

# **Voices of Feminism Oral History Project**

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College  
Northampton, MA

## **MARJORY NELSON**

Interviewed by

**KATE WEIGAND**

May 18 – 19, 2005  
Northampton, MA

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## Narrator

Marjory Nelson (b. 1928) grew up in New Brunswick, NJ. She married at age 19 and defined herself primarily as a wife and mother for the next 20 years. Inspired by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, Nelson returned to college in the mid-1960s and began to participate in the radical political movements of that decade. She graduated from the University of Akron with a B.A. in 1966 and an M.A. in Social Psychology in 1968. She was awarded a Ph.D. in Sociology from the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1976, having completed a dissertation which examined the National Woman's Party, and was instrumental in the founding of Women's Studies at both SUNY-Buffalo and at Antioch College in Ohio. Nelson has been involved in peace, civil rights, feminist, and lesbian activism; her most notable political activities include lobbying for the ERA in Congress, organizing to free Joann Little and the Wilmington Ten, and co-founding the Women's Building in San Francisco. Her articles and essays have appeared in a wide variety of feminist publications including *Sinister Wisdom*, *Sojourner*, *Off Our Backs*, and many others. Since the 1980s Nelson has lived in San Francisco where she works as a feminist therapist and a lesbian feminist activist.

## Interviewer

Kate Weigand (b. 1965) has a Ph.D. in women's history and U.S. history from Ohio State University. She is author of *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

## Abstract

In this oral history Marjory Nelson describes her childhood in an upper middle-class academic family in New Brunswick, NJ in the 1930s and 1940s, her life as a typical white suburban housewife and mother in the 1950s and 1960s, her transformation into a middle-aged white academic feminist and leftist political activist after 1968, and her experiences as a lesbian activist living and working in San Francisco since the late 1970s. The interview focuses on Nelson's transformation from married housewife to activist academic, her work with the National Woman's Party and its founder Alice Paul, her personal and political relationship with old left lawyer Mary Kaufman, her involvement in interracial feminist organizing in the 1970s, and her work as a lesbian activist in California since the 1980s. Nelson's story details the ways the social and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, especially the second wave of the women's movement, changed many women's lives. It also illustrates important connections between feminism and a variety of other twentieth century movements for social change.

## Restrictions

None

## Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Four 60-minute tapes. Transcribed by Lisa Sears and Jessica Hitch. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kate Weigand. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by the Narrator.

## Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

### Video Recording

**Bibliography:** Nelson, Marjory. Interview by Kate Weigand. Video recording, May 18 and 19, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Marjory Nelson interview by Kate Weigand, video recording, May 18, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 3.

### Transcript

**Bibliography:** Nelson, Marjory. Interview by Kate Weigand. Transcript of video recording, May 18 and 19, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Marjory Nelson, interview by Kate Weigand, transcript of video recording, May 18, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 64–67.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 18 – 19, 2005, with:

MARJORY NELSON

in: Northampton, MA

by: KATE WEIGAND

WEIGAND: This is Kate Weigand here interviewing Marjory Nelson for the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project. We're in Northampton, and Marge has come from California. Usually we start out just by having people say their name, and their address, just so that it's attached to the tape –

NELSON: OK. Well, yes, I'm Marjory. Most of my friends call me Marge. I live in San Francisco now, at the edge of the Mission District. I'm very involved with the Women's Building out there, and have been involved in the women's movement from the very beginning. So I guess that's why I'm here.

WEIGAND: That's why you're here. Do you want to start out, just so we can get a sense of where you've come from, talking about your parents?

NELSON: OK. My mother was a brilliant woman who married a man who definitely was in charge of the house, and she never really had a chance to show her brilliance. But she was very happy in the marriage. She was highly educated. She went to the University of Wisconsin — she tells the story that she was the brightest student they'd ever had there — and she had one year of graduate study. Then she went out to California, and worked as a secretary for the Whipple Foundation until she married in 1921. And my father — she met her husband, my father, in Wisconsin. She had a biology lab, and he was a graduate student, so he was supposed to be supervising her. As I hear the story, it was love at first sight. He was drafted, he had to go off to war, but he was a conscientious objector.

WEIGAND: This is World War One?

NELSON: Yes, World War One. But he still had to go. As he told the story, they put him to work inspecting garbage cans. [He was in the Army Sanitation Corps in France.] Now, whatever that meant, I don't know. But it's interesting. I've done research on World War One lately, and there were many conscientious objectors at that time. That's another story. But when my mother died, she left one newspaper clipping for me. It was a picture

of her carrying a peace sign in San Francisco in 1917. I never knew that, and this was in 1968. It was when I was beginning to get involved in the peace movement and, here was my mother involved in San Francisco in 1917. So I've been finding out more and more about my parents, and who they are. They were part of the Progressive movement. They were very progressive people, except my father was a terrible sexist. He didn't believe that a woman — a real woman — could be a scientist. Now, where was Dorothy, his wife, my mother, who was the most brilliant student scientist they'd had there? And that's what she lived with. I mean, my father would pontificate at the dining room table (laughter) about women scientists. I grew up with that, and that was hard.

WEIGAND: So were they from the Midwest originally?

NELSON: [Mother's family arrived on the East Coast in the 1600s and 1700s and settled in New England, New York, and Virginia. Stephen Hopkins — the fourteenth signer of the Mayflower Compact — was my cousin through his daughter Constance. In the 1800s some of the family moved to the Midwest. Dad's father's family emigrated from Copenhagen in the mid-1800s and settled in Wisconsin. His father, Julius, came to Rutgers to teach biology.] My mother was from the Midwest. She was born in Indianapolis although she grew up in Washington, DC. Her father — and she told many tales about her father — ran away to sea when he was fourteen, came back, fought in the Civil War on the side of the Union, and then went back to school, became a medical missionary, taught chemistry, went over to Beirut, and taught over there. He learned Arabic and then came back to Washington, D.C. and did some more. He went to Johns Hopkins, and became a doctor. That's where she grew up. But he died when she was about twelve or thirteen and it was a huge loss for her. I think she never really got over it. She and her mother went back to live in Indianapolis with her grandfather — her mother's father — who was an old Victorian.

So my mother had this kind of combination of Progressive ideas and very Victorian ideas. My father was a Socialist. He was very progressive. He was a conservationist. He worked for the state of — he was a professor of biology and was head of the biology department at Rutgers University, as was his father. There's a Nelson building at Rutgers which is named after those two Nelsons, my father and my grandfather. He had three sisters and two brothers. One of his sisters was also into biology. When she decided she wanted to get her PhD he told her there couldn't be two Dr. Nelsons. But she went ahead anyway.

WEIGAND: That's good.

NELSON: Yes. But, I mean, there were these strange contradictions in the house I grew up in between very progressive ideas and just outright sexism. My mother never should — there were three boys, and then I was born — and

my mother never should have had so many children. She couldn't manage the boys. In the house I grew up in the boys were out of control, and that had a lot of effects on my life.

WEIGAND: Well, I guess that's what I want to talk about next. Can you talk a little bit about your childhood? You were born in New Jersey, and did you grow up there?

NELSON: I was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and grew up there. And I lived — actually, Highland Park is where we lived. It was across the river from New Brunswick, and we spent nine months of the year there. Then, in the summer, we went down to Delaware Bay. My father was a marine biologist, and he had a laboratory on the shores of Delaware Bay, so we spent three months down there. There was no electricity, no running water, clouds of mosquitoes, but on a cottage right on the beach. That had a lot to do with who I became, too, because I spent a great deal of time alone. There were no other kids round. My brothers, when they got old enough, went off to scout camp, which was OK with me, but there were no other kids around for me play with. So I learned to entertain myself. Endlessly.

WEIGAND: So that was during the summers?

NELSON: Yes, summers on the beach. I had three months of the summer, until I was old enough to go to camp, and then I came to camp up here to Green Mountain Camp outside of Brattleboro, which I loved and adored.

WEIGAND: I'd like to get a sense of what your life was like when you were a kid. What was your neighborhood like?

NELSON: Well, we lived on a lovely, shady street. Next to our house was a vacant lot, and all the boys in the neighborhood came to play there. [Most girls in the neighborhood avoided the lot. Betty Anne Brow — my exact same age — was on the other side of the lot. So we grew up together in some ways. On the other side of our house was Grandmother Nelson's big old house. Nana was sickly and didn't seem to like children around. She'd raised six! Her daughter, Ingrid (my aunt), and her family moved in to care for her when I was about six. Cousin Connie was two years older and David was one year younger.] There were lots of boys in my growing up, and that was hard. I grew up, again, in very mixed kinds of ways. I was very passive, and I was a very good girl. I was a very good girl. I had to be a girl.

My mother had three sons, and she almost died with the birth of the third. The pregnancy and the birth of the third son were very difficult. She was told never to have another child. Then she had two medical abortions, and then she got pregnant with me. Now, the way the story goes — again, this is the great myth of my life — that she had always wanted a little girl and

she never had a bit of trouble with me. So there was the message: Don't ever be a bit of trouble. That really ruled my life. My parents were very strict, and when my father was around that worked. But when he wasn't around — which was most of the time — the boys went wild. My brothers could be sadistic. My oldest brother was the bully of the neighborhood, so that was hard. I was shy, and passive, and bright. I went to Rutgers Elementary School, which was a great experience for me. That's something that really worked for me. I loved school. I did well. I had girlfriends, friends, and it was nice.

When I got to about the seventh grade, I developed a huge crush on the music teacher at our school, and I decided I wanted to take piano lessons, which she gave. So she came to our house, and gave me piano lessons, and music became a major theme of my life. That's how I got through high school. When I finished elementary school in the eighth grade, the boys went on to Rutgers Prep School, but the girls couldn't come. Girls had to go elsewhere because the girls weren't allowed. Here's this sexism, this terrible sexism again. So I went to public school, and I never felt I fit in. I was miserable all four years of high school. I was very shy, and a good girl. I played in the band. I mean, I did things. I was always trying things, but I was pretty scared, and quiet, and timid. And music was very important — playing the piano — and I sang in the church choir. [Senior year I gave a piano recital and worked very hard and was proud of that. Mother, Aunt Ingrid, and friends attended, but not my father. That hurt!]

In my senior year, the war was over. World War II was over, and I was singing in the choir, and the brother of the choir director came back. His name was Howard Hoekje. He was in the Marines, and I fell in love with him, and I married him on my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. As I look back and tell the story — I mean, this happened to many women, men and women, after the war. They got married, and the women were really not encouraged to go off to college. We were expected to take care of these returning GI's. It was fine with me. I mean, the way I tell the story is that I looked for the strongest guy around, and that was Howard Hoekje, and I was in love with him. I was very much in love with him. So I married him on my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday.

WEIGAND: But you did go away to college, right?

NELSON: I went away to — my parents said, because I had already enrolled in Oberlin — they said, "Go away for one year. Try it." I chose Oberlin because of the music, but when I got there I discovered that my musical ability was not much. I mean, I'd worked hard, and I didn't really have a great talent for music, and I wanted to go back and get married. It was the only thing that made sense to me. It was part of the times, and I had not learned or developed enough of a self to think of anything else I might do. It's quite amazing to me to look back on that now. I didn't — I never

thought I would grow up. I was always surprised when the next birthday came along. I think I was basically frightened. I was basically traumatized by my brothers, and the boys in the neighborhood, and I just never thought I would grow up. But I did.

WEIGAND: Can you talk a little more about what sort of messages you got about what it meant to be a girl?

NELSON: Oh, constantly. [Men were in charge so you had to have a man to “take care of you.” Father knows best. Never be as smart as the boys. You can’t be, but if you are, hide it. Rape was a joking matter, or your fault. I was punished for fighting back. “You have to learn to take it,” Mother said, or “boys will be boys.” Girls shouldn’t have muscles or be too physically strong. Girls must have character. When very young, I was athletic and loved to do cartwheels, climb trees, etc., but the boys could see my underwear, and I had to wear a dress, so all that stopped. Other messages were about how we should look. Betty Anne’s sister was a model in New York City so she introduced (along with the movies) the world of make-up and glamour, which aroused in me huge self-consciousness about my body and how I looked.] There were messages, all around. It was terrible sexism. I mean, girls were not supposed to want to achieve anything. If you went to college, it was just to meet a good man, or learn to be a good parent to your children, a good upper-middle class — I mean, coming out of the professional class to do justice by your male children. It was very blatant, very clear. There was a lot of stuff about women’s bodies, and I grew up with a real hatred of my body. I was terribly self-conscious, and very, very conscious about my weight. I was — oh, let’s see — I was maybe ten pounds over what was officially supposed to be the correct weight, but that seemed like a lot, and wrong. These messages about girls conforming were everywhere, everywhere. The big thing was the boys, the war, the GI’s coming back, and what we were supposed to do to support them. I went along with it because I didn’t have any developed — as I said, I didn’t have a developed sense of myself, or any dreams. I had fantasies. I lived in a fantasy world. I had a lot of fantasies.

WEIGAND: Like what kind?

NELSON: Oh, I read Willa Cather, and had fantasies of secret gardens and magical places, and of being an opera singer, or something. But it was not real, and I knew it wasn’t real, and I thought, This is a little strange, but I did. I read. I read a lot. There were books in our house, you know, so I was encouraged to read. My mother was a very dreamy, quiet woman. And I grew up to be like my mother. That’s who I was. I was like my mother. I was very conformist, wanting to please, wanting to make whoever was around happy. That’s who I was.

WEIGAND: How about the — you grew up in this interesting time, sort of during the Depression, and then the war takes place while you’re a teenager, I guess.

NELSON: A teenager, yes.

WEIGAND: And how much did that affect your life, or affect your thinking?

NELSON: Oh, it was terrifying, the war. [Living on the East coast we had blackouts and brown outs. Neighbors trained as plane spotters looked for enemy planes. We had an army base at the edge of town — Camp Kilmer — which filled our streets with GIs preparing to be shipped overseas. Our streets were no longer safe at night.] I'd go to the movies. I went to the movies a lot. That was part of my fantasy life. I'd forgotten that. Yes, a big part of my fantasy life was the movies. I'd go on Saturdays, or I'd go after school if I could. When I was in elementary school I started going to movies. We got out of school at one o'clock, and we could go to the movies in the afternoon. That's what we did.

The war was terrifying. There would be newsreels of the war. My parents read the *New York Times*, and they were very interested, and concerned about the war, and talked about it. There was a lot of discussion about it, and about Hitler, and what was going on. It was very frightening, very frightening. I think it probably had a huge influence on my life in terms, again, of just trying to do the best I could, and not make any fuss. I was up at camp when the atom bomb was dropped, and I remember a huge celebration that the war would be over. It wasn't until later that I realized what that meant. As I say, I was very much of a conformist.

WEIGAND: Did you have much political awareness as a kid? It sounds like your parents had some.

NELSON: My parents were very, very political. They were serious people. My father was very political, and my mother was very educated, and talked with him. They talked about what was going on — the Depression, the government, the war in Europe, the politics of the college — so I grew up hearing all of that. [Many poor men knocked on our back door and were fed during the Depression.] My father also talked a lot about racism, and his solution to the problem of racism was a coffee-colored race. But I also got the message that I shouldn't think of marrying a black person because it would be so hard on the children. So again, it was a double message.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: There were not any people of color in our home — invited to our home — so I didn't have that experience. The only people of color I saw were — I think when I was about ten, we had a black woman come as a cook. Before then, the people who worked in our home as helpers were Eastern European women, so I didn't have much of a sense of people of color except that my father would talk about that. He'd talk about it. But I didn't really know a girl — a black girl — until I went to high school and then

there was an African American girl in our class. I liked her, but there was a clear message that I shouldn't bring her home. There were very mixed messages everywhere.

WEIGAND: Yes, and I don't know quite how to ask this question, but can you give me some sense of your family's values and what was communicated to you about what was important in the world?

NELSON: Well, yes. I think that they had very progressive values. [They believed in justice, taxing the rich, controlling big business, exposing corruption. Dad voted socialist. He hated big business, commercialism, and believed in social responsibility, conservation, education, internationalism, and the League of Nations. My mother, Dorothy Lewis Nelson, was on the board of the YWCA and the League of Women Voters. One year she directed the local Red Cross drive.] They really cared about changing the world. They'd been pacifists. I remember them talking when World War II started, and my — I didn't know that they were pacifists until one of brothers wanted to enlist. He wasn't old enough, and he had to get permission. Then I heard this conversation about the fact that they'd been opposed to World War I. How could they now support this war? They were concerned about that. How could they do that? But all three of their sons were drafted.

Another big effect on my life was the fact that so many of the boys I knew went off to war and didn't return. A lot of them were killed. But the values of my parents — I respected their values and still do — of telling the truth, except you don't talk about what's going on at home. Basically, you're honest in your affairs with other people. You try to treat people with respect. Children should be seen, and not heard. The grownups talk, and the children don't. My mother was — my mother belonged to a club that she called the Traveler's Club. They met twice a month, or every two weeks, or something like that, and the women gave papers. These were educated women, and they gave papers. They did research papers for each other, and that's as far as they ever went. I never heard any of these papers, but my mother would hole up for, I don't know, weeks writing her paper. Then she'd give it to her group. This is very sad to me. She loved her club.

WEIGAND: Do you have any idea of what kinds of topics?

NELSON: Well, they'd travel to — they'd pick an area — like they'd "go to" South America by doing research. They never traveled. So the papers would all be about South America. They'd choose different subjects. But I never heard any of the papers. Once a year the club came to our house, and I would dress up, and pass around the whatever. They had elaborate tea parties. It was very genteel. That's the word I want: genteel. My parents were soft spoken, except that my father, when he got angry would rage. He didn't do that very often, but enough that I was afraid of him. I never

heard my parents disagree. I never heard them fight. In all those years, my mother acquiesced. So there's a value. There's a patriarchal value.

My father, Thurlow Christian Nelson, was — some people called him a great man. He was deeply involved in water conservation and pollution as a danger to rivers, etc. He was very charismatic, and interesting, and very sweet in some ways. He seemed very powerful. I adored him. And I think science was a value. Definitely science was a value. That you had to find out — this is the truth I'm talking about — what is really happening? What's reality? And there was a huge dedication to the whole world of science. And my father — I think I told you he was on the Board of Water Conservation for the state of New Jersey, and he taught biology.

And they went to a church. [They were both spiritual. Dorothy was a Theosophist as a young woman. After her children left home she taught a girls' Sunday school class and seemed to love that. She was the first Deaconess in her church.] It was Dutch reform, but it was the college church, which meant it was a very liberal church. So I grew up going to Sunday school, but nobody really believed that. Not really. Not really. It was just what you did. It was a social thing. My mother went to church because she met her friends there, and my dad — my father didn't go. Most of the time he didn't go. He'd go out in the woods, or go canoeing. That was his "church."

And here's another, the value of nature or a love of nature. I got that all the time. He taught biology. He'd go out in the fields, and collect specimens, and I'd go with him. I tagged around after him. I would have loved to have had his life, but I was told there's no way. No way. My mother made it very clear. There's no way you can be a biologist. Forget it. But I had that as a child. I mean, had a lot of time in nature. Not just in the summer, actually all year round. So that was a value. [They enjoyed classical music — concerts and opera. Mother took me to New York City to Saturday matinees and theatre.] You take care of things. It was not a particularly materialist home. You don't buy a lot of stuff. You buy quality clothes, you know, but no ostentatious display of wealth. My mother came out of the old bourgeoisie, the old 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeoisie. So they had property, but these were her values. You don't show your wealth. You don't show your power. You do things very subtly.

WEIGAND: Yes, gentility, I guess, yes.

NELSON: Gentility. Yes, quiet spoken, yes.

WEIGAND: That's interesting. So let's see. I guess maybe we need to skip forward again here, and sort of go back to the year that you go to college, and leave your husband-to-be in New Jersey. Is that right?

NELSON: Yes. He came back from the Marines, and went to Rutgers, into the chemistry department to get a PhD in chemistry. So I went off to Oberlin. But Howard came out weekends, and he called me, and I just — basically I wanted sex. He was seven years older than I, and he was assertive. He also touched me in ways that I'd never been touched before. I was not a popular girl in high school, so this was all new to me. And I would have happily gone to bed with him, but there's another value: you do not get pregnant if you're not married. I watched a cousin of mine get pregnant and be ostracized by this progressive family. I mean, the whole family, all but the aunt who was a scientist in New York. My Aunt Dora took her in, and was kind to her. But the rest of them, they ostracized her. I couldn't tolerate that. I wasn't that strong. So I knew if I wanted to have sex, I had to get married. So I did.

WEIGAND: What was Oberlin like then?

NELSON: Oberlin was full of the — what did they call them? The Coast Guard, the CG's. They had a lot of returning GI's there. It was for the boys primarily. I don't know. I never really related. Again, I didn't have enough sense of myself to know what I wanted. I went there for the music, and I was overwhelmed because I was taking music in the conservatory. Oh, I wanted to learn to play the organ. I played the piano fairly well. And so I started taking organ lessons, which was fun. But in order to get credit I had to take music theory. Well, I'd taken music theory in high school, and gotten A's in everything. But in Oberlin, five days a week we had ear training, we had sight reading, and I couldn't do it. I didn't have — I couldn't. So I worked incredibly hard, and it was the first C grade I ever got in my life. And the only reason I got a C in music theory was at the end of the year, the teacher called me, and she said, "My dear, you were never cut out to be a musician. If you promise me you're not going to try to, you know, stay in this program, I'll pass you."

WEIGAND: Wow.

NELSON: And I said, "Yes, I'm going home to get married." So that's — I didn't really take advantage of being there. It was really a waste of money, frankly.

WEIGAND: So then you go back to New Jersey, and that's where you start your — ?

