then they disappear.

MS: Contrary, Diane, to what the right wing has done. If you look over the last 25 years at what the rightwing has done, they have well-funded groups that are working on the agenda that these people care about. They get multiyear grants, they are not starving out in the streets like

the progressive organizations are. Why? Progressives have just as much money as conservatives. Why are we starving our organizations? What is the problem?

DS: I think partly we think good work should be done out of, it sort of is the noblesse oblige that you talk about coming out of the wealthier part of the community. It does also affect this part, somehow that these things, because they're good and right, should arrive full-blown out of the head of Athena without...

MS: The boot strap concept.

DS: It's still very much I think the case. I think also we have too many organizations. I know foundations agree with or talk about this. The discussion is that we have dozens of groups addressing any given problem, every one of them weak and small. What's been the discussion in your funding circle world about things like that? What difference does that make?

MS: I don't think there's been a strategic discussion about, there's another fine line about how much do you put your own agenda on or not. As far as I know there isn't a strategic discussion as to who should live and who should die, that I've heard of. Everybody is talking about the multiplicity of the groups around. Why does Missoula Montana think they can solve global warming? I don't know.

DS: Why do we have over 100 organizations that address the needs of kids?

MS: Here in Missoula?

DS: All of them starved. Or women's organizations. I remember when I helped Women's Place, which initially was very much a feminist experiment in dealing with rape and sexual assault but also using it as a training place for feminism. Its decision to fold and fold its services into the YWCA, a more conservative but still a social change model, and how hard that was. I helped talk them through that. That it was okay not to exist anymore. But that's a very hard thing for groups to do, to let go and celebrate what you've done but move on and let go of it.

MS: I totally agree, I totally agree. I don't know the answer. I don't think it should come from the funders. I've heard Rick Cohen who was National Coalition for Responsible Philanthropy talking about this. What's happened since 2001 is unfortunately a lot of very good groups failed that shouldn't have failed and some of these starving groups have continued. So it has not been that the weakest and least important have necessarily been the ones that have gone down the tubes. That's a big problem. There's no god out there that's saying, you live and you should die.

DS: But that mix of money in any non-profit that's going to try to stick around for a while, say within WORD of doing the economic development stuff, where you get a mix of state money, federal money, eventually convincing Burns to give him a million dollars toward regrating of business loans, private funding, corporations. How do you put that mix together? And feeling

like your agenda's set, particularly if you start taking federal or state public money. The guidelines are so narrow and so tight, and set the agenda in ways I don't know anybody ever really likes particularly. You feel like you've sold your soul to the devil there.

MS: Right, you talk about restrictive money. Boy, the public money is a lot more restrictive than private money. You're right.

DS: Yet it's incredibly important, when I look at around women's groups the domestic violence is a good example. When we started Women's Place and all these rape crisis programs, they were all volunteer efforts and maybe you find a little bit of money here and there. Now because of successful lobbying because of the national, like NOW, Legal Defense Fund, and others, incredible amount of federal money coming in to states like Montana. Funding so that even some of the county organizations have three, four, five staff persons.

MS: As they should.

DS: As they should, given the prominence of violence. So that's become a semi-arm of government and as a result though in some ways has lost some of its early feminist edge. I think particularly in the area of displaced homemakers that's happened. Where originally those were patched to social change community action organizations and now...

MS: What are they now? I don't even know.

DS: They're kind of career training institutes, they're things that are affiliated with different economic development corporations that have no politics whatsoever much less any feminist politics.

MS: Or empowerment stuff.

DS: Which, they were originally created by feminists who were using it as an empowerment tool and funded by...

MS: Private money it started off right?

DS: Private money, yeah, to the degree that it had money at all.

MS: That's the role rural foundations should play, is to be that early money that can then go out 'til we have a public mandate.

DS: What, to virtually bring this into one of the more current reality is that some of you who are in the funder world have created even within Missoula and Montana a network of women who are social change.

MS: What we're trying to do is, it's a group of wealthy women and what we're trying to do is have people open up their pocket books and hopefully to progressive movements. At this point we haven't made the cut, that you have, to be progressive. Just because it's a well-known fact that people with money give less money away proportionally than people without money. There's something wrong with that picture, so what we're trying to do is mobilize dollars here.

DS: I think it creates a synergy in that people are breaking out of the isolation of being in the closet about money.

MS: That's the closet. Try and get people out of the closet because they won't give money if they're in the closet, or they give money anonymously and very small amounts. They're not thinking long term about their philanthropy plan, of well, 'I should tithe myself whatever percent of my income.' You can do it by percent of income or percent of total wealth but it is a little bit of the noblesse oblige. There's a lot of private money out there that should be moving stuff.

DS: There's a lot of, your family's had money your whole life probably or mostly, so you grew up with it.

MS: Yep, 1906.

DS: But there are a lot of younger people now that are inheriting some significant amount of money.

MS: There's the largest shift of money from one generation to another in this country that this country has ever seen before. Its happening right now and it will be happening for the next ten years.

DS: As our parental generation dies off and passes on money to our generation.

MS: Trillions, we're talking trillions of dollars. It's not billions, its trillions.

DS: Which can be organized to elect conservatives and run conservative causes and fund the heritage foundation, or can be used for...

MS: Having the next wave of progressive politics in the United States. We'd better move that way if the world's gonna make it.

DS: So what is your own personal philosophy around philanthropy?

MS: Well I guess from the beginning of the story it was the noblesse oblige, you owe society. It's part of the luck of the draw. I don't think it was around wealth, it was just this is part of what to be a human being on this world is, you need to give. So now that I am not working I

probably, I would guess, I'm probably quote-unquote working on the computer, on the phone probably thirty hours a week. A lot of it is around philanthropy and a lot of it is around networking with other wealthy people and trying to make bigger chunks of money available for progressive causes. That's kind of my national. I have three areas of operation, one is national, and that's what my national is, and state is just to be there on a philanthropy basis but also a donor activist—that's where the activism stuff comes in—and then on a local-local is getting a little dirt under my fingernails around food policy. So it's all around giving but different spheres. They're all exciting to me. I love every one of them.

DS: I think around giving, so much of that goes against one of the values trends of the last forty years, which is the rise of individualism which—

[End of Interview]