NELSON: I went back, and I went to Douglas College, which was New Jersey College for Women there. I got free tuition there, and my sophomore year I married Howard. I enjoyed my courses. You know, I love philosophy. But I never took any of it seriously. The only course that I really loved — oh, I loved philosophy, and I loved a course I took in dramatic reading because I got a crush on the woman who taught it. Part of my confusion in life was, here I just married. I was in love — I thought I was in love with my husband — and I fell in love with this teacher. I just had such a crush

on her. So I loved her class, and I worked very hard in her class, and that was fun. That was fun, and it later got me into a little theater, and doing stuff like that. That was later.

WEIGAND: How was it balancing going to school with being married?

NELSON: My parents gave us an apartment in their house. They turned a couple of rooms into our apartment, because my brothers were all gone by then. We lived at home. It wasn't very different except that we had — now there was a man in my bed.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: I enjoyed my classes and my music. I mean, I did my homework. I was still a good girl. I was still being a good girl. It wasn't — it wasn't any different, really.

WEIGAND: So, you lived with your parents basically, but in a separate space. So did you sort of do your own life, or attempt to do that?

NELSON: We all ate together. It was — later when I went back to school, then I can talk about balancing school, and marriage.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: When I had kids, that was a whole different thing. But it was more like just life as I'd known it. Going to school, and Howard was there. My mother — my parents really loved Howard. He was a good boy too. Howard was a, you know, very respectful son to them. They were crazy about him. My mother was a — I didn't say this. One of the reasons that I got married was that my mother came to me, and she said, "If you and Howard are going to continue this way" — because she knew we were making out on the sofa, going about as far as we could go without having intercourse — she said, "You have to get married. People are talking about you. My friends are talking about you." So I said to Howard, "We have to do this." And I'm not sure he was ready to get married, but he wanted sex, too.

WEIGAND: Yes. So it's really these outside forces that have sort of —

NELSON: I'm sure that if, you know, it had been a different age, we would have had an affair, and that would have been the end of it. Really, it was very soon. I mean, God, he'd been off in the Marine Corps for four years fighting over in Japan, and he was in the Intelligence Corps. He interviewed Japanese prisoners. He was the son of missionaries, and so he'd grown up in Japan.

WEIGAND: And he could speak Japanese?

NELSON: Yes.

WEIGAND: So he wasn't right in there in the combat; he was more protected?

NELSON: Well, there were some times when one of the things he did — he didn't talk, you know, these guys didn't talk much about the war.

WEIGAND: Yes, they didn't talk about it.

NELSON: But one time when I was prying him for information, he talked about the fact that he would go in a boat along the shore, and call into the guys on shore, to the Japanese, to surrender. That was pretty scary because they would be firing, with gunshots going both ways.

WEIGAND: I know Douglas College was a women's college.

NELSON: Yes.

WEIGAND: Was it really deeply integrated with Rutgers in general, or was it — ?

NELSON: No, it wasn't particularly integrated. It was in another part of town. Rutgers was in one part, one side, and Douglas was over in the other side. It wasn't integrated then. That happened later, after I left.

WEIGAND: And so how was that? Was there any discussion about — I mean, women's colleges were much more common then — but I guess I'm wondering what the messages there were about being female?

NELSON: Pretty traditional. They were pretty traditional about the role that women were supposed to play. There was no liberation at all. None at all. There was no sense of that at all. It was — it was not very exciting to be there except for this one course that I — Anna Nelson's course. [That was where I learned how to make a speech. She encouraged me to enter a contest. I spoke about music and its importance to life.]

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: There was really no excitement on the college campus then, at least not for me. Maybe it was there, and I didn't see it. I was this dreamy, head in the clouds, passive, shy person.

WEIGAND: You felt like your real life was at home?

NELSON: Yes. And the choir, and my music felt real. I continued studying music. When I went back to Douglas, I started getting A's in music theory again. And I was playing the piano, and I was fine in college. You know, as long as I wasn't in a conservatory I was good enough to continue. I chose an

English major, and it was OK. But I didn't really work very hard. I crammed, you know. I always got A's. That's one of the problems. Except for this experience with music, it was easy for me to get A's. I wasn't challenged [except in my junior year, a course in philosophy did excite me and I felt disappointed that I hadn't discovered it earlier.]

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: I wasn't challenged. After eighth grade I wanted to go away to Northfield, a girls' boarding school.

WEIGAND: Right up here?

NELSON: Is that the name of it? Yes, up here, because I loved camp. Oh, I loved that. And I yearned to go up there. One of the girls I knew from camp went there, and told me about it. It was a huge regret that I didn't get to go. And what my mother said was, "If we send you up there, we won't have money to send you away to college." Well, when I was beginning high school, I thought I would be going away to college. So I really wanted that. I mean, camp was the only place where I discovered a different part of myself, and I went rather wild. I got rather wild at camp. And so did some of the other kids. It was an amazing experience.

WEIGAND: What did you do?

NELSON: Oh, we'd sneak out of camp, and go body-surfing down the river naked, that kind of stuff — stay up all night, smoke.

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: I mean, nothing — or hitchhike, go out, and hitchhike. I mean, I'd never done anything like that. And I went there for five years, and the last year I was there — my junior year — they asked me never to come back. They told me I was a ringleader. Now, that was the most amazing thing I'd ever heard because I didn't understand myself that way at all. I really was — I was crushed. I was heartbroken. But anyway, going away to boarding school was something I really yearned for, and had to put it out of my mind. But that was a huge disappointment. Well, I think basically my parents didn't want me to go away because their sons were all gone.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: They didn't want me to go away. They wanted me home.

WEIGAND: How did you think about these crushes that you had on women when you were young?

NELSON: At the time I thought there was something really wrong with me. I thought I might be really, really sick. My mother who had — well, in her Traveler's Club, there were single women who I'm sure were lesbians. But she would talk about women who were lesbians as queer. She used the word queer. She'd say, "If you stay around just women too much, you'll get queer." She was very homophobic. And she really — I don't know how she — what she did with her friends. I don't know how she managed that. I really don't. Her mother — by the way, her mother went to Vassar and I understand there was great deal of expressive woman love there. I have a marvelous picture of her that I didn't get till just about ten years ago, of my grandmother sitting with a group of women at Vassar College. Their arms were all around each other.

And my mother, when she was at college, her senior year joined the Theta sorority. I think those were the happiest years of her life. So she was struggling with something too, about that. I got messages: Don't be queer. Don't be an intellectual. That was part of it. Don't be an intellectual. And when I was trying to decide where I was going to go away to college, I didn't think about a women's school then, because my father was saying, "It's better to go to a co-ed school because you learn to be with men." Well, this was the message I got over, and over again. You have to learn to be with boys. And when I was a — when I was little, and my brothers would be doing their sadistic thing, my mother would say, "You have to learn to get along with the boys. You have to learn to flirt with them. You'll be grateful that you have these brothers because they'll get you dates when you get older." This was this rampant heterosexuality, just rampant.

WEIGAND: Wow.

NELSON: Yes.

WEIGAND: That's interesting.

NELSON: Yes.

WEIGAND: So can you talk — I mean, this is going back again a little bit, but I wanted to ask what was going on in your head at the day of your wedding? Can you sort of go back to that moment, and just talk about how you felt right as it was happening?

NELSON: I was doing what I was supposed to do. I was being a good girl. My mother was ecstatic. My mother told me that she was going to plan my wedding. It had nothing to do with me; that this was the mother's role. This was about families, and all that. And, you know, it was her thing. Two months before she died, when she was still able to talk to me — she was dying of cancer in 1968 — she talked about the wedding she gave me as the most beautiful thing she'd ever done. This was the high point of her

life, my wedding. And I think it was. It was a beautiful wedding. I was married on my birthday, so that's December 20<sup>th</sup>. And the church was gorgeous. It was full of all these greens, and boughs of, you know, whatever, holly. My bridesmaids wore green velvet, and my maid of honor — I had six bridesmaids, I think. I've forgotten — four, or six. And my maid of honor wore red velvet. And it was gorgeous. [I was excited to be getting married because I wanted sex and I wanted to be grown up — away from my parents' domination. And it meant that I was successful as a woman so I felt more confidence.]

WEIGAND: Sounds beautiful.

NELSON: And I had a lace gown. But I was being a good girl. That's what it was. I wasn't thrilled. It was just something I did. It's just a little strange to think about that. But that was it. I didn't have a way to hold experience. I was just not that developed as a self.

WEIGAND: So, I guess, you go to college through May of 1949?

NELSON: Um-hmm.

WEIGAND: And then your daughter was born in 1950, right?

NELSON: Yes, right.

WEIGAND: So —

NELSON: So Howard finishes his degree in 1949 and we leave New Brunswick. I had accelerated and tried to finish my degree by going to summer school, but didn't manage it. It was too hard. It was too much, the accelerated courses, combined with being married, and all of that. So he got a teaching job in Ohio Northern College. It was this little, tiny, Methodist School in Western Ohio, up in the northwest part of Ohio. Tiny, little — 2,500 people in the town of Ada, Ohio. So off we went. And his job was the head of the chemistry department. There was one other guy in the department who didn't have a doctorate. He had a doctorate, and they were trying to get accreditation. His salary was \$3,500 a year. I was the professor's wife. Oh, they gave him a full professorship.

WEIGAND: Wow.

NELSON: I mean this was something. And I was being my mother. You know, I was 20 years old. I was twenty years old. And I get out there, and we have an apartment above the veterinarian, and farmers would bring their pigs in to be castrated, so I'd look — my kitchen window was right over the driveway, and I'd hear these squealing pigs. But suddenly, here I was with nothing to do. I didn't want to go finish my college at a place that wasn't accredited. It didn't feel like something I wanted. So what am I going to

do with myself? [The women of the town invited me to join two different clubs — *Entre Nous* and Current Events. The women were kind but much older. They served fabulous, rich desserts. I went to a few meetings of each but was bored by them.] My husband did not want me to work. I wanted to work, but he didn't want me to. I started having dizzy spells. I finally went to the doctor and they couldn't figure out what was wrong. They sent me down to a psychiatrist in — I guess it was in Columbus, or Cincinnati — yes, it was in Columbus. I drove down there, and they did a neurological test. And I came back, and the doctor told me that the tests showed that I had an anxiety neurosis, and that the recommendation was that I have a baby and that would fix me. So I did. Yes. My husband — Howard wasn't ready to have a baby. We weren't ready to be parents. But this was the time. This was the time. And I thought I was ready. I was excited about that. And so I got pregnant, and by 1950 Carol was born. And that changed my life.

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: That was a wonderful, amazing experience. I mean, the childbirth was terrible because I wasn't prepared for it at all. But, I mean, I had — again, I didn't do any of the — I just didn't know. I was ignorant, very ignorant. But once she was born, I had a sudden realization that this experience made me a real woman, and that that's where my support was going to come from. I made a shift there. And it wasn't too long after that that I got a phone call from this girl from high school, Anita Crone, who also showed up in — oh, I didn't tell you! We left Ohio Northern. He wasn't getting enough money, and he wasn't happy in his work, and he decided to go into industry. He got a job at Columbia Southern, which became Pittsburgh Plate Glass, down in Corpus Christi, Texas. So down we went. In the middle of the academic year we went off. I'd been there — I don't remember when Anita showed up, but it wasn't too long after I was there that I get this call from Anita. She's got a baby too, and we became best friends. She saved my life. She saved my life. We just helped — she — you've met her. She has a lot of energy, and it was very stimulating. I was ready for a real woman friend. I really didn't have a real woman friend, somebody I could really talk to. So this was a new experience for me, to have somebody. There were a lot of things that I didn't know how to talk about, and she didn't either. And, I mean, we've discovered that later, over the years, because we've maintained our friendship. But it was wonderful.

And I began to meet other women in the neighborhood who became friends. This was the beginning of something that I've continued throughout my life, seeking out women friends. Their friendship has been immensely important to me in my life. And the women, other housewives, other mothers, became my support group.

WEIGAND: So were you living in a suburban setting?

NELSON: Yes, definitely, in the suburbs, in Corpus Christi. Yes

WEIGAND: So sounds like it could be — I mean, I'm guessing here — you read about these sort of suburban coffee klatches in the 1950's —

NELSON: Well, that didn't work that way for me because my husband didn't want to be in one of the developments. [I would walk the sidewalks with my baby carriage — later a red wagon — and meet other women with their babies and we'd talk, and maybe have lunch. But there were only a few young families.] The GI Bill was getting houses for people, but he didn't want that. Now, I'm not sure why he didn't want it. I think he was a bit of a snob, and conservative. My parents had gotten some money from — my mother had gotten some money from the estate that her family had, and so they sent us about \$5,000. And so we could buy a house in a more established neighborhood. So my neighbors were women who were older than I, for the most part, which I hated. I mean, I wanted to be out there with the women my age. I was very sad about that but, again, I was a good girl, you know, doing what my husband wanted.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: And he picked out the house, actually. He bought the house because I stayed with my parents while he went down, and bought the house, and then — I was being taken care of. I was still being treated very much in this way of raising upper-middle-class girls. I was terribly innocent, and basically ignorant of what's happening. I was just supposed to be responsive and, you know, taking care of the husband, and the children. It was a very weird way of raising kids. But that's who — that's what was happening to me. That's where I was.

WEIGAND: So you said your life changed with the birth of you daughter, and this move. I guess you've talked about that a little bit, but can you flesh it out more? Can you talk about sort of what really changed for you, and how you changed?

NELSON: Well, I began to find some purpose in, in my life. I began to be stretched, and pushed. I began to learn a lot of things about — I began to grow up, basically. I mean, there's this kid screaming. And Carol was a very demanding — my first child was very demanding kid, and I had to learn to take care of her. And I wanted to learn. I wanted to learn. And I wanted to be the mother that my mother wasn't. My mother was not a warm, and loving, and she — she was sweet, but she was not expressive. You know, she was genteel. I told you all that. I wanted to be a wonderful mother, a loving mother. I read Doctor Spock. I wanted to be there for my kids, and that's what I tried to do. I became super mom, super housewife. Betty Friedan tells the story. That's who I became. She wrote that book, but it was about me. I mean, I know a lot of women say that, and it was true.

WEIGAND: So how did you spend your days?

NELSON: Oh, God, well we — there's all this stuff of taking care of the children, playing with them, and taking care of the house. You became a housewife. So I learned — the first house we had, we painted the walls. I made the curtains. Anita, at some point, taught me how to decorate cakes. We started doing that kind of stuff, fancy cooking. We didn't have much money. He wasn't making much money. I was just making the house look pretty, and sewing. I sewed dresses for my girls, and I sewed dresses for their dolls. I sewed dresses for myself. And I'd go out with the kids, take the kids out. Meet Anita, or other people, and go out. We'd go out to Padre Island, this wonderful island outside of Corpus Christi. I spent a lot of time just being with the kids, and taking care of the house.

My husband came home at 5:00 o'clock. He insisted that I be home, and I was. So that was it. He didn't want me to work outside the home. I wasn't prepared to go to work, so I didn't really argue with him then. It was later that I did. But I wasn't ready to do that. I was creating a life for myself within the parameters that had been set for me. And I was very happy. I was as happy as I could be there. I felt — for a number of years, I really — I loved the babies. I loved them. I had a little trouble with, you know, when I had more than — when I had two kids, and the kids were fighting. I didn't know how to deal with that. That was hard for me. And Howard wanted a son, and I had two girls. I really wasn't ready to have another child, but he wanted a son, and I wanted to give him a son. So I got pregnant the third time, and it was fortunately a son, Peter. But all of that worked really well. I really tried to be a loving mother within what I could do. And I was, and I was reasonably happy at it. And I think reasonably content, and I sang in the church choir. I got involved in the little theater. I had a night out at little theater. You'll enjoy this. I started — the first time I went there, I went out at night during the week to little theater in Corpus Christi. The director of the theater said, "You must be a lesbian, being out at night, away from your husband." The idea that I would go out was so — and I had cut my hair short because, in Corpus Christi, the wind was blowing so much. I had long hair, and my husband wanted me to have long hair, but I cut it short because the wind was always blowing, and it was just easier. "You must be a lesbian!" (laughter)

WEIGAND: Were there other women involved in it?

NELSON: No, no, no. It wasn't anything like that. It was the fact that I wasn't home with my husband. (laughter) I didn't know what he was talking about. I wasn't thinking about being a lesbian. I wasn't one of those women. I didn't know any lesbians. I mean, if I had, it might have been different, but I didn't have that experience. It just wasn't who I was.

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: So things were going along pretty well. And it was in about 1958, or something like that. I can't remember, 1957 or 1958. This woman came to our church — Elaine Lubbers — to be an assistant minister. I'm not sure she called herself a feminist but she was the first real feminist I'd seen. Her husband had died, leaving her with four children, and she'd gone to seminary. She was a liberation theologian and she was brilliant. She wanted to bring that to us. So she started setting us up to go up to the Christian Faith and Life Community in Austin, Texas. She started talking in ways about demanding — she wanted to be the minister but she couldn't get the job. But we were all immensely impressed with Elaine. She had a huge influence in my life. So we started going up there, to Austin, Texas, and they were introducing us to Paul Tillich and to — what they talked about was re-mythologizing Christianity. In other words, you say you're a Christian. You go church. But what does it mean? And they were really challenging us. I loved it. I ate it up because it began to make sense to me. It got me to really talk about things in a very different way. It was a profound influence on my life.

And then, the other thing that happened that changed my life was that I got sick. Now, I was really driving myself in terms of doing the housework, and painting the house. Meanwhile, we moved to another house, and I did everything. I sanded the floors, I put up sheetrock, and painted everything. Tiled the kitchen, and loved it. I loved it. But anyway, I got terribly sick. I got hepatitis, and I had a growth on my thyroid, and I had a kidney infection. I had all of this at once, in January of 1960. The doctor said the growth on my thyroid needed to be operated on, and I didn't want that. He said, "It's probably cancerous." So it really was terrifying to me. I mean, I was what, 31 years old. And I was sent to the hospital, and I spent two weeks in the hospital on an IV, and then I was sent home, and put to bed, basically, for three months.

People began to tiptoe around me, and Anita did a lot of caretaking of my kids. So did other women. Anita did this amazing thing. She organized the women of the church to help our family, and later to help other people, too. But she was the one that made that happen. And basically, I lay in bed with this thing growing in my throat, and getting bigger, and bigger, and my fear that I was going to die, or at least lose my voice. It was a terrifying experience. I was not prepared for it. And nobody else was — the people around me did not want to talk about it either. Everybody reassured me by saying, "Oh, no, you'll be fine."

So that was my first real experience of looking at death, or possible death. The other thing that it did, because I was sick for a long time, was that it robbed me of the only role that I knew, which was being a housewife. It absolutely took that away from me. Who am I? I didn't know. I mean, it was a very scary time for me. I had the surgery. They removed a hunk of my thyroid. They didn't give me thyroid replacement, and I became terribly depressed. At the same time I had this kidney infection. Now they

were able to deal with that. When I had the surgery, my liver went off again just from the anesthesia. But, you know, as I began to get better, they started dealing with the kidney infection. And they had to dilate my urethra. The doctor stuck these steel rods up inside me. [There was a series of treatments and the rods kept getting bigger.] Basically it was like being raped. I mean, it was a terrible experience. And to help me through this, they gave me a lot of drugs.

I had the surgery in May. By the end of August, I was feeling so weird. I didn't have the thyroid. I was having this terrible thing happening. What I didn't know was that the experience was restimulating some old memories that I wasn't ready to deal with at all. But I — I got in the car one day. We had a woman helping with the house, and the kids went off to school. That was it. They went off to school. I didn't know what was wrong. I was very scared. I did the one thing I could think of. I got in the car, and I drove out to Padre Island. I thought, I'm just going to go out to the beach because, to me, the beach was a safe place. I left Howard a note saying "I'll be back. I need to get away." Your thing is blinking.

WEIGAND: Yes. We're running out on time here, so

END TAPE 1

## TAPE 2

WEIGAND: OK, you haven't got your microphone on yet.

NELSON: Oh.

WEIGAND: So you were sort of talking about a lot of things when the last tape ended.

NELSON: OK.

WEIGAND: You were ill, and you were off to Padre Island.

NELSON: I was off to Padre Island, yes. I spent the night out there and this is the first time I'd ever done something away from my husband. This was a terrible thing. I thought it was a terrible thing, that I'd left him without his permission. This will give you a sense of where my head was. The next day I was desperate. I was completely desperate. I didn't know what was wrong with me. And I didn't realize it was the thyroid that was missing. And I came back the next day, late in the afternoon. He met me in tears. He was glad that I'd come back. And I felt so guilty. And he didn't talk about it particularly. He wasn't one to talk about things. We never — we didn't talk about anything, you know, except the children, and so forth. So we went to bed that night, and he went off to sleep, and I felt so guilty, and so upset, and so scared I tried to kill myself.

WEIGAND: Wow.

NELSON: I took the pills. I had these pills — I guess it was Codeine — and I slit my wrists. But I didn't actually cut that deeply. I mean, I really — afterwards I realized I really was calling for help in the only way I knew how. And I lay there on the bed for a little while, and then I woke him up, and said, "I've done this thing, and I need to tell you." He called the doctor, who said, "Bring her into the hospital in the morning." He wasn't that alarmed. Howard took me to the hospital, and the doctor who saw me said, "Let's put her up on the psychiatric ward to teach her a lesson." And that was that. I was locked up for, I don't know, a week, ten days, something like that. That was an experience. There were other women up there who'd been locked up. There was a woman who — they were locking up housewives who were challenging their husbands. There was a woman who'd just had a baby who'd run away also, and he'd sent the police after her, and had her locked up. Well, my husband wasn't having me locked up, but it was part of the story.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: I had gone away. And nobody was really talking about the fact they didn't give me the thyroid hormone.

WEIGAND: So when did they figure that out?

NELSON: The doctor finally rather sheepishly showed up after I'd been locked up. The doctor who'd been — the GP who'd been kind of in charge of the whole case all along, he was in our church, and he was sort of a friend, I thought. He came in, and said, "Well, maybe we should have given you some thyroid." So they started giving me thyroid. And they didn't give me enough, but at least they started it. And my friend Anita was fantastic. And Elaine, and a couple of other women in the church were fantastic. They — you know, they really (crying). It was such a hard time.

WEIGAND: Yes, that's hard stuff.

NELSON: I was so scared. I was so alone. They surrounded me, and they accepted me. They accepted me. Janet Hart was one; Jim-Alice Scott was another one. You know, we all didn't talk — we didn't know how to talk about stuff. But they weren't ostracizing me. I thought, you know, I should be ostracized because now I had all these problems, and I'd also tried to kill myself, so —

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: So I had that, too. My women friends were wonderful, and they took care of my kids, and they really helped me. And at that point, as soon as I got a little stronger, I had a profound, mystical experience of a connection with God. I mean, I was thinking in the terms that we'd been learning at the Faith and Life Community. I think one of the things that happened when I had the surgery for my thyroid, I was ready to die, and then I didn't die. So who was I? I didn't have a clue who I was. Nor did I have the ability to even ask that question. I really needed help. Well, I saw a psychiatrist then. Not the one who'd had me locked up. His name was Dr. Meaney.

WEIGAND: This was the good one or the bad one?

NELSON: No, he was the good one. He was wonderful. He introduced me to Victor Frankel. He said, "I think you're looking for meaning," and he gave me Frankel's work. He was absolutely right. He was really able to help me. And so I launched into a very creative time. I started writing poetry. As soon as I had some strength, I got involved with the church in a new way. We were having church suppers. We were creating the beloved community. We weren't quite calling it that, but that's what we were doing. And we were inventing new rituals for the things that we were used to doing, and new words — putting new words to the hymns. I taught a course in Paul Tillich, on the — the courage to be. I taught that course. Read the book. Oh, I know what this is about. I discovered something inside myself in terms of my abilities, being able to think, and teach a class.

Then another thing happened. My mother came down to stay with us. Oh, my — oh. A week after I got out of the hospital, my father was killed in a hurricane. So I've got two stories going here. Let's see. I'll come back to my father.

WEIGAND: OK.

NELSON: My mother came down to be with us, and she read — I think it was in *Time* — that Mary Bunting had started the Women's Institute at Radcliff for women who were returning to school. She told me about this and I wrote a letter to Mary Bunting, who answered it. I still have that letter. I kept it. I found it in my files. I wrote, "This is an amazing thing. I'm interested." She was very kind, you know, she responded, and let me know what happens to you. So I started thinking about that. I'm going to go back to school. I'm going to find meaning for my life, and that's the way I started thinking about it.

WEIGAND: So this is before Betty Friedan even?

NELSON: Yes. Oh, yes. This is 1960, or 1961, that time. I had a whole lot to — long way to go, because I didn't know who I was. And I'm not a housewife, and I'm not supposed to be anything else.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: I needed Betty Friedan. You know, what is wrong with me? What Betty Friedan did is she pointed out that I was not the only one who was asking that question. There was not something wrong with me because I didn't know what was wrong. We were — a whole bunch of us were asking that question. That was such a gift to me, that book. Yes, after — basically, to just back up a little bit. My father — my father was due to retire, and they'd moved down to South Jersey, and they'd bought this wonderful home. My mother was thrilled because finally she was going to have her husband home with her, and domestic life. My father had been the great man, and she'd been the woman behind the great man. Finally, she was going to have a man who would go with her, and travel, and do whatever she wanted to do. Ten days before his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, there was a hurricane in the Jersey Coast. [It was hurricane Donna in September of 1960.] During the eye of the hurricane that man went over to the bay, and went out into the bay to rescue a rowboat. It was crazy behavior. He knew. That man, he'd grown up on the water, he knew better. It was a desperate act on his part. He was drowned.

WEIGAND: Wow.

NELSON: And my mother, Dorothy, really felt he was trying to get away from her. I think he was trying to get away from losing his job, his definition of himself, as he loved being the professor, and he was going to have to

retire. He loved that work. And although he was going to have a limited role with graduate students, it wasn't the same. But what happened to me when I heard that he'd died was this amazing — again, an amazing experience. I was trying to figure out who I am and, I thought, I'm going to become like my father. The way I saw him was courageous, outspoken, forceful, a teacher. I thought, I'm going to become that, because he can't stop me anymore. The sexist is gone. He can't stop me anymore now. And I took on — I decided to imitate him. He was my model. That was another change.

Well, within I don't know how many months — I'm not quite sure how many months — my husband was transferred to Akron, Ohio in the spring of 1961. So I left all my women friends and went up to Akron. I wanted to go in one respect because we'd be closer to my mother, and she was having a really rough time. She was terribly depressed because she'd given up her life for this man, and he was gone. Who was she? She was lost. So it seemed like a good idea. And we could spend summers at the shore with her, the kids, and I. That was appealing to me. And we did. That was great.

And so we moved up to Akron, and got the kids in school. I met the woman down the street who had three kids who became my first good friend there. About three months after I met her she killed herself. And, you know, I began to see from the outside what this looks like, and what I had been playing with. I was very shocked at myself. I didn't know what to make of this act, this desperate kind of act that I'd made. I had a hard time the next couple of years. My husband was calling me frigid because I didn't want sex with him. I end up going to a shrink in Kent, Ohio, which is near Akron, to deal with the fact that I'm frigid.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: I mean, that's the definition. This really happened. The shrink asked me — Dr. Clemente his name was — he asked me what position I liked in sex. I said, "I like to be on top." He said, "That's your problem. You have not accepted your female role." Well, I think it was only a month after that, or maybe it was even right then — it was in the spring of 1963 — a friend of mine handed me Betty Friedan's book. I took it home, and I stayed up all night reading it. Oh my God, it just opened my life. This is what it is. My problems are shared by all these women, and it has to do with my relationships, and the oppression as a women. It's not me. And what I realized was that then I needed to change my life, but in a way that would be helpful to me. I definitely decided I'm going to go back to school.

It took — so I went. I had determined earlier I was going to go back to school, but in the process of moving, that didn't happen. [In Corpus Christi in the spring of 1961 I took a short course in speed reading to help me focus my mind. In Akron I had to be home to feed my children lunch. The school would not provide that service. Mothers were expected to be in the home. So I proposed that we move out of the city where school buses

would collect the children early and deliver them later in the afternoon. So we built out in a pretty country area called Bath and moved there in the fall of 1962.] But I started back to school the next fall. I took a course in psychology in the 1963-64 academic year. Then all kinds of things began to change and grow for me. I fired the shrink. Never went back again. (laughter)

WEIGAND: Wise choice. (laughter)

NELSON: So I had a name for — I had a name for — what I wanted was feminism. And I'm going to change who I am. My husband — my mother, who once thought it was a good idea of for me to go back to school, now was not in favor of it. She said, "What's the matter with you? Isn't it enough to have your husband, and all your kids?" My husband was opposed to it, and I had enough strength then to say, "Well, I'm going to go back, or I'm going to leave you." Oh, well, OK. (laughter). Well, that was easy. I'd never stood up to him before in quite the same way. So I was beginning to get stronger. I went to the University of Akron, which was a very conservative college, but it was wonderful in a lot of ways. There was an Institute for Civic Education and I got involved with them. Now, understand in 1964, there were no other women doing what I was doing. I had a group of women friends from the church. Because I was in the church when we moved up there, I found another group of women friends. They didn't think I should do this. Nobody understood. They all said, "What are you doing?" But it was wonderful. I mean, the courses were thrilling. I was so ready. And the philosophy department was offering teach-ins about the war in Vietnam, and I started going to that.

The Institute for Civic Education gave me kind of a home. Because I was — as I say, I was the only older woman. I was in my mid-30's. Where did I belong? Well, they gave me a home, and that was great. They gave me some jobs to do: running groups, being a group leader. I was really discovering that I could be a teacher, and I could be a group leader. And I took sociology courses, and philosophy courses, and went over to the teach-ins. The head of the philosophy department was fired because of his political role, and the whole department resigned. So I'm, you know, beginning to learn more about politics. [I stopped going to church as I realized what a patriarchal institution it was.]

The other thing that's happening is that I meet a black man. I met him at — we had a brotherhood Sunday, and I met him there. He was involved with the Institute too, and we became very close. He talked about how the oppressed people are white women and black men. (laughs) Well, you know, at that time, that sounded good to me.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: Anybody who would say women are oppressed — and I believed him, and so we talked a lot about that. But Akron — now I'm talking about the mid-1960's, during the Civil Rights movement. And I haven't talked about that

at all. I hadn't had any real contact with the Civil Rights movement. But I've talked to you about how I lived a lot in fantasy. Part of my fantasy was that I would be involved in the Civil Rights movement. I didn't know how to make that happen. But at the University, I began to run into, finally, black kids. And I started to teach. I started getting teaching jobs very quickly. I did substitute teaching. People would be away, and in those classes there would be the kids from the ghetto who were talking about how urban renewal, and how it was destroying their homes. Akron had a riot, and the cops were there. I had this in my class. I had the students — these were evening classes and they were all students, the kids who were rioting — and the cops who were trying to put them down. My friend was involved in all of that. So I began to become really conscious about what was happening, and I figured out that how I was oppressed was related to how blacks were oppressed. It was very clear to me that this so-called protection — that's what they called it — had really almost destroyed my life. And this was supposed to be done for women? This didn't make any sense to me, but I saw the connection between sexism and racism. That was profound for me. Always, from then on, my feminism has been related to an understanding of that.

WEIGAND: Yes. Well, that's something I wanted to talk to you about. Maybe — I don't know if now is the right time or not, but it seems like you're doing that stuff before a lot of other white feminists are doing it.

NELSON: Yes, I was.

WEIGAND: That's very interesting.

NELSON: I think that's true. Yes, yes. I think that's true. It came out of my consciousness, and my struggle, and that's what's important to me, because I really got it. This was not some politically correct idea.

WEIGAND: Right, right.

NELSON: It really made sense to me. I knew if I was going to change my life, I had to deal with my own racism, and racism everywhere I saw it. I knew that feminism had to include that understanding. I was not quite so clear yet about class stuff. But I was clear about the whole oppression of the so-called protection of white women.

WEIGAND: So, can you talk a little bit about how exactly your experiences brought you to that realization? I mean, you've done that some, but what were the particular factors that you think helped you figure that out?

NELSON: Well, OK. A lot — there were a lot of factors. [Somewhere in here I should mention how in 1952 I consulted a doctor (Howard's company doctor) for lower back pain. He put me in a darkened room and massaged my back and masturbated while he did so. At first I could not believe my

own experience and certainly did not have the courage to ask him what he was doing! (This while male authority figure.) Furthermore, I returned two more times and told no one what went on. Yet, I wondered about my own strange passivity.] One of them was the fact that this black guy was close to me. From that, I knew. I knew what was — I was getting to know some black people, which was important. I wanted to change my life, and I was calling myself a feminist, and trying to find my way. There was no organization. There was no women's organization. I was really trying to do this all by myself, and with this friend. I was going to the teach-ins on the war, and opening, and fantasizing — oh, this is the other piece. I was looking at the struggles in the South. Now, they were going on. [I wanted to join them but didn't want to leave my family. My children were too young. There was a woman like me with family who went down to work with them and was murdered — Viola Liuzzo. That was a stern lesson for me.] And I was watching these on television. These strong black women — it was so clear that this whole gender thing wasn't — it was just hogwash. Women could be just as strong as any man, and that was profound. Really profound. And they became role models for me. I mean, the women that I read about — there weren't black women in my life yet. My students — the students that I met who were black were all guys. And then this special friend; his name was Ed. I was working really hard to try to find my place, and not getting much help from outside. I'm trying to figure it out, and taking these classes. I'm still struggling a heck of a lot. It was hard because I no longer had my wonderful women friends around me, and I was really in a new place. My husband wasn't particularly supportive, although he became more supportive. As I got stronger, for a while there, he tried harder to support me. When he really saw that I meant business — I'm just remembering, early on when I was going back to school. One day, I stopped, and bought myself a man's tailored Oxford shirt. That was fashionable then. I brought it home, and showed it to my husband. He said, "You're trying to be a man." And I lost it. I tore the shirt up, and I had a huge rage at him. So I was struggling with everything.

[I was also watching Mother's suffering after Dad died. She had given him everything of herself and had nothing with him gone. She went into a deep depression that lasted until 1966 when she learned she had terminal colon cancer. And I'd grown up hearing Dad talk about justice. And the work we'd done with the Faith and Life Community — liberation theology — was still very alive: "Live your faith." And I knew what my oppression had cost me in my own suffering. I felt that, symbolically, my feet were bound (all my fears, my timidity, my "obedience" to my husband and parents, my husband's insistence that all our sexual problems were my fault)].

And as I say, there was no — there were a few friends who were beginning to do this. The woman who handed me the *Feminine Mystique* — Ann, her name was — and there was another friend who eventually left town. We got to be friends, and then she left. There was so much happening, and I was trying to figure it out, and going to teach-ins, taking philosophy courses. Taking courses with these guys in the sociology

department who were not particularly brilliant, and running into sexism there. And still struggling with it; still struggling with it. I don't know if I've answered your question.

WEIGAND: Well, yes. I mean, yes, I think it makes sense.

NELSON: I was still very much alone but I was changing gradually.

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: Very much trying to figure out where do I fit? There was no women's movement around me. The most active movement was the end the war movement. Oh, I started going — I went to a peace vigil in Kent, Ohio. A little group of us walked around this street singing, "Now all we are saying is give peace a chance." And it was terrifying. I mean, it was — I'd never done — although I had fantasized about it, I'd never done it. And there I was.

And the first thing — gradually what happened was that a lot of little things began to happen, and change. There was a great guy who became a graduate student, and he was an activist. And he told me about the grape boycott. So I joined the grape boycott, and took my kids out picketing the grocery stores. That was amazing. I took flyers for the grape boycott. This was later. This is 1968. I took the flyers out to factory gates, and I had the experience — this is also a life changing experience. This is class now. I'd always — when I saw a guy who was my equal, you know, expected them to respond to me in a certain way. So here comes the administration out of the rubber factories. And I hand them a flyer. They don't see me. They don't see me. I'm not one of them anymore. And I thought, Oh, this is changed now. I'm not this person I used to be. You see me differently. That was very dramatic. I went to a cocktail party where I started talking about these new things I was understanding, and I could see the people who I thought were my equals, or my people, my community, moving away from me. I spoke in my church when Martin Luther King was killed. I spoke in our church about that. I could see this thing happening. I'm becoming very radical. I was very angry by then. I was so angry. Oh, geez. But again, not knowing, you know, quite how to express it, except in these ways. So I'm going to peace vigils now. Dick Herman was the new graduate student. We became buddies. He was a buddy.

Working in the grape boycott — those were the two things — and this developing consciousness about race. There's some personal things that happened in there. I had an anthropology teacher who I was — I wasn't in love with him, but I was impressed by him. He was brilliant. I worked with him as a graduate student and he came on to me, and I responded. He started hugging me, and just kind of, you know, rubbing his body against me. Well he was basically a very disturbed person. And as I began responding to him, he couldn't tolerate it, and he turned against me, and that was very upsetting.

But a lot of things were happening now that were changing my life, and pushing me to get stronger. I felt, you know, You're going to do this, you have to get stronger, believe in yourself. I'm beginning to grow a sense of myself, with great pain, and struggle. I wasn't going to see a psychiatrist and I sometimes thought, Who's going to help me? I mean, my problems — I had Dr. Freud.

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: I didn't even want to. Because I felt after reading Betty Friedan, [after courses in social psych, sociology, etc., and my growing political awareness], the problem isn't only me. The problem is the society. I've got to change the society. But how do I do this? I've got, you know, my kids are getting older, but how do I do it? I've had some hard things in my life, and I've had some amazing gifts. And the next amazing gift — I decided I wanted to go get a PhD and my husband supported me. Amazingly, he really supported me. He said, "You're never going to be happy until you get it." And he was right. And so I started writing away to these colleges. Akron didn't offer a PhD in sociology. Kent State was the nearest place, and if I had been there, I might have been one of those — kids were shot —

WEIGAND: Right, yes.

NELSON: Anyway, I wrote to the University of Chicago, I wrote to Brandeis, and I wrote to the University of New York at Buffalo because one of the teachers there said they had a good theory department. I loved social theory, and social change. That was my field. I wrote up there, and they offered me a three year fellowship, out of the blue. I wasn't even asking for financial aid.

WEIGAND: Wow.

NELSON: There was money coming from the Department of the Navy to train teachers. So I got this incredible gift. So I accepted it, and then in the fall of 1968, I started going up there, to Buffalo. It was another life changing thing — I call it the GI Bill for housewives.

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: But really, for the first time in my life, I was alone. I'd never really — I hadn't had what now you'd call a normal teenage years where you're off by yourself, and you prove yourself. I'd never done that. And now I was going to do it. I asked my kids if they wanted to come with me. My oldest daughter, Carol, went off to Cornell when I went off to Buffalo. Barbara was in high school and did not want to leave. And Peter really didn't have a choice about it at that point. And Barbara and Pete had a good relationship. Peter was 12, I think. That was hard.

[In the fall of 1968 I was still going once a month to New Jersey to visit Mother, who now was dying. I drove or flew. I remembered then how much I had wanted to get away from my own parents when I was a teenager and assumed that my children would want the same from me. Of course this was a handy rationalization, but it did ease some of the pain for me of leaving Barb and Pete. Mother died December 30, 1968. I was with her. I wrote about her death in *Long Time Passing*.]

It was hard leaving those two. I felt terribly guilty, but there's nobody was going to stop me from going up to Buffalo. So I had started a new life. And that was wonderful. Buffalo, well, they called it the Berkeley of the East. I mean, it was — there was all kinds of stuff going on up there. And I went to Professor Lou Gross, who was the leading professor of social theory, and when I started talking about my ideas, and about women, he said, "You're a lesbian. I know you're a lesbian." (laughter) I said, "No, I'm not a lesbian, I'm a feminist." I read into that a lot. I mean, I don't know what these people knew that I didn't know. I don't know whether they saw it in my face. But that was wonderful. For two years I took all the courses I could take. I was involved — by this time, I was going to the big peace demonstrations in Buffalo, marching in women's contingents, and there were always lesbians. Stonewall hadn't happened. There were still not separate gay contingents. Not yet.

WEIGAND: Right, yes.

NELSON: But there were definitely a presence of lesbians, and I began to think about that. But I was still thinking of myself as heterosexual. I haven't talked about this, but I'd started having affairs outside of my marriage. I had the experience of having a lover — this is back in Akron — who made love to me in a way I'd never been made love to before. I discovered I wasn't frigid.

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: And I really enjoyed sex. That was also so liberating. So I began — I had a period of quite a few years until I came out of having a lot of sex with guys. Well, there was the sexual revolution. [It wasn't all fun. I was raped by another grad student after a party. I walked home bleeding and was too embarrassed to tell anyone or get help].

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: And I was on the pill now. No, I had the Lippes Loop [inserted by Dr. Lippes in Buffalo. It ended up causing problems later]. I stopped the pill — this is way back — and I thought I was pregnant just at the time I started back to school. So that was my first confrontation with the possibility that I might want to get an abortion. And when I called around, I began to see that that was going to be impossible. I was so worried. Well,

it was just because I'd just stopped the pill, and my periods were messed up. Anyway, that's an aside, but that came into my consciousness, too.

WEIGAND: Another issue.

NELSON: All these different things that were raising my consciousness.

WEIGAND: Well, I was thinking about this yesterday. I mean, your chronological position; your age, and the way you were politicized in this particular historical period.

NELSON: Yes.

WEIGAND: It's interesting because you're at the right age to do the 1950's, and the sort of traditional housewife in the suburbs routine.

NELSON: Yes. Betty Friedan's book was really about me — on the nose.

WEIGAND: And then you go to college in 1964 just as all that stuff is kind of breaking out.

NELSON: Right, right.

WEIGAND: You're sort of like people who — well, like the age of your children almost, who were sort of creating those movements in the 1960's.

NELSON: That's right.

WEIGAND: You're kind of off by a generation, but you're there at the time.

NELSON: Yes, I was. I definitely was off. Yes, there was another thing, too. When we first moved to Akron, and I went to Fairlawn Presbyterian, or Church of Christ, I guess they were doing that. And there was a group of kids there who were in this new generation who were really unhappy with their parents. I was asked to be — not their leader, but the assistant leader. I loved that, and I related to these kids. I saw that they were like me. I really saw that. We were in the same place. We were intensely unhappy with our society, and wanting to do something about it. So these kids were wonderful. They gave me a lot. I never got to be — there was one girl I got to be quite close with, and she came out to my house. Her mother was a friend of mine, but she couldn't stand her mother. That was important. I saw that we had something in common here. I definitely identified with them. But it always kept me kind of — still kind of off by myself.

WEIGAND: Because of your age?

NELSON: Yes, because of the age difference.

- WEIGAND: Yes. Well, I was thinking, too, that, you go back to school in 1964, and then 1968 is the year that you go away from your family –
- NELSON: Right.
- WEIGAND: And that's the year that — people talk about the U.S. is coming apart in that year –
- NELSON: Yes, that's right. That's right.
- WEIGAND: It's just an interesting parallel.
- NELSON: Yes, yes.
- WEIGAND: I mean, did you think about that at all at the time, about how the country was changing so much –
- NELSON: Yes. [In the fall of 1968 I went in a car full of other grad students to Washington D.C. for a huge anti-war demonstration. I was wandering through the crowd looking for my daughter Carol, who'd said she'd be there, when I got gassed!]
- WEIGAND: And you were changing so much?
- NELSON: Yes, yes. And so was I. Yes, yes. I didn't feel so alone. [I've written about the commute between Akron and Buffalo and how the housewife and grad student met somewhere in between]. Well, up in Buffalo, I met some women from NOW, and started going to schools with them. [At the schools we visited we talked of how girls are socialized]. And now, I'm seeing, Oh, this works! Those two years, I was beginning to feel much more like I belonged somewhere. And talking about the movement, and getting into it — by 1970, I'm ready to go off to meet Alice Paul, and that whole story.
- In the spring of 1970, that's when Kent State happened. And again, I thought, If I hadn't gotten this fellowship, I would have been there, on that mound. I know full well I would have been there. I could have been shot, but I was lucky. Lucky. Lucky to have the fellowship, and lucky that I wasn't there. And they — the media called 1970 the Year of the Woman. So the magazines, *Time*, they all –
- WEIGAND: I've seen them.
- NELSON: And the end of — in the spring of 1970, I went to a sociology convention in New York City, and there got to know one of the professors I'd never taken a course with, simply because his courses were taught on Friday's when I went back to see my kids. I'd go Fridays, and he taught the Sociology of Knowledge. His name was Ed Powell. We hung out together,

and we fell in love. Ed and I became lovers, and we became — we were like a couple of middle-aged hippies. And we were both — I mean, he was married, I was still married. Neither of our marriages were working. And we were just both of us ready to — ready to raise hell, to be teenagers basically. And we did. We had such a good time. And we'd go off camping together, and we joined the revolution together. And we started going to demonstrations together. And so finally, I had a comrade that I could do this political work with. Ed was a wonderful teacher, and he was — well, see, he was in the sociology department. I was finished with my coursework now, so it wasn't any problem about having a relationship with him. And he was interested in history, and so he became a major person in my life.

So I finished my exams. When I started with Ed, he persuaded me, "Go ahead, and take your exams." I hadn't studied for them. He said, "Maybe, you'll pass them all. Why not find out. If you don't pass them, you know, you can study."

WEIGAND: You can always study later. (laughs)

NELSON: That was a new concept. You know, that I don't have to study, and get a perfect grade. No, take them. I aced every exam except the psychology exam. The question was about Freud and I wrote a feminist critique, as I understood it, of Freud. I didn't really know Freud's work that well, but — and one of the — you had three graders. One of the graders gave me a zero. (laughs) So the guy who was in charge of the graduate exams said, "Marge, what happened?" I told him and he said, "Well, clearly, this is a political grade," and so, you know, I passed my prelims. So I was through with all that.

I was looking for a dissertation subject. And Ade Levine — Dr. Adeline Levine — in the sociology department — I'd had some courses with her — said she'd just been down to Washington, D.C., and she'd met these old suffragists down there. She said, "You've got to go talk to them," because she knew I was interested in social movements. And so I did. I picked up my son, and we went down to spend a week in Washington, D.C. I went over to the Library of Congress to find out about these women. Now, I didn't really know very much about the suffrage movement. And hadn't been terribly interested in it because I thought it was — I thought it was bourgeois feminism, frankly. That's what I knew, and the way it was presented in the books that I read. And so at the Library of Congress, I'm reading. The Woman's Party — they had a Woman's Party, and I'm reading and thinking, Oh, these are the women who went to jail. Oh. I got very interested. So then I called over. There's a phone number, the National Women's Party in the back of one of the books I read. It was Irwin's book (Inez Hayes Irwin, *Up the Hill with Banners Flying*, or *Jailed for Freedom*, Doris Stevens's book, one of them. And I called over there, and Alice Paul herself answered the phone. And I said, "I want to come over, and talk to you about studying you." She

said, "Come early tomorrow morning. We have a lot of work to do." "OK, I'll be there at 8:00 o'clock." She told me where to park my car. The Women's Party is right up on Capitol Hill. Do you know where that is?

WEIGAND: A little, yes.

NELSON: There's two Senate office buildings, and a parking lot. And on the corner of Constitution, and Second Avenue is this big, brick mansion that was covered with ivy, and surrounded with tall trees.

WEIGAND: Belmont House, is that what it is?

NELSON: Hmm?

WEIGAND: Belmont House?

NELSON: Belmont House.

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: And that's the Women's Party. And what was interesting — I mean, when I saw it — because there was these marble giants, and then there's this place that's like kind of an oasis with the trees, and there's a walled garden. So my son, and I — he goes with me — we walk up, and ring the doorbell. A Black woman in a maid's uniform answers the door. Oh, well, I wasn't sure about this. And she, you know, she invites us in, and she said, "Miss Paul will be with you in a minute." I look around the corner. We're in this big hall, and there's a dining room off here. It's a mansion, and there's a parlor over here. In the corner, in the dining room, just inside the door I can see an old woman in an apple green housecoat on the phone with this tray table, and tea in front of her. And that's Alice Paul.

So she calls me. We sit in the hall. We sit in this entrance hall which was like a women's museum. The entrance hall is full of this statuary of Lucretia Mott, and Susan B. Anthony, and Joan of Arc, and some other stuff. Anyway, she calls us in, and she says — she's just charming, and she's interested in meeting Peter. And she said, "Why do you want to study history? The point is to make it." She absolutely could not understand what I was doing. Would not understand why I would want to do this. And she started talking about the Equal Rights Amendment. I hadn't heard of the Equal Rights Amendment. Nobody talked about it in academia, and I wasn't reading the papers, so I didn't know anything about it. Within an hour, I was over at the House of Representatives.

The Equal Rights Amendment was coming up for a vote in the House, and they were trying to get sponsors. And that's what I was doing. And I was — oh, I was wearing a big peace symbol, you know. And they needed leftists to be supporting it, because the people who had been supporting it were not on the left.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: They were the conservatives. You know, I'm sure you know the story. And so I was very good at it. And so I went to all the progressive Congress people who had not endorsed it, and they said, "You're supporting this?" I'd say, "Yes, of course. Equality." At that point, I didn't really know too much about the history, and of course, equality. So I was very successful, and also had this friend of mine back in Akron. I called him. He was a labor leader. I got a union. Fantastic. Alice was impressed. She said, "Why don't you stay with us? You can stay with us, you can live here." I told her about my fellowship. I had one more year. You can live here if you work for us half a day. We'll give you a room for 100 dollars a month. I had 300 dollars in my fellowship, so 100 dollars a month, that was reasonable. She said, "If you work for us half a day, you can have all the rest of the time to do your study. If you want to do it. I don't know why you want to do it." So that's how I landed there.

WEIGAND: Wow. So what was she like, Alice Paul?

NELSON: She was brilliant. I have never — I've known a lot of very smart people. I have never known a mind — a person with a mind like that. She was absolutely brilliant, absolutely brilliant. Her mind was like a spinning top. She was just right there, so focused. She'd just zero right in. She could not understand my interest in all the different things. She wasn't there the full year. She'd be there for a few months, and then she'd go up to her home in Connecticut. And Marjory Reynolds, who was the president of the Woman's Party would come. The two women were not there at the same time. Alice Paul was honorary, but when she was around, nobody else could be in charge. I mean, clearly, Alice Paul was in charge. So she'd go away for a while. But anyway, so there were — but I never got close to her. Nobody — I don't think anybody got close to her. But she'd call me into the office, and we'd have tea, and she'd tell me what's going on, and what she wanted me to do. She was directing me. Actually, Peter, and I, my son and I, came back. We were just there for a week, and then I had to go back, and be with the rest of my kids. And then we came back to Washington to be in the House in August of 1970 when the ERA was passed. And Peter was there with me, and that was a thrilling thing. And we sat right next to — oh, dear, I've forgotten her name. From the National Association of Colored Women. Oh, dear, I've got it. [It was Ruby Kendrick.]

WEIGAND: Yes. We can figure it out later.

NELSON: I sat right next to her, and she was talking about being part of the Woman's Party. Oh, yes, we want this. They supported the Equal Rights Amendment before the League of Women Voters did. Well, where's your bourgeois feminism, where's the white feminism? I mean, she — that was

very moving. Anyway, so I was — let me get my thought back. So then I had to get my kids settled for the summer, and then I went back in the fall.

And so what was Alice Paul like? So she would invite me in, and she would constantly question me because I was constantly going off on peace demonstrations. [One day Alice invited me into her office for tea and told me I was sitting in Elizabeth Cady Stanton's chair and perhaps some of her good energy would rub off on me. Then she launched into a tirade over Stanton who was "interested in too many different things," thus diluting her effectiveness, and not at all like Alice's heroine, Susan B. Anthony.] I came back one time, and we'd been chased by the cops. She was very upset with me. She'd say, "You're just wasting your time. You have to focus. You have to focus on the one thing." She was definitely a single issue person."

While I was there, I met all these wonderful women. Ruth Gage Colby was there. Now, Ruth was not on the board of the Woman's Party, but on WILPF's board. And she took me over to introduce me to WILPF because I hadn't — I yet didn't know the organization. So that was my beginning of being part of that. There was a woman in the office there. We became friends. [Through Ruth I met Flo Kennedy and spent time with her. We were both speakers at a pro-abortion rally in the spring of 1971. At that rally I did security along with many others, forming a ring around the park because there'd been threats to Ti-Grace Atkinson's life. She also spoke there.] And Ruth was a friend of Eugene McCarthy's, who was a chief sponsor of the ERA. And Alice would call Ruth to come down, and get on Gene's head, because Gene was not giving the Equal Rights Amendment the attention that it needed. By then the Equal Rights Amendment, now, in the fall, was in the Senate. It had passed the House, and it was in the Senate, so it was a whole different thing. Alice was so furious at Gene McCarthy. He should have been giving it more attention, and he was doing all these peace things. Well, Alice was a pacifist. I mean, no doubt about that. But she just was so upset with people diverting their energy.

But she was an amazing woman. Just amazing. And for me to see that somebody could spend their life doing this, and to meet a woman who was so smart, and so radical, really. She was basically very radical. I mean, while I was there, of course I read the stories. I read all of the *Suffragist* and *Equal Rights*, the journals they put out. And I had access to their incredible feminist library. And that's where I first found out about Emma Goldman. I didn't know who she was, and her life was in there. Any woman's life — Eleanor, a lot of stuff about Eleanor. Alice didn't like Eleanor Roosevelt because Eleanor had been opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment, so they'd had their feuds. But nevertheless, she was in the library. And I read — it was an incredible opportunity for me.

[As I discovered that these women of the early NWP were the radical feminists of their time, just as we were professing, I felt more and more connected to them. I wondered why I hadn't really known anything about them and that woke me up to the importance of women's history.]

WEIGAND: Yes, it's amazing.

NELSON: Yes. And I found Mabel Vernon. Mabel was a major influence in that year. Now, she was two years older than Alice, and she was a pacifist, and she would come over to Belmont House with her partner, Consuelo Reyes. And she would tell the story. Consuelo had put the pictures that they had on slides, and they would give a slide show. Mabel was called the silver voiced orator of the suffrage movement. She would talk about her experiences. Mabel was all over the country. She was the first person to get arrested. She was an amazing person and I spent a lot of time with her. [Several times I drove Alice and Mabel to funerals of other old suffragist comrades and the two of them would share stories. That was very rare for Alice and very sweet for me.]

What I found was that women — people could live outside of traditional institutions. Here's all these women doing their lives, and doing these great things. And I had another mystical experience on the road going to the Woman's Party, one time when I was driving from Akron back to the Woman's Party. I kind of had like this flash like, I can be like them. I can do what they do. I'm going to spend my life for women. I'm going to dedicate my life to women.

Now, I need you to understand that the whole time I was there, I was very upset about the racism. And I didn't quite know what to do about it. (laughter) [I tried to talk to Alice about it. She insisted it was about a single issue and nothing more. Race was another issue.] What do I do? You know, I talked to some of the women there who were progressive. And they were saying, "Well, you know, they're paid well. This is southern tradition, and this is how it is."

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: But I was very disturbed. The only people there who were Black were uniformed workers. I never saw a woman of color there — except some of the — that's not true. That's not true. I mean, Consuelo was from Costa Rica. There were Latinas, and there was a Japanese woman came to pay homage to Alice Paul. This woman had been one of the leaders of the Japanese movement. [There was also Sybil Moses who stayed in a room next to mine. We shared my hot plate as neither of us was invited to meals at the big house. (Belmont House was attached to two frame houses where rooms were rented. At one time, early on, these rooms were filled with NWP workers, but not so much when I was there. Carol Burris who started the Women's Lobby was also there. The two frame houses were sold to the Senate in the 1970s and torn down for an expansion of their parking lot.) Sybil was a member of the National Association of Colored Women and did some lobbying for the ERA. She was there only a few months and we talked a lot. She felt snubbed by Alice and some of the other white women staying in Belmont House.] And of course, in the *Suffragist*, and in *Equal Rights* more than the *Suffragist*, there were pictures of women of color who are upper class, who are part of this international movement. So that's where they were. And of course, they

got involved in the — Alice got involved in the World Woman's Party, and all of that.

But I was — I found it very hard to be there and to see what clearly was racism. Alice was racist, there's no question about it. And that was distressing to me. I didn't want her to be. Mabel was not, and I talked to Mabel about it a lot. Mabel — early on, I asked Alice how she, and Mabel had met, and she told me about a speech contest. They met at Swarthmore. Mabel's topic in the speech contest was about the new Negro. Her father had been a publisher, and he had been pro-civil rights, and she was clearly not racist, or trying, you know, wanting not to be racist.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: But she never challenged Alice. Nobody challenged Alice.

WEIGAND: Yes. It sounds like she was a tough cookie; hard to challenge. Yes.

NELSON: She was a tough cookie.

WEIGAND: Yes, yes.

NELSON: Yes, yes. But amazing. It was an amazing privilege to know her, and just to see somebody with that kind of devotion. She was on the phone. She was fighting. Oh, boy, did she get upset about that seven year clause they put on it. I think it came out of Birch Bayh's office. I can't remember now, but what I was doing is, whenever somebody would tack a new something on the amendment, I'd go to the printer's office, and get it, and then have to go around to all the offices, and, you know, tell them. She was fighting. The newer, the younger feminists who were supporting the Equal Rights Amendment did not see that the seven year clause could kill it.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: Well, Alice knew that it could.

WEIGAND: She'd been doing it forever. (laughter)

NELSON: Yes, yes. And other people didn't seem to understand that. And she would just be livid. I have a lot more stories, but I think maybe that's enough. [I have a long article (as yet unpublished) about my year with Alice Paul. It's been sitting at *Ms.* for awhile now. My dissertation is about the NWP in the suffrage years and comparing it to the ERA years.]

WEIGAND: Yes. We're coming up on a second hour, too, so this is probably a good time to take a break.

END TAPE 2

## TAPE 3

WEIGAND: So here we are again on May — what is it, the eighteenth, the nineteenth?

NELSON: The nineteenth, May nineteenth.

WEIGAND: We're here on May nineteenth for day two of Kate Weigand interviewing Marge Nelson. And I went, and looked a little bit back over some of what we were talking about yesterday, or some of the questions that I had asked you yesterday. There were a couple things that I wanted to ask you a little more about.

NELSON: OK.

WEIGAND: So if that's OK, I'll back up just a little bit from where we were.

NELSON: OK.

WEIGAND: And then we'll catch back up again.

NELSON: OK, all right.

WEIGAND: I know you mentioned the Christian Faith and Life Community, and you talked a little bit about it. But I was wondering if you could a little more about it. What were these workshops that you went to?

NELSON: OK, OK.

WEIGAND: What were they like? What did they consist of?

NELSON: Sure, sure. What they were doing with us was talking about re-mythologizing Christianity. So what they said to us was, "Well, here you are, and you've been going to church all your life. But what does your faith mean? What are you doing here? When you say you're a Christian, what does that mean? What does Christ on the cross mean?" I didn't know. I went to church for the same reason my mother seemed to. It's what you're supposed to do. It's part of this life that I led. But I had no idea what faith meant. And so they really challenged us to — to find out. And then they had a program, What Christ? It's not about a person. It's about — this is what they were doing. It's about an event that happened, where you are facing who you are. You're really into reality. That's what it was. And in that place, what you find that takes you through is what they call the Christ event. Now, I may not be presenting that correctly anymore, but that's how I understood it. And it made great sense to me. They were part of the ecumenical movement, so they were trying to, you know, find ways to really talk to other churches. Ecumenical meant other churches, and it meant Judaism, too. We read Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, all these great thinkers that I had never read before.

And so that's what we were doing. And thinking really seriously about what does it mean. Why would you call yourself a Christian?

WEIGAND: So was there sort of an implicit, or explicit social, or political message attached to it?

NELSON: Absolutely. They didn't get into the politics, but it was certainly there. It was about living a — really living your life with authenticity. And that boy, did I want that. [They challenged our white middle-class complacency. Our church was all white. They were integrating in Austin. Although we saw no blacks when we were there — none on staff — and no women either, and Elaine was struggling with them over that issue.]

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: I just ate that up.

WEIGAND: So it was people from your local church who went there as a group, and — ?

NELSON: Yes. Groups of us went up for the weekend. And then we started having meetings back at the church. We started having Sunday night suppers, and worship services. And I got involved in that, designing new kinds of worship services, and that sort of thing.

WEIGAND: So then — I know we touched on this yesterday — but can you talk a little bit about how that experience was part of the changes that you eventually started making in your life?

NELSON: Well, yes. I'd been to two of the workshops when I got sick. And then after I got out of the hospital, after my difficult time with the thyroid, and my depression, I went back up there. I went to see Joe Matthews [one of the Methodist ministers] and I told him how lost I was. And he challenged me again. He really challenged me. And that was excellent for me. And then I went for another weekend, and then that's when I began teaching Paul Tillich [*The Courage to Be*]. So I began to discover in myself that, Oh, I can do this. See, I'd always been told I couldn't do anything.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: Because I was a woman, I thought I wasn't as smart as the men. I wasn't, you know, anything. But as I read this, the existentialist — we were reading all the existentialists. We read Sartre, and all of that. And I struggled with who I was. And as I began to take risks, and do things, I began to get stronger.

WEIGAND: I see. So it wasn't just sort of an intellectual shift, but also a —

NELSON: No. It was a real change for me. Putting myself — I mean, to teach a class, that was an amazing thing.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: A class of adults. It was an adult class. I'd done the kids, but this was very different. And I was just in my element. I found that I had a good mind. I didn't know that. I mean, I sort of knew it, but it didn't mean anything to me. But that I could really make a contribution, and that was amazing.

WEIGAND: Yes. That makes sense.

NELSON: OK.

WEIGAND: The other thing I wanted to go back to was back to the late 1960's in Buffalo when you're really starting to be much more politically active, and to be a feminist.

NELSON: Yes.

WEIGAND: Can you talk a little bit about your ideology, if you think you had one, and what your feminist politics were at that point?

NELSON: [My major field was social theory and social change. I called myself a socialist and was searching for a feminist theory that seemed adequate. Back at Akron University I'd read Marx, Engels, Weber, Durkheim, Mannheim, and more — all male — and since none of them dealt with women's lives, like many other feminists of that time, I was trying to come up with something new. It seemed that we had to begin with our bodies, with theories of oppression, of patriarchy, of socialization, and that we had to take control of our actual lives, of our sexuality, reproduction, spirituality, work, childcare. Everything had to be examined and changed. But how? By this time I was committed to racial and economic equality, welfare rights and women's rights. I took two seminars in Black history and one with Juliet Mitchell. Everywhere we turned our new discoveries and pronouncements were also being discounted and ridiculed.

At this time, 1968-70, I was also still connected to family in Akron and trying to figure out where it all fit together, since the young women's movement seemed to have no acceptance of motherhood. On campus I attended every meeting I found on women's liberation, reading every mimeographed sheet, marching in separate women's contingents in the many anti-war demonstrations. [During Spring/Summer of 1970 I wrote a prospectus for a small course in the new discipline "women's studies" which I co-taught with two other faculty.]

I hooked up with NOW. Mary Schwartz was the president of NOW, and she was a sweetheart. I went out with her and some other women. We were talking about how women are brainwashed and socialized to be a certain way. And so we went in the schools, and we talked about the

reading material. That's kind of the way we were treating it at that point in time. Now, Mary — Mary was another one of the people who pushed me. So at the end of my two years there, 1970, Mary invited me to be a speaker at a big rally. There was August 26<sup>th</sup>. It was women's strike day, and it was the celebration of suffrage. It would have been the 50 years of winning the suffrage. And she invited me to speak at a big rally they were having in downtown Buffalo. I go, "I can't do that." She goes, "Yes, you can." And so I went up, and talked about how women were oppressed, and how I was oppressed as a housewife. I had note cards, and I still have them. I started making this speech, and behind me there was a group of young women from the evolving, developing women's studies department. And they started calling, "And we want revolution." And I discovered that I could say something that I wanted, and let them say, "We want revolution, and we want it now." This whole new thing happened. I could improvise. I didn't know that. And it was marvelous. We all had a great old time.

[Justice had been proclaimed by the civil rights movement. I don't know when I first started saying, "The personal is political," but that theme is basic to Betty Friedan's analysis. I do know that I wanted to assert my independence from men. I didn't let them open doors for me, etc. I stopped wearing bra, girdle, stockings and started wearing pants. For my year in D.C. I decided I was too invested in the question of what to wear, so I made a black smock and pants and wore that as I kind of uniform. People would ask me, "Are you a judge or something?"]

So all these little things that I did, somebody pushed me, and I tried it. And I found, Oh, I can do it. Really what I was doing was breaking through all these limitations that had been imposed, and that I had internalized. So I had to keep trying, taking new steps, taking chances.

WEIGAND: Yes. When you hear about NOW in that period, you hear about it as sort of this moderate, liberal —

NELSON: Well, that's where I was.

WEIGAND: So is that how you experienced it?

NELSON: Well, I was — that's who I was.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: I was becoming more radical, but I wasn't there. I was wanting to be more radical, but I wasn't there. I didn't know how to get there. So I was trying different things. I certainly always, though, everywhere I went, all the work I did, I kept running into NOW because that's who was organized in most cities. And women like myself, like I used to be, who wanted more, but how do you get there. And that's who NOW was, and is. So I respect them. I don't put them down.

- WEIGAND: Yes. No, they do great things.
- NELSON: They do great things, yes.
- WEIGAND: I guess I was just trying to get at the question of whether the reality of the organization at that time sort of matched this reputation that they had.
- NELSON: I think they were more radical then. They were the first ones really who were stepping out. I mean, they weren't the only ones. There were some very radical women stepping out. But so were the women in NOW. I mean, Mary Schwartz, to organize a rally in downtown Buffalo in 1970 was a very radical thing to do. [It's easy to be a radical on a college campus and something else to step out in one's community.]
- WEIGAND: Yes.
- NELSON: And she invited all the radicals that she knew.
- WEIGAND: Was it big, the rally?
- NELSON: Pardon?
- WEIGAND: Was the rally impressive, and large?
- NELSON: Yes, it was in the town square. And who came to the rally? All these men — all the businessmen were coming out to see what all these women were doing. Yes, and actually, in the end of the year news that year, they were showing the highlights of the year, and they showed the rally. And who did they show? They showed me with my big peace sign with my fists up in the air and they quoted some guy who said we were ugly “dogs” who couldn't find a man.
- WEIGAND: Wow, cool. (laughter) What did your kids, and your husband think about all this at the time you were doing it?
- NELSON: Well, my kids, my daughters, Barbara — Carol was off kind of doing her life now. She'd gone to college, and was really on her own, more or less. But Barbara was still at home, and when I talked to Barbara about it back then, she was all for me, and she was very supportive. Now, when I talk to her about it, she talks about her terrible loneliness that she didn't dare tell me about because she knew that I was trying to save my life. She knew I needed to do this. But she was definitely taking care of me when she said, “Oh, you're fine. This is wonderful, you're doing it.”
- WEIGAND: Sorry.
- NELSON: We got a problem here?

- WEIGAND: I just noticed that this isn't counting up at all. All right, so we have an interruption there.
- NELSON: OK.
- WEIGAND: You were talking about your daughter, Barbara.
- NELSON: Barbara, yes, and how hard it was on her. My husband was apparently very depressed. What happened with my husband — I mean, the marriage was really over, and had been over for quite a while. He tried to change as I was changing, but didn't really want to do it. When I went up to Buffalo, he had promised that he would try to find a job up there, and come, too. But he didn't want to leave his job. So anyway, but he — what he said to me was that — because I began to think [by 1969] that I wanted a divorce. It made sense. I was leaving, and you know, this is over. He said, "Please, don't get a divorce. Go and live your life, and come back for holidays. We want you." Well, I went along with that because, I guess, I suppose to be with the kids. [He also threatened to kill himself if I did leave him.] I think now it was a mistake. I think I should have made a clean break and brought things more up to the surface. But that's not who I was then.
- WEIGAND: Right.
- NELSON: We were all avoiding all the hard things.
- WEIGAND: Right.
- NELSON: And that's how we were raised. So I was still married, and he finally asked for a divorce in 1973, and we did it then. But nobody was saying to me, "This is too hard with you away." It was hard for me to be away from them, from the kids; not from him. I was finished, but not with my children. It was very hard, and I couldn't deal with it anymore. I mean, I didn't know how.
- WEIGAND: Yes.
- NELSON: We didn't know how to talk about these things, how to bring up difficult subjects, because we never did it. Nobody ever talked about anything difficult.
- WEIGAND: What did they think of your politics?
- NELSON: [I wanted to believe that my kids loved it. I don't know what they knew or felt about the politics, but they seemed to like the idea of helping the farm workers in their boycott and doing something different.] My kids loved my radical politics. They thought it was exciting, and thrilling. And when I was picketing the grocery stores in Akron, my husband tried, but he

didn't really agree with me, and he didn't know what to do about that. I don't think he had any idea what to do about it.

WEIGAND: And because of the larger changes that were going on in society, they were also loaded. You know, the issues were really loaded.

NELSON: Oh, yes, yes. He started. I mean, he went back to law school –

WEIGAND: Oh.

NELSON: He went back to school. He started seriously to try to change himself, and catch up. But there were too many other things in his background, and who he was. He was basically a conservative — a liberal republican right in there. But he was not a radical. And he was severely challenged by what I was doing.

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: He didn't know quite what to do about it. So he was hanging on.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: Until he found another women who talked him into getting a divorce. I'm sure that's how it happened, which is fine.

WEIGAND: Also, I wanted to ask about the Buffalo period.

NELSON: Yes. [There are two periods in Buffalo: 1968-70 and 1973-77.]

WEIGAND: I know you're doing a lot of different kinds of activism then.

NELSON: Yes, yes.

WEIGAND: And I wondered if you could talk about whether you experienced any of those kind of classic conflicts, you know, between doing — I'm losing track of what you were actually working on then. But, you know, you read about how in certain kinds of anti-war work, or civil rights type work, or union organizing kinds of work, there was a lot of sexism and baiting of feminists?

NELSON: There was.

WEIGAND: I wondered if you experienced any of those?

NELSON: Oh, all the time, all the time. It was very clear. But I think it would be easier for me to just kind of talk about what I was doing.

WEIGAND: OK.

NELSON: There's one thing I do want to get in. This is very important. Well, first of all, I want to say that making these kind of changes in my life — the way it happens is that you make one decision, or one thing happens, and you start to go in another way. And you don't know where you're going to end up. I never knew where I was going to end up. But something would happen, and I'd just go with it. So what happened to me was when I got up to Buffalo in 1973 after Antioch, I started believing that I was beginning menopause. And I'd heard Estelle Ramey when I was back in Washington talking about taking hormones. So I looked up a woman gynecologist, and I went to her, and told her maybe I need to take hormones. And she said, "Well, let's check your thyroid." And in order to check my thyroid, I had to go into the hospital to get it paid for. She said, "Go in for the weekend. Take your work with you. We'll collect your urine, and that's it." OK, so I took my work. I went in for the weekend. Well, some nurse, or somebody messed it up. So they poured somebody else's urine into my bottle. So I had to start over again. I was there for five days. I picked up a staph infection in the hospital. Nobody in the hospital called it a staph infection except an intern who came up, and told me, "You know, I'll never admit this in court, but you got a staph infection." And that was hell. That went through my body, I got terribly sick. And they gave me antibiotics, and I reacted to the antibiotics. But nobody would call it for what it was. So I began to find out about iatrogenic diseases, and I began to look — as I was looking at everything from a much different perspective. You can't really trust this system, and you can't trust the system of medicine either.

And I was in for the next year. I mean, I was trying to teach these courses. But I was in, and out of the hospital for six weeks. And I had terrible pain in my belly. I had terrible, terrible intestinal pain. It was a very hard time. And here I am trying to start a new life. So what I'm doing, I'm getting a lot of support.

[In 1974 I was offered several jobs in the new Women's Studies — at Cornell and a college in New Jersey (Ramapo? I've forgotten the name) but on the condition that I finish my doctorate. I was in too much pain to do that. So this was also life changing. By the time I actually finished — 1976 — there was a lot more competition and I was ready to leave academia.]

When I went back to Buffalo I looked up Mary Schwartz, and we started a consciousness raising group. Those women were right with me. And Ed Powell was with me. Ed Powell was there, too. So I had a lot of people now helping me get through this difficult time. But when I could, when I had the energy, I would go on the demonstrations. And it was — there was always this sense that women's liberation was inferior to the peace movement. This was a by — that's not the word I want. It was a distraction. It was divisive, like, You're not important. We're the important people. We guys are the — and it drove me nuts. It made me furious. And most of the women I knew were all furious. We were enraged. And that was true at the Woman's Party, too. The women who

came there, everybody was just really, really angry at how we'd been treated. It was so clear.

WEIGAND: So in some senses, then — Sara Evans makes this argument about how the New Left, and the Civil Rights movement really helped to create the Women's Liberation movement —

NELSON: Yes. I say that's true. I mean, I really give that movement credit for me, as models, and then the opportunities that I had, which we're going to start talking about. [I give more credit to the civil rights movement, not the men of the New Left. The anti-war movement provided a context in which we all were organizing.] First of all, the first big thing I did from Buffalo — well, again, I was in the university. I was going to panels. They'd have panel discussions, and I would be invited as the sociologist to be on the panel. And my friend Polly, who's going to enter the picture pretty soon, would be the psychologist, and so forth. So we were doing that, and we were still going out, and talking to schools. But I was becoming more, and more radical. I began writing all my school papers about women, and my — did I tell you that my major professor, Lou Gross, who was an eminent social theorist, told me I was a lesbian?

WEIGAND: Oh, yes.

NELSON: Because I was writing feminist papers! Anyway, so, in 1975, I went to the Socialist Feminists Conference. Now this was the second one. The first one, I think, was in Chicago. But the second one was at Antioch College.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: So I went back down there. I stayed with Melba Stern, who was a friend of Mary [Kaufman], and of mine. Melba lived with Mary and me for a little while. And down there everybody was talking about Joann Little. The Joann Little case was being publicized. When the conference was over, I went back up to Buffalo, and my daughter, Barbara, had just graduated from Oberlin College. She got a job working on the Joann Little case. There was a whole lot of money raised. Morris Dees did a huge mailing, and made a lot of money. So the Defense Committee hired the Jury Project, which was growing out of the whole Attica struggle. Now the women in my CR group were working on the Attica case, and they were part of doing this Jury Project of showing they couldn't get a fair jury trial. You know what I'm talking about? And what happened was that they needed the jury project to come down, and move Joann's case out of this little county, where she was in jail, up to Raleigh so hopefully she'd get a fair trial there. And they were looking for people to do that survey work. Barbara got a job working with them, with my friend Beth Bonora, who was in the CR group. So she went down to North Carolina. She called me from down there. She said, "Where are the feminists? This is terrible." She was scared to death going into these racist little towns, and asking them

what they thought of Joann Little. My God. And she'd never done anything like that either. She said, "Where are the feminists?" And I said, "Well, you want me to come down?" That's how I got into that. Again, you know, a door opens, and I walk through.

So I went down. Now, they'd already moved the case to Raleigh by the time I was able to go. I had — I was teaching classes, and I had to wait until they were over. I get down there, and what I find is just amazing. In Raleigh, there's a rape organization. I can't remember what they called it. Rape, you know, support, whatever. They had 300 members. They sent out a mailing to get support for Joann. And it was either three, or five women responded.

WEIGAND: Wow.

NELSON: And, you know, where are the white women in Raleigh? Why can't they be there? What's in the way? Well, what happened was that the National Organization for Women was having their state meeting that weekend right after I arrived. They had not supported — the national had supported Joann, but the state had not. They weren't going to do it. So I could go to the meeting because I was a member. I was a legitimate member of NOW, so I went. There was a black feminist workshop, and that's where all the angry women were.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: All the activists were right there. How can we do it? How can we do it? And I talked to them. I talked to them, one, about the suffragists, because none of these women had ever done anything quite like this. You know, they'd never taken a stand. They were all, you know — the black women, too — were socialized to stand back for the men. And I told them about the suffragists, how they'd picketed the White House. But more than that, I told them about my experience. Did I tell you about working for Title IX, and how I learned how to move?

WEIGAND: No.

NELSON: I was telling that story to somebody. OK. When I was with Alice Paul in 1970, a lot of different people — women would stay at the Woman's Party. One of those was Ann Scott. Ann Scott, not Ann Firor Scott, who wrote about the southern women.

WEIGAND: OK

NELSON: There was another Ann Scott from Buffalo. She wrote the *Half Eaten Apple* about discrimination in education. It's a wonderful little essay. She was working on Title IX, and she took me along to her meetings. She asked me to come. She said, "Now, there's going to be a big, important meeting where we need to get a decision for this Title IX. And there's not

very many of us. So we need to strategize to make it look like there's a whole lot of us. And we want you to come". And so they placed us around the room, and I learned this as a new strategy. And you know, all around the room, suddenly these voices were coming up speaking for this Title IX. So I told this group who wanted to support Joann Little how to do this. It's so interesting to me how these things get passed along. Just a little, you know, few women –

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: People who just have a little information really know how to work it. And that's what we did. We went to the plenary session, and we swung the organization. And the next morning, these white women, and a few black women were out on the steps of the courthouse with signs saying, "Joann is our sister." I'm so proud of that work.

WEIGAND: Yes, that's amazing.

NELSON: I just love it because it's such feminist work, and it came through such a stream of history. So that was — that was that. I have a picture.

WEIGAND: Oh, good.

NELSON: I have a picture here from *Time* magazine. You can see Joann up here. I don't know if this shows, but I'm just going to tell you about it.

WEIGAND: OK.

NELSON: In the bottom is a picture of a prayer vigil the night before Joann's trial started. And you see a lot of black faces. Over in the corner is — here we are. There's a white woman standing there. That's me. (laughter)

WEIGAND: Cool.

NELSON: That's me. I don't know what this shows, but –

WEIGAND: If you hold it up a little more, I think we can get it into the picture.

NELSON: OK, OK. This little arrow by my face –

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: That just says that's me.

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: But I was so proud of that because it was very clear to me that — I've said this already, but I'm going to keep saying it — that women's liberation

has to be for all people. It has to be for women of color, and not just white women. And that was really one — it has been, and continues to be one of my major themes. It can't just be this isolated group. So continuing with that, what came out of that — I stayed there for a couple of weeks. Because I had a connection with the Jury Project, I was able to open a door for the local black feminists who wanted to meet Joann. Now, here again, all this money was raised for the Jury Project and the trial. But that was separate from the organizers who came in. There's another white woman who came in from Chicago. Melva something-or-other from Chicago's Women's Liberation. We were doing this organizing in the streets, handing out leaflets, and trying to get women to come to the trial. We had no money. We made signs on pieces of cardboard. But, you know, just this strange disconnect. Anyway, the women, the local women wanted to meet Joann, and they didn't know how to do it. So I could open a door for them. They started going in, and they helped Joann celebrate her birthday, and you know, they then could be there to support her during the trial, which was wonderful.

I had to go back to Buffalo. I think I had another course coming up I needed to teach. I was picking up courses to teach to support me while I finished my dissertation. I found that there were some black women who were supporting Joann up there, and they were having vigils. I talked to a bunch of white women. I said, "Let's get together. Let's make this be an integrated thing. It's not just black women. White women want it, too. Let's do it together." So another one of the pictures that I brought — but I don't think you'll be able to see it — is our vigil in Buffalo. And I'm there wearing my shirt that said "Power to the ice pick." (laughter) There's a picture of an ice pick with blood dripping off the end. That's who I was then.

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: Wearing that t-shirt, which is now in my archives.

WEIGAND: That's what Joann Little used to defend herself?

NELSON: That's how she killed that slimy jailer who raped her — I forgot his name. [It was Clarence Alligood.] Yes, but in the process of that, I met — I can't remember her name. She was the co-leader with Angela Davis of the National Alliance against Racism and Political Repression. Marlene — I'm sorry — Charlene Mitchell. [After I left Raleigh, going through New York City, Mary wanted me to go talk to Charlene about my experience in Raleigh, so I did. Not quite a year later, I get a call from Charlene. She said, "We need a white woman to go down into Wilmington, North Carolina to work on the Wilmington Ten. We can't find any white women who will go, and do it. Would you come, and work with our team?" (laughs) The Alliance believed you need to have an integrated team. You just don't send a black team in. You — you're fighting for integration, so you have to look integrated.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: And it was amazing to me that in the organization they couldn't find a white woman. But see, I said, "Yes, I'll go." So that summer [of 1976], later, I was down in Wilmington, North Carolina with this team. And this was such a profound experience for me. They thought they had a place for me to stay, but when we showed up, the black woman who answered the door looked at me, and she got terrified. Wilmington was really still under assault. I don't know if you know about the Wilmington Ten.

WEIGAND: A little.

NELSON: It was around the integration of education. You couldn't have integrated schools. The black students were supposed to go the white schools, but they wouldn't let them in. So the blacks set up their own schools in the church, and the church was attacked. They had tanks in the street, and they fired on the church. And I saw the bullet holes in the church.

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: It was terrible; it was a very scary time. The Klan had run down somebody on a beach, and killed a guy. It was a very scary time. So anyway, this black woman took one look at me, and she said, "She can't stay here." It was too scary for them to have a white woman there.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: She wasn't thinking about me. She was thinking about herself, and the safety of her family, and whatever. They couldn't find a place for me to stay. I mean, we went to hotels, motels, all over the place. They finally called the minister, who came up with Lula Mae Jones. Bless her heart. They took me over there, and Lula Mae slept with a gun under her pillow. And all the windows in her house were closed, and she had no air conditioning. This is how scary it was. Marlene — the co-leader — Marlene and I were there, and we slept together in a double bed in this hot little room, and that's where I was working. I had a very hard time finding any white people. I was going for the white people to find support —

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: And I finally found one woman who invited me out to her house for lunch, and she was going to introduce me to her friends. But when I got there, her friends wouldn't come. But we did set up to have a slide show. Our little group had slide shows to show the tanks in the street, and all this. The whites didn't know, and so this woman invited some of her friends, or couples. It was a night from hell. They did not want to believe one thing. We had pictures. They wouldn't believe that this had happened. They

refused to take it in. That was a time. [It was illuminating to see how our hostess's behavior changed around her husband and friends. I felt sorry for her and also understood. I'd been there, like her.] Finally I went up to Raleigh/Durham where you had more liberals. And I was also there working not only for the Alliance, but for WILPF. They were co-paying my salary. I was making \$25 a week. They gave me a one way ticket down to Wilmington. I mean, that's — (laughter) that was my experience. But it was such a profound experience to be in —

Oh, I need to tell you one more thing about being in Wilmington. One of the younger black women who was organizing — Mary, her name was — and I went to the beach one day. She had twin girls. It was so hot in Wilmington. It was 104 degrees. We went to the beach, and we went to the integrated beach, or what she thought was integrated. Now, she had come from Wilmington. She was staying with her mother, and her girls. She'd been living in Connecticut, so she thought it had changed. We got out on the beach in our bathing suits, and were sitting there on the beach, and it's hot, and I'm going to go swim. I said, "Is it OK, Mary, if I go swimming?" "Yes, sure, go ahead." She and the kids were building a castle. I just get out in the water, and I look back at the shore, and here's a group of white guys, are throwing stones at Mary and her little girls. So I race back out, and we — we got out of there. Scary, scary stuff.

WEIGAND: Yes. And this is 1976!

NELSON: 1976, yes. [Charlene and I went around visiting the mothers of the young men who were in prison. Some of them had several sons incarcerated.]

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: Yes, yes. So up in the Raleigh/Durham area we created, you know, we were able to gather enough people. We had a big demonstration. In Raleigh, you could go to the edge of the prison, and it was down in a pit. You could stand along the edge. We had loudspeakers, and there were nine black men, and one white woman, Anne Tyler. I went to see her in prison. She was like me. She was a Vista worker. And here were these beautiful, young black men, who were in prison because they were trying to get educated. And so we stood above them, and we had a loud speaker. And Anne had written a letter, and they asked me to read the letter, her letter. It was a very feminist letter. And I could hear, even among the people I was working with kind of umm, unh, unh. Angela Davis was there, and everybody loved her. And I met her, you know, she's lovely. But — and Angela's a feminist, so there was no trouble from her — but all these guys, they just didn't want to hear feminism. So that's the end of that. Well, that's not all of that story, but that's enough of that story. I want to backtrack on how —

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: How I got back from Wilmington is that Polly Taylor came down and picked me up. Now, Polly and I had come out a year earlier. They gave me a one way ticket down there, but Polly had to come down, and get me.

WEIGAND: Wow.

NELSON: Well, she loaded a whole bunch of women in her car, and came down. You know, that was wonderful. That was wonderful to have her there.

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: And she took me home.

WEIGAND: So there's this stuff that we haven't talked about yet that sort of precedes this. I mean, there's –

NELSON: Yes, right, 1975, yes.

WEIGAND: Antioch, and Mary Kaufman, and –

NELSON: I haven't talked about Mary yet?

WEIGAND: Not really.

NELSON: Oh.

WEIGAND: I think yesterday we were just getting –

NELSON: OK.

WEIGAND: You were talking, I think, about the Woman's Party still when we finished up.

NELSON: OK.

WEIGAND: And about that lobbying work that you did for them. So maybe this would be a good time to switch gears and to talk about the work you did at Antioch, and about Mary Kaufman

NELSON: OK.

WEIGAND: So –

NELSON: Yes, good, OK. Antioch. Ed Powell got me the job, and I got there. And I discovered when I got there there'd been a huge furor. The leftist men had wanted to hire somebody very different. The women had put — there were a lot of women students teaching women's studies courses, and they struggled to get me. I didn't know that until I got there. The whole time I

was there, these guys, they were so snotty. They were just snotty. They were threatened. They were threatened by me. I never — I couldn't understand that. I mean, here I'd been struggling to get stronger, and become a radical, and I was admiring, you know, these guys who'd stand up, and speak. But when I began to, you know, really try to test their radicalism there was nothing there it seemed to me.

So I start teaching women's studies. My classes are packed. Their wives come to my classes. That explains a little bit about — (laughs) — I guess after two semesters, I walk in the student union one evening to get my supper, and there's a woman shows up. This is an older woman with white hair, wearing this Russian fur cap and a big brown coat. It was Mary Kaufman. I looked her up, and I sought her out, and we became very good friends. We were both single, and lonely. And she — now, I haven't talked about Mary at all?

WEIGAND: I don't think so. Just to refer to her.

NELSON: Oh, OK.

WEIGAND: But —

NELSON: OK. Well, I told her that I had just been working on the Equal Rights Amendment. And she said, "Oh, I think women should have equal rights, but for myself, I've never had a bit of trouble." Well, I didn't believe her.

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: But what am I going to do, you know. And I thought, Oh, this is somebody I want to get to know. We began to have supper together once in a while. And then, the first thing that happened that affected Mary and me was that — was going to vigils outside Wright Patterson Air Force base, which is very nearby. I was going to peace vigils because I was doing this all along, and handing out flyers. Every Friday we went over and did that. The students decided that they wanted to have a big demonstration and do civil disobedience. I had been thinking about that the whole year I was at Washington. I was watching people go to the Capitol and do it. While I was staying at the Woman's Party, I didn't. I was afraid I wouldn't get support if I got arrested. Clearly, Alice Paul would not support me. And I was kind of vulnerable, so I didn't do it. But I was thinking, I really want to do this. I want to put myself on the line. I want to see what this is like. I believe in this.

So when they were organizing this demonstration, I signed up to go. And I went, and I sat in the street with a whole bunch of students all around me. A lot of them were my students. I was arrested, and went to jail with them. Well, Mary Kaufman had organized her students. She was teaching kind of a pre-law thing, and she was teaching them to be legal observers. So there were 158, or something like that, of us arrested. We were all organized in affinity groups. Mary said in order for the legal team

— Mary invited me over for supper, and she said, “Now, I’ve got this proposition – “Oh, I know, I was telling you about it –

WEIGAND: Yesterday.

NELSON: Yes, that was it. She said, “Now, there has to be a liaison between the legal team, and these groups that have been arrested, because every group has their own idea about how they want to do this, and we need to coordinate that. And Marge, you are the person to do it.” This is the way she talked. “Marge, you are the only person who can do this.” “I’ve never done anything like that before,” I said. And she said, “I will teach you, I’ll show you.” So I said, “OK, well, will you feed me this good chicken you just cooked?”

I was kind of at sea. You know, I sure wasn’t cooking for myself in those days. And so I started going over to have dinner with her, and she taught me how to do it, and I went to meet with all the affinity groups. And then I went to jail with a whole bunch of women. And here again, a lot of them were my students, and a lot of them weren’t. And when we sang feminist songs, some of the women who weren’t feminists felt that it was divisive, and you know, kept running into this. But, for the most part, the women who were in my jail cell were very supportive. That was an experience, too. I have a story about that, but I think maybe I won’t tell it here. I’ll write it up. It’s kind of a long story.

But through all these things that I was doing, I was getting more, and more radical. I was seeing more, understanding more, and getting more confidence. At Antioch, I was the radical feminist, and they were interviewing me, and putting my picture in the paper. I was the advisor for the Women’s Center, and these lovely young women who were just coming into their consciousness came to my classes, and I had a wonderful time with them. I loved teaching them. And I was a good teacher and it was a great experience. I really loved that teaching. I was also teaching some general sociology courses. I taught a course in urban sociology, and we did a study of the town where Wright Patterson Air Force Base was. I forgot the name of it. But anyway, I was doing all that.

And then the next year, there was a big strike of the workers for the college. Mary and I supported that and it lasted a long time, and garbage heaped up on the common. Nobody collected the garbage, and everything. But we supported it, and we —

Oh, Mary and I took a house together in the second year. It was this beautiful, big house that Mary wanted. Mary had never had that. She’d been working, and she came out of immigrant family. I was coming from it, and didn’t –

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: I wasn’t particularly impressed by it. But she wanted it, so we rented this big house, which was very smart, because we had great parties there. And when the workers were on strike, they were all coming to our house. Mary

and I would talk at great length about feminism, and class issues. She really pushed me to get to understand class issues in a way that I hadn't. I'd wanted to, but I just hadn't quite gotten it. But she wasn't sure about feminism. And as I say, when I first started knowing her, she really believed she'd never been discriminated against. But as I knew her over the years, she began to see how — for instance, Bill Kunstler was well known. Mary Kaufman had much more status in terms of her experience at Nuremburg. I haven't talked about that. Mary had been at Nuremburg. It was Mary who brought the Nuremburg principles back to the U.S. and applied them to all the civil disobedience that the students were using. She helped people devise a strategy that — I mean, from Nuremburg, that your government tells you that you should do something is not a reason to do it if you think it's wrong.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: That's basically it. That's the basis of civil disobedience, and it was crucial to all these anti-war demonstrations. And Mary had that. And that's what she taught me, too. I mean, she was so eloquent, and so devoted. And she was getting calls from all over the world, people wanting her to come. And she would go. We had this incredible resource. But at Antioch College, I'll tell you, when Mary and I teamed up together, these white guys, they'd make fun of us. They were threatened by us. Mary was very powerful, and I guess — and I was powerful for what I represented. I didn't think of myself as powerful, but I clearly represented women's liberation. And they seemed scared to death of us. (laughter)

It was very strange to me, and disconcerting. You know, I thought, What's the matter? Come on, grow up. Grow up. We can be comrades. I was never a separatist. That was not who I was. So what happened then at Antioch was in the spring of 1973, the money for the poor students dried up. Nixon had come in, and they just cut off all that money. Now, Antioch had gone out, and recruited poor and black students. They brought them on campus with the promise that they would raise money to support them, to give them an education. And when the money dried up — when federal money dried up, Antioch did not have the money. Now, we thought — and I can't prove this — but we believed that they had spent the money they'd raised setting up these centers all over the place. But they told the students, "Too bad. You have to transfer to a state school. We can't keep you here any longer." You can't transfer out of Antioch. You don't even get a grade at Antioch. It was a terrible thing to do. The students were just distraught, and so they went on strike. They chained all the buildings shut so there wouldn't be struggles at the doors of the various buildings. They had pickets to kind of guide that, and to try to keep there from being violence. We didn't want this to be a violent situation. Well, when they closed down the gym, the jocks who wanted to get in the gym were absolutely livid, and there was a day that we heard that they were going to storm the gym. So we set up the women's brigade. Now, this is where it began to change with Mary, and feminism. I called the women to have a

women's brigade, and a lot of these professor's wives had kids. We had women, and children at the gym — a women's brigade. Mary was impressed, and that was a big thing for me, that I could impress Mary.

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: She was impressed that feminists were, you know, we really could do something. We really did have integrity, and we knew how to struggle. And Mary was there, too. And I have some great pictures of Mary, and me, and all of us standing, and sitting in front of the gym. When the jocks came, they couldn't get in. Well, that thing went on for a long time. It was a very bitter struggle. And there came a day when I went to a meeting of the humanities, which I was part of, and some of the black students wanted to come in and talk about the strike. One of the professors there said, "Who are these people?" They were his students. They were his students. He didn't know. This racism, in this little, wonderful, progressive school, that woke me up a little more. There were all these little things that were happening. I said to myself, I don't think I want to be here. I had thought when I went down there, This is going to be great fun to be here. Then another one of the white, liberal, so-called radical white men came to me, and said, "You don't have as much to lose as I do by supporting this strike." How could he say that? But this attitude, this attitude –

So what happened was the administration sent out a letter to everybody, and they said we're going to enter the administration building May 22<sup>nd</sup>, at noon. If you're there blocking the way, if you're faculty, you'll be fired. If you're students, you'll be expelled, and if you're anybody else, you'll be arrested. So on that day, there were 400 of us standing in front of the administration building, and the kids were out with their drums, you know, and Mary and I were right in the center, in front of the doors. I have pictures. You can see Mary's white head. And I wore these dark glasses with black and white frames, so you can pick me out, too. And you can see the administration walking across the long lawn that led up the administration building. They get there and, you know, of course they can't get in. And so we were fired. Students — I think about 14 students were expelled. They picked people.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: They didn't fire any of the black faculty. They didn't dare fire them, because they knew the blacks were organized. They picked the two Latino guys. I guess it was just one. No, there were two of them. And they made a terrible mistake. They fired two guys who had tenure. I think it was two of them. It was at least one, maybe two, who had tenure, and Mary and me. So there was a big fight to get us reinstated. I have a marvelous poster that the archives will get of drawings, of Mary, of our faces, the fired faculty. There's Mary on one side, and there's me on the other side, and these guys in between, "Wanted Back." And Mary organized that struggle. [I think

her papers include a tape of the hearing for our reinstatement, with Mary's speech and mine.]

Now, I went on up to Buffalo because I had already decided to leave, and go back. I was totally disillusioned with Antioch. Not for the students, but as a place for me. I didn't want to turn into one of these people.

WEIGAND: Yes.

NELSON: I was afraid I would if I stayed there. I was still growing. I was still needing to grow. So –

WEIGAND: I think this is probably a good time to switch the tape.

END TAPE 3

## TAPE 4

WEIGAND: So, can you tell me a little more about Mary Kaufman and about your conversations with her about feminism and class and –

NELSON: Well, Mary and I got to be very good friends and that year that we lived together, we would get into our pajamas and nightgowns — whatever we wore — at night, and she had a big king size bed, and we'd watch television and we'd talk. We got to be very close, and she began to confide in me. She talked, of course, about her history, and I listened. As she began to trust me, she began to see how she had been discriminated against, and the ways that, because she was a woman, she just wasn't treated with a kind of respect that she was certainly entitled to. So we talked about that a lot. And we talked about her family and we talked about her sense of separation from Michael –

WEIGAND: Her son?

NELSON: Her son, yeah. She talked about how hard that felt, that she felt that he didn't quite understand who she was, nor did his wife, who had been a student of hers — I'm not sure about a student, but had been one of the young women who had come to her. There were a lot of young women who had been under her care, at various demonstrations and so forth, when she was teaching. She was always teaching students and always had young people adoring her. She was adored or she was hated. She was such a strong person. She intimidated many people, and she was difficult. I mean, she was very — she could be very dogmatic; very, very sure of herself. But when we were together in the evenings, she wouldn't be that. I would see a very different side of her, a very soft and caring side. She was also a very loving and loyal person. She was very, very kind. She'd talk about the loves in her life and there was — there was somebody in her life then. It was a man from India, who come to this country once in a while and they'd have a little affair, but that was it. That was it. She was very loyal to her sister, Fanny, and I was going through this separation from my family, because now I was divorced and I wasn't going back there with the family and with the kids for holidays, and that was hard.

I started going to Mary's. I became part of her family, and they took me in. They invited me in. That was wonderful. So, when she left Antioch and then she went to Hampshire College, she invited me over there to give a seminar on the ERA and the NWP. She introduced me to people, and she was always pushing me. She pushed me — here's another little story. When we went to jail, we all — there were 150 some of us standing outside the courtroom, and we filed in one by one, and we met the judge and we got our sentence and so forth — she pushed me again to speak. She was always pushing me, saying, "Make a speech, Marge." They were all men speaking and she saw that. She began to see it. These are all men. Where are the women? "Get up there! Get up there, Marge!" And so, you know, and I did, and when it was my turn to go up there, I made a speech,

and then everybody started making a speech, and you know, she was always doing that. She was — and she was doing that not only to me, but to everybody — to her students. The students who were with her just adored her, and for good reason. She was incredible. So Mary and I continued until she died. She — let me see how to do this — after she finished teaching, she went back to New York City and, somewhere in there, she met Paul Albert and married him, and I have to say that I was jealous. I never had a sexual thing for Mary, but I loved her, and I was jealous of having somebody else there. And by the same token, when I came out with Polly, Mary was jealous of Polly. And she didn't like me being a lesbian, either. She had a hard time with that. "I have trouble with this," she'd say. "I have trouble with this. What was the matter? You were having such a good time before." She just didn't get it. But gradually, because she wanted to understand — and the thing about Mary was that she really wanted to learn. She was always open to learning, and if something troubled her, she wanted to find out why, and so she, you know, she grew around me being a lesbian. And after she married Paul, Paul had family out in San Francisco, so they came out and took an apartment out in Berkeley, and that was absolutely lovely because then I would go over to see her. By this time I had broken up with Polly and I was with Sandy, who was a very warm-hearted — everybody loved Sandy. And Mary fell in love with Sandy, too, so she embraced her. And Sandy embraced Mary, too. So that all changed. So Sandy and I and Mary and Paul would go out and do things and we'd go out together and we'd laugh. Paul was a jokester. Mary didn't have much of a sense of humor, but Paul was funny. He was always making jokes, and — so we all, we did stuff together. We did a lot of stuff together. And one of the pictures that I'm going to send to the archives is of Paul and Mary on their scooters. They both — Paul was an amputee and Mary had trouble walking at this time in her life, so they both had scooters, and they'd go around town and honking their horns and — they had such, such spirit.

And we were part of that, and it was such a gift to my life. And I know I was — we were to her, too. We were — because we — Sandy and I, we adored her, and we'd come over and we'd bring food and we'd have Christmas dinner. We'd have Thanksgiving dinner. We'd have, you know, many Sunday dinners. And we'd just sit around and talk and laugh and be together.

WEIGAND: Yeah, sounds great.

NELSON: Yeah. Yeah. And one of the things about Mary — late — at this time in her life, she was trying to write an article, a really a big article about Nuremburg and about this work that she'd been doing with so many thousands of people. By this time thousands of people had had contact with Mary and her thoughts. She wanted to write it and organize her files, and she would hire young people — students — and she hired my daughter Barbara, when she was free, to try and help her organize her files. And at one point, I tried to help her. I'd sit down with her. I tried to

— oh, I know, I was trying to help her get money. And we did. We wrote several grants that she could get money to support her. [I have notes on a grant application in my files.] But the problem for Mary was a woman's problem. Paul would get sick, and she would of course take care of him and fight for him. He had heart trouble. He had all this diabetes. He had some little more amputation, and she'd give up everything, you know. Of course she would. And so she didn't get to finish the thing that she wanted to finish, and that was hard for her.

WEIGAND: Yeah.

NELSON: And there came a time — I think it was 1995 — where she had a lump, and they thought she had breast cancer. My daughter had a lump. They thought she had breast cancer. And I was bleeding, and they thought I might have some cancer somewhere in my vagina. All three of us were facing this, and it was Labor Day weekend. Bill Kunstler had just died, and Mary went into the hospital. She was going to have her biopsy, and she had her biopsy. My daughter Barbara went up to be with her, and when they found out that it was cancer and that Mary was going to need to go into a nursing home, her son did not offer to take her. There was nobody there. Barbara was not in a position to take her. I was — I mean, I was way out on the West coast at this time. She's in New York City. All the people that Mary had taken care of, all the people in the [Communist] Party — nobody was there to take Mary in to help her. It just — it broke my heart. Where were you? Where were you? What was the matter that nobody could take Mary in? And she was a smart woman. She had a heart attack and left. Paul had died a year earlier. She was mourning Paul — there's no doubt about that — but she still hadn't finished her work, and she — I knew she wanted to finish her work, but now, she was — she was not able to. It's very sad.

WEIGAND: It is.

NELSON: It's very sad.

WEIGAND: Yeah, to be somebody who just, like you said, helped and helped and helped people out to —

NELSON: Yeah. But always that work was — and this is where feminism is so important — always that work was out there. There was never the dealing with the relationships, with the personal part of it. I mean, she and I did, but for the most part, all the political work she was doing was out there. It didn't matter what was going on. If you weren't feminist, you weren't dealing with it. And that's a really important — important point. Yeah, a major, major point about feminism, yeah. So —

WEIGAND: So —

- NELSON: And I miss her. I still miss her.
- WEIGAND: Yeah.
- NELSON: I mean, every — Mary, Mary used to call me, and she hated my answering machine. She'd scream into my answering machine, "Marge! Marge! Are you there Marge? Marge, pick up the phone! Marge!" (laughter) And I wish I could hear that voice on my own still.
- WEIGAND: Yeah. Yeah.
- NELSON: She was a great woman, and I was so privileged to know her. I mean these women — these older women. Mary's about fifteen years older than I, but Mary and Alice Paul and Mabel Vernon, those three women. Elaine Lubbers. They were all great women who really helped me along.
- WEIGAND: How about — well you want to talk about Buffalo and the self help stuff?
- NELSON: OK, yeah.
- WEIGAND: And I also would like to hear, at some point in here, about your whole coming out experience, and how that fit in.
- NELSON: Yeah, yeah. I haven't talked about that. OK.
- WEIGAND: So, which makes sense to talk about first?
- NELSON: Well, let's do coming out.
- WEIGAND: OK. (laughs)
- NELSON: When — I mean I talk about my sex life a little bit, because people are going to be curious, and my husband's saying I'm frigid and then I — well, I was still married to him, but we just weren't — we weren't meeting sexually. And I did take lovers. And I discovered I really liked to have sex. And this was a period of sexual freedom. There was a lot of sexual freedom. I had a lot of sex with men. Well, at Antioch, there was a gay movement, and so I started looking around and thinking about it, because I knew that I was emotionally connected to women. I was beginning to understand that about myself. But all the women that I met were young, and they were my students. There was no way I was going to come out with one of my students. I couldn't do that. That's not right. So I was looking for a woman who was my age, who was interested. (laughs) I didn't find anybody at Antioch. But when I got back to Buffalo — I told you before that I was going on these panels on women's liberation, and this Polly Taylor was showing up — and so I started to get to know her. I was also in a CR group, and I was beginning to talk in my CR group about ageism and the differences — how they weren't seeing my experience,

because they were all younger. This younger generation wasn't really seeing where I was coming from. They were kind but I wasn't — I was one of them, but I wasn't, and I needed that, that recognition. Well I don't know whether they really got it, but I started saying, "I need to be in a group of women my age." So Ed Powell, who was still my lover and close friend, had a friend who — how did this work? He had a friend — yeah, Ed had a friend whose wife was saying, "We've got to introduce Marge to Polly." They were — they knew Polly, the Frieds. Marge and Manny Fried. No — oh, God, what was her first name? [It was Rhoda.] It doesn't matter. The Frieds introduced Polly to me, in a different way. They had us over for dinner. Ed was there and Polly and (laughs) —

WEIGAND: So were they matchmaking?

NELSON: Yeah, they were matchmaking. Even though Ed and I were lovers, they were —

WEIGAND: Right. (laughs)

NELSON: Those were crazy times, crazy times. And Polly and I began to spend more time together. And it was, it was — you know, it was a very considerate thing, the way I got together. I didn't just fall in love with Polly, but Polly — Polly was a Quaker woman. She was this dear woman. She was working as a therapist, and she had a Mercedes, and she would dress up in her nice little outfit, and she was ferrying draft resisters across the border, and of course nobody stopped her.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: She was very much involved in that movement. In fact, she went to jail because she refused to talk about one of the people that she took over, and they put her in jail. There was a big stink about that, and they got her out. She was highly respected in town. So, I just — I fell in love with her mind and with who she was, this Quaker woman. She just had so much integrity, and that mattered so much to me. And, so at one point, she's over having supper with me, and I say, "What do you think, Polly? You think you'd like to be lovers?" And I didn't even know that at that point — or maybe I did know — that she was bisexual. She was already having sex with women. And she immediately said yes, and so after — but it was until after the Joann Little case when I came back that we got together, and that was a lovely, wonderful thing. After about six months, I moved in with her. She had a little house, and then Polly and I decided we wanted to have a collective in Buffalo. Everybody was having collectives.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: It was a huge mistake. Just huge. We found four younger women. So here we are — Polly's the only one that's got any money. She bought this

house on Linwood Avenue, this eighteen room — no, maybe it was bigger than that — a huge mansion. It was this old Victorian house — this huge mansion — for \$18,000 dollars. We moved into it, and it needed to be repaired and here, you know, Polly and I were like the mothers of this younger group of women, and it was a disaster. (laughs) Anyway, we had some great parties, but — what do I want to say? I'll just do a little more about my time with Polly. We had — after I finished my degree, I couldn't get a job in Buffalo. I finished in 1976 and wrote my dissertation about the Woman's Party. I did finally get that done, and I started teaching — I did get some teaching jobs. By this time, I was very involved — very interested in the whole — in questions about the body and women's bodies. And I'd gotten into a self-help group. [We each had a speculum and we looked at our own cervix. That was very moving to see the os through which my children were born. While at the NWP in 1970-71 I got to know Lolly Hirsch from Connecticut who was staying in the big house. She talked about her group who were learning to do menstrual extractions. She published for awhile a great little newsletter. I think it was called *Monthly Extraction* or *Monthly Periodical* or something like that. I gave all my health archives to a woman who was out here in the 1990s doing research on that early movement.] I had already had this experience of iatrogenic disease and there was this whole big women's health movement. There was also a patients' rights movement at that time. I taught a course in the colleges on patient's rights. I co-taught it with a young woman. I taught courses on the politics of women's health at the Women's Studies college at SUNY, and at the Cornell School of Labor. They wanted somebody to do that. And I became part of a self-help group — Polly and I both became part of a self-help group. This big mansion that Polly had bought became kind of center, because there was a gay center, but there wasn't a women's center, and so we had meetings there. That was a great reason to have this house. That was not a mistake. Our self-help group met there. And what's also happening, is that we're beginning to talk more about ageism, and to really need to talk about the difference between being a young person and being a midlife person who's had this whole different experience. We wanted to be seen. We wanted to be recognized. And so this movement is beginning to grow too, and we're part of it. So we have — our self-help group has a menopause workshop, which I led, and I wrote an article about it and sent it to *Primetime*, which is I think the first publication of this era on that topic. Marjory Collins published it in New York City. It was a really nice — I don't know if you — I don't think you have it.

WEIGAND:

I'm not familiar with that.

NELSON:

No. Well I'll send you — I've got a couple of issues. I wrote an article about menopause, which she published. So we were beginning to get into that movement, and think about it and talk about it, and what happens in Buffalo is that, it has become clear the collective isn't working. I can't find a good job, and I'm still very much in love with organizing. I mean,

I've come back from the Wilmington experience and I can't see myself exactly as a professor. I want to change — I'm a real radical. I want to change the whole — I want to change it. And it had become clear to me that if I want to change it, I have to change and I have to make some real commitments.

Polly had a little money, and we had a big auction. We sold all our stuff. And what I had was the remnants of my upper middle-class life. My son Peter drove up with all my furniture, and my silver, and my this and my that, and we sold it all. Polly sold all her stuff, and we bought this used RV and we left Buffalo. [We were looking for the "older women's movement."] I said, "Let's go to San Francisco," and she said, "I don't know if I want to live in San Francisco." So I said, "Well, let's go see what's going on in the country." So we spent the next nine months traveling around in the RV. We went to Cambridge. Well, we liked it there, but I said, "Let's go see some more. This is still cold weather and snow."

We went down to Miami, to the national board meeting of WILPF. That would've been a possibility for me, to become part of WILPF. The only problem was that WILPF was not interested in lesbianism. They were not a feminist organization. They were pro-woman, but not feminist. So, that wasn't quite a fit. We traveled up to Minneapolis, where we had a friend who gave us a house. Actually, she was back in Buffalo, and she had a house in Minneapolis, and we stayed there for a month. We went to the women's centers, and met a lot of people, but I didn't want to live there. The whole city's white.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: They all look like me.

WEIGAND: It's still cold.

NELSON: And it's still cold. So meanwhile, I'd heard about the Yvonne Wanrow case, and my daughter Barbara working on it. Beth was the person from my CR group who got Barbara into it. Beth was working on the case, and they needed a white woman to come out and help organize white women. So we set that up. That was starting in August. So we got there, and we worked there for most of the fall. We took a little trip out to go down to San Francisco. That's a different story, but I'll stay with Yvonne. Yvonne was a Native American woman who had shot a man who had molested her child. After the molestation he was coming into her house and she shot him, and she was accused of first degree murder. The question that was raised in the Yvonne Wanrow case was — which was a precedent-setting thing — when you talk about self defense, what does she need to be able to defend herself? Well here, she shot him with a gun, but he was a great big man and she was a little woman, and she had her leg in a cast. Of course she needs a gun. That was the whole issue. And actually a woman whose name I don't remember — I'm sorry — was writing a book about

that and she came in and interviewed Polly and me later. My work, again, was going to white women and talking to them about this case. Again — and I didn't really talk about this with Joann's thing — but the white women that we met were progressive women, and they wanted to support it, but they didn't know how to make the jump. It was a jump. This woman killed a man. A lot of them were religious people. How do you do that? How do you make that OK? And it's a question. It's a real question. Well, how do you not make it OK? And that's the kind of work that I was always doing in Spokane. I met with a law school. I went to the Y.

Everywhere I went, by the way, where you found the feminists was in the YWCA. Most places don't have a women's center, but they had a Y, and there were the feminist women. Wonderful. It's important to acknowledge that. So — and I went to the university and I gave lectures, and I organized workshops, and I had to get educated about how Native Americans are discriminated against. I mean, I knew it existed, but I didn't know what form it took. I didn't understand about how their children were taken away from them and sent to boarding schools. Their heritage was taken away from them. And so it was important to know this, to learn this and talk about it. That's what I did, and it was a wonderful experience.

And Yvonne opened up to us, and we went to rallies with her, and we were her team. We were getting ready for her a new trial. I don't remember exactly the details of that. We were getting ready for that, and we rented this big house and got it set up. It was a house that would be big enough so that her friends could come in and stay there, and we could meet them and, again, develop a mix of the whites and the natives. So we were always working to have this integration, so the jury can see that this isn't just an isolated little case. That's the work you do when you're organizing around these big trials, and that's what we did. But they didn't have the trial. There was a big hearing, and we went to that — actually, that was a little bit later. Went to that and, in fact, she was acquitted.

WEIGAND: So did you have more success doing this interracial organizing in that context and around Native Americans and whites than you had in the South?

NELSON: I — what I have to say is that, when we arrived, there was already organizing going on, so we weren't starting as much from scratch as the women in Raleigh were. There was already a defense committee that we worked with. But there was not a whole lot of support around Spokane. There was some. When I first got there, I went to this lesbian party, and the women all wanted to know, How did you know? How did you know who we were? They were all closeted. And I said, "Well, I can tell. I can tell." But they were very nervous about that. They said, "How'd you find us?" I guess I have a kind of a radar, you know, a lot of us do. I mean, you pay attention. You see. You see little — so I don't know. It was a little different, because there definitely was a community of people who were working very hard. It's hard work. It's hard work. It was hard. It took a toll on me. But I am so grateful that I was able to do it. I wanted to do it,

and it certainly changed my life. It woke me up, and challenged me to keep growing, which I continue to do, even at 76. I'm still learning, still learning.

WEIGAND: Can you talk a little bit about coming out and how it — like, did it make you — I know for a lot of people, they think back on their life up to that point, and really sort of think about it all differently.

NELSON: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. It was a wonderful thing to do, because I've told you about crushes I had on my music teacher —

WEIGAND: Yeah.

NELSON: — and my speech teacher, and suddenly that was OK. I wasn't sick. There wasn't something wrong with me. And I knew that I had this emotional bond with women. I was women-identified. I always had been. It just kind of made sense for my life. It made sense for my life. And I had — there's this quick story I'll tell you about one of my brothers, the youngest of the three older brothers. He had always been a little bit different. He had a major breakdown in the 1950s, when we were living in Corpus Christi and when he broke down and he stayed with us for awhile. And it turned out that he discovered that he was a homosexual. I don't know if he'd actually had or had fantasized or — I think he'd had an experience with a boy. He was going into Boy Scout training and there'd been something that — he was shocked to his core that he had done this, and thought it was so wrong, and he'd had a breakdown. Now maybe he would've had it anyway, but he was so ashamed he could never reconcile the fact that he was gay. And this just seemed heartbreaking to me. He saw a psychiatrist who said, "Well, yeah. You're gay. So learn to be gay and to accept yourself." He thought that was terrible. He just — he couldn't accept it. And even my parents were saying, "This is who you are. You have to learn to live with it." They were accepting, but he wasn't. And so I started thinking about this in a lot of different ways. [After his initial breakdown he became paranoid schizophrenic and was in and out of hospitals the rest of his life.]

When I started thinking about homosexuality for myself, I thought, you know — I mean, basically, the sex is really different. I never lusted for men's bodies. I never had. I enjoyed the act of sex, if the lover was skilled. That's what I enjoyed. I enjoyed having an orgasm; I mean that's — who wouldn't? Who doesn't? Who doesn't?

WEIGAND: (laughs) Right.

NELSON: But — and I, you know, I certainly loved Ed Powell, but I never lusted. I lusted for women's bodies. And when I understood that, I thought, Well this is who I am. That's fine. That's fine. Yeah, that's good.

WEIGAND: So rather than being a difficult experience, it was sort of a —

NELSON: Oh, it wasn't difficult at all. By this time, I was a feminist. That coming out was the big one. I was a radical. I was a political radical. That was the one that separated me from people, where people began to look at me differently and I began to act differently. Lesbianism just kind of fit in with who I was, and by the time I came out — that's 1975 — a lot of people are doing it. It's much more accepted. I never had any problem. I sent letters to my kids. When I came out, my son came to visit me with a friend of his. He was going to Interlochen Arts Academy by this time. He — he thought it was great. He was very impressed with everything I was doing, so no problem. I sent letters to my two daughters, and I think Carol was over in Germany then. I got a letter back from her and she said, "Oh, I'm glad you've found somebody. That's wonderful, mom." I didn't hear from Barbara, who's the closest to me. And I didn't hear from her, and I didn't hear from her. Oh dear, oh dear. This is terrible. Barbara's upset. Well, finally she came to see me, and I asked her. She said, "Mom, I just can't stand to hear about your sex life, whoever it's with." (laughter) So that was it, you know. No problem. My kids all were very accepting of my partners. It was no problem at all. It made sense to everybody. Of course you're a lesbian.

WEIGAND: Yeah. They've been telling you all those years. (laughter)

NELSON: I was the last one to see it.

WEIGAND: Yeah, and, you know, I guess, it sounds like you were really coming out in that whole context of lesbian feminist community and culture.

NELSON: Yeah. I certainly was. Yeah, yeah.

WEIGAND: So, I think we've — have we covered most of Buffalo and — ?

NELSON: I think we have. I think we need to get on to San Francisco.

WEIGAND: Yeah, I think we do, too.

NELSON: Because I have a whole lot of life out there.

WEIGAND: Yeah. So, why San Francisco?

NELSON: Well, OK. So Polly and I leave the Yvonne Wanrow case, and we travel down the coast, and we go to the Women's Land in Oregon, where we meet Elana [Michaels] and Elizabeth [Freeman] who have Women's Land, and they have Older Women's Land. There's a growing Older Women's Network. They're all lesbians, but they call it Older Women's Network. And right next to it is Cabbage Lane, because all the young women are — the Women's Land thing. And we stay there for a month, and Ruth and Jean Mountaingrove are right up the hill from Alana and Elizabeth, and

they're all our age, maybe a little older. I guess Elizabeth was a little older. But finally we're meeting really radical women who are our age. That's what we want, and we yearn for this. I mean, you know, the young women are great but, you know, we want people our own age, and here they were.

WEIGAND: And were these women like you, who had sort of come out later in life, or were they people who'd been –

NELSON: Well, Alana — I guess, I'm not sure if Elizabeth — I can't remember if she was married. Maybe she wasn't. Maybe she'd been a lesbian. Ruth — the Mountaingroves, I think, had been — had come out later in life. They published *Womanspirit*, a wonderful magazine, a wonderful journal, right there, up on the mountain. They were living up on the mountain. And talking to them, then, we began talking about San Francisco. Well, I had been to San Francisco very briefly as a graduate student. I'd come out to a conference in San Francisco and fell in love with it. My mother — I also told you about my mother.

WEIGAND: Oh, right. She lived there.

NELSON: My mother had lived there and always talked about San Francisco, so she planted this dream. And that was a happy time in her life, before she got married. I mean, it made sense to me. So, after we finished with Yvonne in December, we went down to San Francisco, and Beth Bonora from the Jury Project was now living in Oakland, and so she set up an apartment for us for a few weeks. I had broken my foot in Spokane, so I arrived on crutches. That's right — Polly drove the van. We looked for an apartment, and we didn't find anything in Oakland. And I didn't care. I wanted the Bay Area. But we found an apartment in San Francisco with some young lesbian women, and moved in the first day of the year in 1978. We arrived there. I immediately decided I wanted to organize. I wanted to find a group. We went to a menopause workshop, where we met a couple of women who were our age, who were radical women, and we liked them. And I started talking to them, "Let's create the Crones Caucus. Let's create this thing." Now, there was organizing beginning to go on all around the country. NOW had formed an older women's task force. Tish Summers and Laurie Shields were there in Oakland. We went to see them. They were doing displaced homemakers stuff. We went to see them. But I wanted a radical group, and so organized the Crones Caucus.

We started meeting and developing theory and talking. I've got all those notes that we made. And by March, I heard that the women's centers in San Francisco was wanting to organize an older women's center, and I applied for the job, and I got it. It was a CETA job, government-funded. It lasted a year. Four of us were hired. And Jean Livingston, a black woman, and myself and Pat Durham, who was a minister's wife — they were separated. She was living in a collective. There was a younger woman named Willow. She was, you know — we were just barely 50, or not

quite. We were in our late forties. We created Options for Women over 40 that became part of Women's Centers. That was a great year. We had all kinds of programs, and by the end of the year, Pat Durham had come out. We had a conference. It may be one of the early conferences on women and aging. We had a lot of workshops. I was organizing it. We were all organizing it. At the end of the day, I did the summary speech, kind of where do we go from here? I have those notes, too. I kept all these speeches.

WEIGAND: That's so good.

NELSON: I kept notes. It's amazing. I shove everything in a box and –

WEIGAND: Yeah.

NELSON: So then I was unemployed, but I got unemployment. Thank God for unemployment insurance. And I began — you know, I needed to find my way around. We were trying to create a chapter of WILPF — oh, back up a little bit. Women's Centers was an organizing organization. They were creating organizations, helping new — this was a period, in the late 1970s in San Francisco, of all these new organizations being formed. Women's organizations — it was a very exciting time. Women's Centers was helping them. They had the 501-C3 status — the non profit status. Their big project was to buy a women's building, and they'd been meeting about it a long time before I showed up. But by the time I was there, I represented Options in the meetings about the women's building. One day there was a meeting — the go/no go meeting, the decisive meeting. Can we do this? They were going from this small budget to this huge, huge project. It was a huge four story building.

WEIGAND: Wow.

NELSON: It was going to cost thousands and thousands of dollars. And they decided to do it, so they did, and they moved in, and Options moved up to the third floor and, of course, helped pay the rent. Well I didn't have a job, but Pat wanted to stay — and I didn't want to stay on really. There were a lot of other things I wanted to do. But Pat Durham, who'd been on the staff, stayed on. And Jean Livingston went to work on the staff of the Women's Building. So they continued and helped to pay the bills and were an important part of that. I lost my thread of where I was going with this.

Oh, what happened to me? We decided — Polly got herself a job working at the WILPF office. WILPF had an office in San Francisco. We decided we wanted to create a feminist chapter of WILPF with an offshoots office at the women's building. That was our goal. There were a few women in WILPF who wanted to do it, but not enough, I'm afraid. But WILPF hired me to do a survey of women's needs in the federal budget, which is a great job. I don't remember how much they paid me, maybe \$5,000. It wasn't a whole lot of money, but enough to live on for

awhile. So I went around meeting people, talking to them — all the different organizations — and finding out. It was just a perfect job for me. I wrote a little book, a little 50-page pamphlet, *Women's Needs and the Federal Budget*. Then in 1980 we had a conference on women and the military. What was happening then — the war in Vietnam was over, but all the nuclear armament was terrible.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: So all that organizing was going on, and I was getting involved in that, and getting myself trained. I became a war tax resister. I decided this was a great idea. I thought I could do it, and wanted to do it. I went to workshops. I didn't have that much money. I gave speeches, and so forth, and actually did resist paying 51 percent of my income tax, and wrote the government a letter about why I was doing it. I was very open with them (laughs). I was very, very much involved then, in that movement. I talked to the board of supervisors, trying to get San Francisco to be a nuclear free zone, and became part of a group of people who were doing this kind of thing. And I got into anything that was going on. I had that kind of freedom. And I have a picture that I want to show, because I just love this picture. Well, this is — I don't think you've seen this. There is a picture of Polly and me in our van getting ready to leave.

WEIGAND: Oh. Oh, yeah. I wonder if I can — let's see if I can zoom in on it. Yep.

NELSON: That's in Buffalo. We're standing next to — that big green building is the house that Polly bought that was our collective home. And there we are with our van.

WEIGAND: That's great. I can zoom in even a little closer. Oh, and I can see the sign on the windshield.

NELSON: We've been working.

WEIGAND: Yeah.

NELSON: Yeah, right.

WEIGAND: Great.

NELSON: I put that sign, "Women Working," in the apartment that we got in San Francisco. The neighbors thought it was so tacky (laughter). And the landlord, who was living upstairs, said he really didn't want it, so —

WEIGAND: Oh, bummer.

NELSON: This — now this is who I am. You see me with a guitar.

WEIGAND: Oh, yep.

NELSON: That's me. That's who I was.

WEIGAND: That's a great picture, too.

NELSON: I learned to play the guitar in the 1960s when I was having a hard time. I went and learned to play the guitar. Now, I told you about music and how important it was –

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: And I could play the guitar, and I'd learned all the songs, and did a lot of group singing, and that was part of my life. And it was wonderful, just wonderful. The Gray Panthers were engaged in a struggle about a nursing home in the center of town that was being closed, the Post Street Nursing Home. It was a terrible thing, and the people who lived there were going to have to be sent out to the boonies, you know, away from their families. So they were having this big struggle, and they wanted to have a sit-in, and Jerry Brown was the governor in his office. That's where this is, in Jerry Brown's office. So we have all these signs about the Post Street Nursing Home, and I'm up there, singing songs in Jerry Brown's office. And one of the women — not the woman here, but there was a woman who was also sitting there — had lost a leg. She had an artificial leg. At night, when she wanted to rest, she took the leg off. So basically her leg was propped up. And she'd hop down the hall to the bathroom. She could hop around just fine. So when people came in the next morning, here was this leg. It was not a successful struggle. They lost the nursing home. But anyway, that, I just brought that because –

WEIGAND: Yeah, it's a great picture.

NELSON: That's who I was then. The dashiki, the guitar –

WEIGAND: Yeah, the shirt, the guitar. Yeah.

NELSON: Yeah, that's who I was. I loved being that person.

WEIGAND: Yeah.

NELSON: I loved being that person. So, what did I do? I continued being involved with the Women's Building. There was a short period where the community of women was involved in decision-making for the building. Now that was not practical, but for awhile, that existed, and I did that. I was part of that. I was part of that group. I loved that. [We also had a study group that met at my apartment.] And I loved the Women's Building. I still love the Women's Building. It's still around. It's wonderful. They've had terrible struggles to really make themselves a multi-racial building,

and now the Women's Building is an absolutely beautiful building. It is bathed — it is wrapped in a mural that is exquisite. I've got a couple of cards I've brought you. I'm going to send you the whole packet of cards. It's just an exquisite mural. I was part of that, and the part of it that I was — I sent a survey out to all the — I was still a sociologist. I sent a survey out to all the members asking what do you want in the mural? They responded, and I collated, and handed it over to the muralists. There were ten muralists who painted this absolutely exquisite mural. San Francisco has a lot of murals, but this one — this is a women's mural. Just fabulous. [I'm still involved in the History Committee of the Women's Building. We are collecting oral histories out here. We also moved all the Women's Building archives to the Gay, Lesbian, Bi and Trans — GLBT — Historical Society and organized those papers.]

Anyway, so I continued being involved with the Women's Building. But I need to back up a little bit. What has happened to me in 1979 personally? I was still having a lot of pain, and I was having trouble, and I had — I found out I had huge fibroid tumors. And I went to several gynecologists who wanted to do a hysterectomy. Now, by this time, I was very suspicious of the medical profession. I wasn't sure I trusted my body with them. Do I really need to have a hysterectomy? So I sought out a healer. This is a big change, now. See, I'd already been thinking about taking control of our bodies. How do you do that? I sought out a healer, and I said, "I want to see if I can heal these tumors on my own, with your help." And she was interested in me because I had this connection with the Women's Building and could get her other clients. She gave me very cheap help. And she was interested in the project, too, I think. And so I started going to her. She was doing acupuncture and massage, and she taught me how to do visualization, and taught me how to do different kinds of relaxation. This was life-changing. This began to change many things from my life. And in a period of, I guess, about eight months, I did shrink the tumors. But she also put me on juice fasting, and that's how I got so fat, because I'd go on these long fasts. I mean, not just a few days. Not just a week. I went on juice fasts for months.

WEIGAND: Wow.

NELSON: And I think that helped to heal my body, but it changed my metabolism, so when I started eating again, I started getting very fat. Well, OK, so this is what's happening. And there's now this new movement coming along, fat liberation.

WEIGAND: Right, right.

NELSON: I went to a group. I went to a group and talked about this, and they were beginning to say, "Yeah, diets make you fat." (laughs) OK. I mean, I had to go — I had to do this fast thing twice. I mean, I started getting fat and I went on another long fast, and then I got really fat, when I went back off it. So, OK, what am I going to do? I mean, I'm not eating excessively, so I

got involved in fat women's liberation. And I ran a group at the Women's Building. I mean, this is me. Make a group, get other people involved. You don't have to be alone. This is what I learned from Betty Friedan — you don't have to be alone. So I ran a group called Fat, Female and Forty, and gradually got to know the real radicals of the fat liberation movement, like Judy Freespirit and some of the absolutely fabulous women who created a whole set of papers about fat liberation. And I have those papers in my archives, too. And we had meetings. I was part of group.

So this is going on, and I'm also trying to figure out what I'm going to do to live. Well, I get a job for one year at the Western Institute for Social Research teaching a class on racism, sexism, and class. And that was great. It was just a year job. I did that, and I created a whole lot of lecture notes. I got invited to speak at a lot. I'm doing this. I'm learning how — I've learned how to do it. And then the next thing that happened was that Old Wives' Tales, the feminist bookstore was looking for somebody and I thought, That's a perfect job for me. I love books. I'm a reader. And I got on their collective and I worked with them for about a year and a half. It was another one of these collectives that wasn't a collective, but it was a collective, and nobody acknowledged the power differentials, and nobody acknowledged that the woman who'd been there the longest — a Latina — was acting as director. Nobody was acknowledging this. And she had all these political people who didn't — I mean, I love books, but what do I know about selling books?

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: What do I know about business? What do I care about business? I wasn't — what happened was, my health just started getting really bad, working in the bookstore. It was hard for me to get around now. I think I'd hurt my back. I worked the counter and I planned the Thursday evening programs. I loved working the counter, where I met the women and talked about the books. What I couldn't do was — it's hard work, doing a bookstore. You're always moving books around and a lot of physical work. And I wasn't in very great shape, now, at that point. So I got a job doing the accounting. It was in this little tiny office in the back that was poorly ventilated. I developed chemical sensitivities, and I started getting dizzy spells and just feeling terrible. And one day I walked out for lunch, to get some fresh air, and I fell off the edge of the sidewalk and I broke my foot. So I was off on disability and that was a low period in my life. What am I going to do? I can't — I can't do this political work anymore. It's too hard. It's too hard physically. And so I started writing. That's when I started. I'd been writing political articles. I started writing fantasy. I developed a fantasy about an owl and a bear who lived in the window of a vibrator store called Joy's Toys. They lusted after the women who walked by. And one of the women was named Floss, and I began writing stories, and actually ended up writing a whole novel about the women and the bear and the fantasy bear. And it was — it was such an important thing, because I was having to heal myself, and I didn't know how to heal

myself. There was something that was wrong and I didn't know what it was.

See, in all these different things I was involved with, people were beginning to be organizing and talking about incest survivors. And I had some memories of one of my father's graduate students who'd molested me. So I began looking at that, and I began thinking about therapy a little differently. I'd been opposed to therapy, you know, I told you that. But I think I started kind of exploring therapy, and feminist therapy, because now this was — this was a reality. Polly had been early in the feminist therapy thing. By the time she got to San Francisco, she didn't want to do that any more. But other women were doing it. And, so I began to explore it a little bit.

WEIGAND: Maybe — we're going to need a new tape in just a minute, so why don't we take a little break here.

NELSON: Oh, OK.

END TAPE 4

## TAPE 5

WEIGAND: And finally the loud noises are gone. They've gone to eat lunch or something.

NELSON: Yeah. Oh, good. OK, well, let's finish up while they're eating lunch. So Options — Melba Stern, who I'd known in Yellow Springs, came out to be part of Options, and she'd gotten a master's degree in midlife, helping women get back to work. And she had a program, and I went to her program because I knew I was going to have to get some retraining or something. I tried to get into the universities. I couldn't get in. I didn't have a contact. You know, once you drop out of that world it's hard to get back in. So I knew I had to get — I had to figure something out. I had to get serious, because I was getting older and how was I going to support myself? I can't continue this lifestyle. So I went through her program, and what I figured out — and remember, I was learning how to visualize. I was learning all these new skills. I'd discovered Buddhism. I was learning to meditate, to visualize. And there was a program at Options — a hypnotist came. I thought, I could be a hypnotherapist. I — the training that I had, there's this stuff — what color is your parachute? What are your skills? What are you good at? And I could be a therapist. Well, I wasn't about — I didn't have the resources to go through the whole thing, but I could get trained as a hypnotherapist, and it made a lot of sense to me, so I did. [I also had an MA and a Ph.D. in the social sciences, which gave me a boost.] Went and got training and I hung out — and I was well known, and a lot of women came to see me because they were curious. (laughs) What's she doing now?

WEIGAND: You were well-known from your political work?

NELSON: Right, right. Remember, I'd interviewed all these people. Yeah, I was well-known. A lot of women came to see me, and one woman came whose job it was to put flyers up all over town, and we did an exchange, so she put my flyers all over town. My early hypnotherapy focused on helping students pass exams. These are the kinds of things I was doing. I thought I'd be working a lot with pain, because I'd had so much myself, but that's not mainly who came to me. All these women were coming to me who wanted to explore their incest memories, and that seemed like good work to me. And I was needing my own therapy, so the two things happened kind of at the same time. I found myself a therapist and started taking classes and training and found somebody to supervise me, and I just kept studying and learning how to deepen the hypnotherapy that I was doing. I became acquainted with a whole world of post traumatic stress disorder, which was just developing then — I mean, this therapy didn't exist before — and discovered that that was part of what I was suffering from because my own — I don't need to get into it in any length, but the things that had happened with my brothers — my own childhood. So I had to deal with that, and I learned to work with other women, and it's work I still do. I

love it. I do short term work. Women still come to me. They're afraid to fly and I hypnotize them. They're going to have an operation, they're afraid. Hypnotherapy has a very good place. And then there are women come to me who also want to deal with trauma, and I do a lot of deep, deep work with them, and good work. I love it. It's good work. It's fine. So in terms of my political work, I see this as political work. I mean, what keeps you silenced? What keeps you from doing what you want to do? What keeps you isolated and alone? That's what this work is.

As we all got older, I began to be involved with older lesbians organizing. There was a conference in San Francisco in 1989 where this group of women that I'd met up with in Oregon — you know, they'd been organizing and having meetings. I hadn't been involved in them, but in 1989 I went to their conference, and there was a struggle, and a lot of us wanted to have an organization that would be political. That's where Old Lesbians Organizing for Change came into existence — in 1989 in San Francisco. I've been with them ever since. And it's a wonderful organization. We meet four times a year. Our Bay Area chapter is the biggest chapter. It's a national organization, but we're the biggest chapter, and it's a fantastic organization, because what we're all doing is we're saying, life isn't over because you're 70, you know? We're also doing a lot of work about facing dying and what do you need to do — what do you need to do to take care of yourself when you become infirm. Well, you clearly need a community to support you. That's what we're doing. One of my “babies” here is organizing support groups and helping them to thrive. The latest that we just did last year, was we found out we had — there was this elephant in the room at our meetings. Nobody could talk about the Palestine/Israel conflict, because there were Jews and there were non-Jews, and very leftist political women, pro-Palestine, and how do we talk about it? And nobody was. So I went to a conference and I found a woman — Sharon Ellison — who was teaching non-defensive communication. I talked to her. I started getting training. I'm going to continue training a bit. I'm going to go on working with her. But we got her to come to the organization. I got the whole organization to go through the training. And here's all these tough old dykes who want to say what they want to say and they don't want to listen. Well, you can't do that. You have to learn how to talk about what you really care about without screaming at people — all things that we didn't know how to do in the early days. We knew how to be dogmatic, and you've got to do this. No, you don't do it that way. And that's what we're learning now. It's very exciting work. We're also talking about housing. Polly was the first one. Polly and Sandy, who was my second lover — and Polly and Sandy are very good friends, by the way — and a couple of other women and I had been talking about co-housing for a long time, but none of us had the money to buy a house in San Francisco. But Polly was the first one who actually needed to get housing somewhere. Wherever she was living, they kept selling her house. So she started investigating senior housing, and got herself into this affordable housing — that's what it's called — which is reasonably priced housing, in San Francisco, right at the edge of the Mission District. And I

was pretty well set until just two years ago. My landlord was dying and I went over there. Polly and I were still sharing a car, so I was seeing her a lot, and I love her. I see a lot of her. I went over and talked to her and she said, “Well why don’t you see if the waiting list is open. They just opened the waiting list.” I’ve had some lucky things. I was in after only three months, and there was another lesbian, also, who got in when I did. So I’m right down — I’m two doors away from Polly in this lovely place. I have a garden. I’m a serious gardener — all in pots since I moved — along the side and front of our building. The other tenants love my flowers too. I’m set for life.

WEIGAND: Yeah, that’s great.

NELSON: And it’s reasonably priced. Sandy has just moved in a month ago. Our old dyke readers group meets in our community room. We have a whole bunch of our friends on the waiting list. So, while in San Francisco, the gay community — gay/lesbian community — is talking about building a senior housing, we’re doing it.

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: We’re doing it on our own. So I’m getting invited to go out and talk about housing. I’m on the Gay Speaker’s Bureau now. I also go around — one of the things that I love doing is going to classes. I’ve been to the third and the fourth grade, and I’ve been to college students and graduate students — it doesn’t matter what age they are — talking to them about the suffragists, and about the civil disobedience they did, and how their movement was a movement for free speech. And so it’s a way for me to go to talk to people about the rights of citizens and how it takes courage and dedication and you can do it. Anybody can do it. You just need to get focused about what’s going on. And that’s what I’m doing now.

WEIGAND: Yeah. Can you respond to the — I mean, there are people — and I disagree with this myself — but people who write about feminists who, after the 1970s and early 1980s, sort of turn inward and they get interested in issues like therapy and recovery and people say, “Oh, there’s this focus on victimization and it’s not political.”

NELSON: Yeah, I can talk about that because it happened to me. First, it’s about naming the violence, the incest, etc. How come women being brutalized, raped, etc., is not political?

WEIGAND: Yeah. Uh-huh.

NELSON: Well, I think — the way I see it is what that I went as far as I could go with the kind of organizing I was doing and the body that I had, and one morning I woke up — I mean I was beginning to think about therapy and so forth — and I heard this whimpering child in my room, and it was me.

There's something here I haven't explored. What I also knew was that everywhere I'd been — I was continually silenced by these big-mouthed guys, and sometimes women. I didn't know how to stand my ground. I knew how to organize, talking to people, but I got intimidated. And that really bothered me, because I'd been silenced, and I had to change that. That is what it meant to me, to go inward, was to find that, to really get down to the root of how I was silenced as a child — because I certainly was — and find my voice. And I've found it now. Nobody's going to silence me. But it's a different way of being, and that's what therapy means to me. It's absolutely essential for anybody who's been silenced and doesn't know how to get past that, for anybody who's been traumatized. If you're doing good therapy, it can change your life. It certainly has rescued mine. I'm strong now. I've discovered a self that I didn't have. I've built a strong self, and the therapy has helped me do it. So that's what I want to say about it. I don't know if everybody's going to do it, but watch out for the new old people who have done the therapy, because there's a whole generation of baby boomers, and they're going to need a lot. They're going to need, you know, social security. They're going to need affordable housing. They're going to need decent healthcare and all these things that are being threatened.

WEIGAND: So you don't see it as being removed from politics at all?

NELSON: It doesn't have to be, no. No, I see it very positively. And the people who come to me, you know, some of them are political. Some of them will be political when they finish their work. It doesn't have to be an either/or kind of thing if it helps you to find yourself and your strength and do what you came on this earth to do — whatever that is. I don't know — it's healthy. Therapy is changed. The feminist movement has changed therapy, so that it's very different than it used to be. It's very different.

WEIGAND: Yeah, less about adjusting to the status quo and more about –

NELSON: Very much less about adjusting to the status quo.

WEIGAND: Yeah, yeah.

NELSON: Exactly. It's about creating a world where people can live and love and grow.

WEIGAND: Yeah. Yeah. Well, can I ask you some sort of very general, reflective questions that I always hate to ask because I feel like they're sort of grandiose, but –

NELSON: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

WEIGAND: So, looking back, what are the things that you are the most proud of? What are the best things you feel like you've accomplished?

NELSON: Well, I — I feel like I've accomplished a lot. I've been very grateful for all the people who have helped me along the way. So many people have helped me and inspired me and supported me. I've gotten quite a few breaks, and I've learned — I've changed myself. I'm very proud of that. I'm no longer that timid, scared housewife I used to be. But the liberation of many, many people — I've been involved with it in one way or another. And movements, and teaching — I'm proud of the teaching that I've done and the students that I've been able to reach, to help them find a spark inside themselves, to tell them their life is valuable. That's what I feel — what it feels like I do, is try to help people find their spirit inside themselves, and how to engage. I do a lot of consciousness-raising. I help them see that we're all connected. We're all part of this, this incredible mystery of life, and that we need each other and we can help each other. That's kind of what I do, and I'm proud of that. I'm pleased that I've been able to do it, and I still do it and want to keep on doing it.

WEIGAND: How about regrets? Are there — do you have major regrets about things you've done or haven't done?

NELSON: Oh, well, I regret all the people that I hurt, like my friend Anita when I was just this ultra — you know, kind of snobby about politics. I certainly regret that. I couldn't have been anybody else at that time. We all were. I wasn't the only one, but I'm sorry that I didn't know what I know now in terms of how to be a true radical. I don't regret going through that. I'm just sorry that I hurt people and I'm sorry the ways that I abandoned my children, because I know that I did. I don't regret that either, though, because, what else was I going to do?

WEIGAND: Right.

NELSON: What else was I going to do? In that period when I got sick, right after I got out of the hospital and I started to put my life together, I realized that the one thing I don't want to do is get to be whatever age, you know, ready to die, and say, "I wish I'd done something different." I don't. I don't.

WEIGAND: That's great.

NELSON: My life isn't over, and I love where I am. I love being 76 years old. I just love it. My body creaks. I go swimming, you know, and I exercise every day, and it's amazing. Life is still very open. I mean, who would've dreamed, a year ago, I'd be sitting here with you, Kate, talking about women's liberation? And all these boxes that I've (laughs) — that there's a place for them to be? Who would've known this? A year ago I was trying to figure out what I was going to do? What am I going to do with this stuff? I even moved it, you know, in my last move where I was getting rid of everything. So life is always changing, and we're in a situation right

now where there are terrible people in government, but it's going to change.

WEIGAND: I hope you're right.

NELSON: It's going to change. It has to. It has to.

WEIGAND: Yeah.

NELSON: And it can. People can change. If I can change — this scared, timid person. I've worked at it my whole life, but anybody can do it. Anybody can change, and we all need to. We all need to work together and change, and take the world back. Not just this country, but all around the world. It's very exciting. There are huge movements going on. The American people don't know a lot about it. They need to find out about it, but there's possibility. There's always, always a possibility, you know.

WEIGAND: So do you think you have a next thing that you're going to do, or are you going to keep on the way you have been?

NELSON: Well, what I want — you know, I think by keeping my archives, you've liberated me, because I've been working on my memoir, but I realize what I really need to do is get my stories together and get them to you and then figure out what I want to write. I mean, I keep — I'm writing. I'm also an artist. I didn't talk at all about my art.

WEIGAND: Oh, no.

NELSON: I've done some lovely art. I might get back to that. But I'm — I'm open. I'm not sure what I'm going to do as an activist. I will continue working with OLOC [Old Lesbians Organizing for Change]. And I like the shepherding that I feel like we're doing. I like what we're doing. We go to demonstrations with our banner — Old Lesbians Organizing for Change — and people love us. They love to see us. They stop and they have their pictures taken with us. I don't know. I'm really at a new time. I've never been in this place in my life, and I'm so grateful. I wish everybody could have this, to be able to look back on my life and think, This is what I've done. Somebody said to me, "Well, if you write your memoirs, then aren't you finished?" No. It feels like this is a consolidation, and what's next? I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. We do a lot of work in OLOC about death and dying. I have friends who are dying, and I'm involved very much in that — helping people die. I helped Melba Stern die. I want to do more speaking. I love going to talk to the students, and I love going to the kids. We have such a good time. So I think I'm going to do more of that. I definitely think I'm going to do more of that, if my health continues. I had a period of really, a lot of bad health. I had gallbladder surgery and Bell's palsy in 2001 and I was in a terrible accident in 2002, so I'm just kind of getting my steam up again, so I'm not sure. I will keep

writing and I will do my art and keep speaking and I may just keep on where I am. But I may do something different, too. I feel like it's open.

WEIGAND: Are there any things I haven't asked you about that you wanted to say or talk about?

NELSON: Yeah, there's a couple of things that I — is there some way we can pause this?

WEIGAND: Oh, sure.

NELSON: One thing I haven't talked about that's very important in my life, and that's friendship. And Anita and I have reconnected over the years, and we've been apart and then we've reconnected, and we started writing a book about being friends. And you know, I see — one of the things that's so clear is — I'm not in a couple relationship now, but I'm intimately connected with the women who are my friends. And the men — well, Ed has died, but when he was alive, we were still close friends. And the friendship is the thing. Couples — yes, some people want to be in couples, and I have in the past, and all of the sex and all of that is great and I'm not talking against that, but we need our friends. Our friends — whoever we're in a couple with, or the partner in the couple dies — your friends are still there. And it's so important. One of the things I've been thinking about is getting — I've still got the notes that Anita and I came out with, and maybe working on that — writing something about it. I don't know, but certainly talking about it. We need to be able to trust each other. We need to build communities where we can trust, depend on one another. That's the project, and that's what I'm doing in OLOC. But that needs to go bigger. Maybe I'll work on that. I'm going to say that — I won't talk about it.

WEIGAND: Well, and Anita is here. I wonder, since you've been sitting quietly over there for all these hours, if we shouldn't at least, you know, get you in the picture for a minute, and document your existence.

NELSON: Can we do that? You want to come over and sit down? Come be in the picture? Well, your name has come up so many times.

ANITA: I see.

WEIGAND: You know, just to —

ANITA: OK.

WEIGAND: You know, since you're here.

NELSON: Just come over here. Just come over here.

ANITA: OK. So that there's a face to this name she's been throwing out there.

WEIGAND: Yeah.

NELSON: Yeah, there. Put your — here, talk — sit right here.

WEIGAND: You don't have to talk if you don't want to, but, since you're here —

NELSON: Well, you can talk. My microphone is right here.

WEIGAND: There's Anita.

ANITA: Hi.

NELSON: Whoops. I've lost —

ANITA: Yeah, I brought a book that she hasn't seen today, or this visit, but some years ago she sent me a beautiful Joan Chitister — she's a woman I've met and admired a great deal, and she wrote a book on the friendship of women, and —

NELSON: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

ANITA: You sent me a copy of that, which I still have and read, but as I've grown older and as time has passed, it is a precious gift. Friendship should not to be taken lightly, and it doesn't supercede or negate any beautiful relationships like the —

NELSON: Right. Right.

ANITA: — marriage I had. The second marriage I had, which she shared. So, yes, friendship is critical to older women, I think, so much so. And I think it's something you work at, and stay connected, and if you don't see each other every day, you don't need to —

NELSON: Don't need to. That's right.

ANITA: And there's a spiritual connection. With the friends that you feel connected with, there's almost an instant rapport that you recognize and appreciate, and then you don't ever forget that. You don't ever lose it. You just keep it. We think about each other all the time. People laugh about that, but months will go by, but then when you pick up talking, it's just like you picked up from yesterday.

WEIGAND: Yeah, yeah.

NELSON: That's nice.

WEIGAND: That's sweet.

NELSON: Yeah.

WEIGAND: OK.

ANITA: Plus pride in your friend. I think we would — she was saying she has regrets. I have regrets, too, but she's very proud of what I've done with my life, and doesn't hesitate to tell me.

NELSON: You bet. You bet.

ANITA: And I'm very proud of her, and I don't hesitate to tell her how proud. So we're not threatened. I'm not threatened by my friends, but I celebrate their success.

NELSON: Yeah, right. That's nice, Kate.

WEIGAND: Yeah.

NELSON: Thank you.

ANITA: Thank you.

WEIGAND: Good.

NELSON: And thank you — I want this on here — thank you for your wonderful book, because that's how this connection came, is because you wrote a wonderful a book.

WEIGAND: That's right. And you wrote me that very nice little fan e-mail. (laughs)

NELSON: You wrote *Red Feminism* and I responded. Yeah, yeah. So thank you, too.

WEIGAND: Thank you.

NELSON: Yeah. It's lovely to be part of this community and what this archives that Smith College is doing.

WEIGAND: Yeah. Well, we're very excited to be getting your amazing collection of stuff that you've saved all this time, so —

NELSON: Yeah, well I feel very honored that you want my stuff.

WEIGAND: Yeah.

NELSON: All these boxes (laughs), all these lecture notes.

ANITA: And thank you for letting me sit in on this.

WEIGAND: Oh, sure. It was my pleasure.

NELSON: Yeah.

ANITA: Did I behave?

NELSON: Yes, you behaved. (laughs) You behaved. We told her she had to keep her mouth shut, and she did.

WEIGAND: All right. Well I think maybe we're done so I'll turn this off.

END TAPE 5

END OF INTERVIEW

## Addendum

February 12, 2006

How could I not talk about my family? My two daughters, now in their fifties, are both professional women: Carol, a lawyer, and Barbara, professor of linguistics and director of a center for English as a second language. Both women married in their thirties and each had a child in her 40<sup>th</sup> year. They say they're exhausted with work and family and chide me gently about women's "liberation." My first grandchild, Eleanor, now 15, plays serious basketball, soccer, and softball, jazz piano and clarinet. She's beautiful and bright. Her Dad died last February (2005) and that's a tragedy. He was a great Dad and they had a close family. Alexander, 13, sang in a boys choir till this year and went to Japan with them. Now he's working on drums. He's bright and funny and a computer addict — he's already built his own. My son Peter, now pushing 50, is definitely a feminist guy. He teaches physics and acoustics, is both scientist and musician.

After all the anguish and guilt I experienced in leaving them behind as I struggled to find a life (and a healthy self), I am constantly amazed at what lovely human beings they all turned out to be. I'm extremely grateful for their acceptance of my lifestyle, and feel blessed that they are all in my life right now, although we don't see each other as much as I'd like.

I also feel blessed by the honors and recognition I've received from the lesbian community. IN the spring of 2004, I received the "Pat Bond" award to old lesbians in recognition of service to our community. And in June 2005 I was invited to represent old lesbians speaking on the platform of our SF Dyke March; an annual event now gathering tens of thousands of lesbians to parade (many bare-chested), through the Castro district on the evening before Gay Pride. What a trip that was!

Although I've never returned to the church, I am a deeply spiritual person, and somewhat of a mystic. In this regard I'm probably most like my father in finding the spirit of creation in all living things — an ongoing relationship. It's a great mystery and we're all part of this web of life.

I'm still writing. Last summer I researched and published an article about Social Security and now I'm finishing a story for *Sinister Wisdom*. On Valentine's Day I'm teaching a class about Sexism and the women's movement at City College. My biggest goal for this year is to get the bulk of my archives shipped off to you. I feel so honored that you want me! Thank you.

I'm thinking about my "perfect" family with my "great" father and all the internal violence that no one saw or acknowledged. And I'm seeing such a parallel to our government and all the denial of our population about the terrible violence it is spreading (and has been) throughout the world. How is it that we think of ourselves with such blinders? They are both patriarchal structures and it is women and children who bear the brunt of it. As we are led into perpetual war for the "great American empire" it will continue to be more and more women and children murdered, raped, sold into sexual slavery, and abandoned here at home (as in Katrina victims who still don't have homes.) Sometimes I think I just want to ship everything off to you and just

go and stand in front of the White House like my old suffragist models. It was only after the war was declared that they were attacked so violently, beaten, arrested, etc.

Last, but hardly least, at 77 I'm exploring a new relationship. For me it's been about 15 years of celibacy, for Tita, 25. It's different: no drama, extremely sweet and grown up. She, too, is political and a writer. We have both learned a great deal about communicating our needs and desires. We both have full lives and friendships, so there's not a whole lot of time to be together. But that seems not to be a problem, and I'm delighted to report that everything in this old body still works just fine.

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