

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

MARY THOM

Interviewed by

KELLY ANDERSON

April 15, 2005
New York, New York

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Narrator

Born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1944, Mary Thom is a writer, editor, journalist and oral historian. Thom attended Bryn Mawr College and did graduate work in history at Columbia University before joining the staff of *Ms.* Magazine in 1972. Thom spent thirty years at the magazine, as an editor, writer and reporter, and became executive editor in 1990. She is the author of *Inside "Ms.": 25 Years of the Magazine and the Feminist Movement* (1997) and edited *Letters to "Ms."* (1987), a documentary history. Thom lives in New York City and is currently working on a biography of Bella Abzug.

Interviewer

Kelly Anderson (b.1969) is an educator, historian, and community activist. She has an M.A. in women's history from Sarah Lawrence College and is a Ph.D. candidate in U.S. History at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Abstract

In this oral history, Thom reflects on her family background and childhood in Ohio and her introduction to political activism in college. She describes her activism on the Bryn Mawr campus and her experiences in the civil rights movement. The majority of the interview focuses on Thom's tenure at *Ms.*, highlighting some of the controversial issues and inner workings of the magazine.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Three 60-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Revan Schendler. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Mary Thom.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Thom, Mary. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Video recording, April 15, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Mary Thom, interview by Kelly Anderson, video recording, April 15, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Thom, Mary. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Transcript of video recording, April 15, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Mary Thom, interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, April 15, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23-24.

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Transcript of interview conducted APRIL 15, 2005, with:

MARY THOM
New York, New York

by: KELLY ANDERSON

ANDERSON: For the record, this is Kelly Anderson at Mary Thom's apartment on the Upper West Side. It's April 15th and we're doing an interview for the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project. So let's start, Mary, by talking about your family background.

THOM: OK.

ANDERSON: I know that you came from Cleveland, Ohio.

THOM: I was born in Cleveland, but I actually grew up in Akron, because we moved there right after my kindergarten. So I was brought up in Akron, and I was there until college. My family is from Ohio. I mean, I think they first came from Scotland and other places like that in the late nineteenth century and settled in Sandusky and then sort of moved out to other towns around there.

ANDERSON: And tell me about your parents. What's your family like?

THOM: My family was very sort of traditional, conservative — but economic conservatives, as opposed to social conservatives — people from Ohio. My father worked for the Bethlehem Steel Company almost his entire life. He was an engineer. He graduated from Case Western Reserve. And his first job was actually with the TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority]. So I used to kid him about that, because further on, we had political differences and I would remind him that his first job was with a Roosevelt works project. Then he started working almost immediately for the Bethlehem Steel Company, and he became a salesman for them, and he had the territory around Akron, and that's when we moved there.

My mother, who was born in Alliance, Ohio, which is another little town around Akron and Cleveland, her father was a dentist and she grew up, but her parents died when she was — her mother died when she was like, three, and her father died when she was a teenager. And she lived with her aunt and uncle, who were in Alliance and then in Bay Village. And she was a homemaker. She wanted to go to college, but there was no

money for it. And in fact she had wanted to study drama and she had been accepted at the Cleveland Playhouse in their program. Her uncle took her to her grandfather to see if she could get money for it and her grandfather just said, no, that she — that there might be money for her younger brother.

So, my mom went to work and actually did contribute to my uncle's education. And she first worked, I think, for Halle's [department store] or something like that. She was a personal shopper — you know, one of those things. And then she went to work for the Bethlehem Steel Company, because her great-uncle knew the president and that was a respectable thing for her to do. I think she was at the switchboard or something. And that's where she met my father.

So, we had a very — let's see. I have a sister, Susan, who is two years older than I am, and we all moved to Akron, as I said, when I was about six, and before we moved there, we had this horrible time with my father having been transferred there, of commuting back and forth from Cleveland to Akron because they wanted us to start in the elementary school at the beginning of the year. We would regularly throw up in the back seat of the car. So my father would have to stop at this gas station to make sure that we were — but anyway, that wasn't so terrible.

So we lived in a sort of urban-suburban community, on a street where everybody went to the same school and where we could sort of play outside, and this was — we were growing up in the '50s. And as I said, my mom did a lot of volunteer work but she was there all the time, and must've been bored but she didn't let on (laughs). And that was it.

We went to the local elementary school, and then we went to private school. We were scholarship students at this school called Old Trail School, which was a girls' school from the ninth grade on, and actually, there was only like one or two boys in our class from seventh grade. And that was very interesting, I think, in terms of women's education.

ANDERSON: Why did you transfer to an all girls' school?

THOM: Well, it was — the public school we would've gone to for middle school was not very good, and you know, my mom also — my mother and father both were very much interested in education and so it was worth a certain sacrifice. And as I said, we both, Susan and I, my sister, were on scholarship there. And it wasn't that much money at the time. We worked in the lunchroom and we got our lunches free for that, you know, and all that sort of thing. So, but I got — it was an incredible education.

I didn't take — I was a history major in college and because of the classes I had at Old Trail and the Advanced Placement, I opted out of all the preliminary history, as well as literature. I mean, I could go directly into upper classes. I certainly don't regret that. It was a very small — our class, my class was, when I was a senior, was like, 18 girls. And my Math Four class was two of us with this very smart guy who, you know, sort of taught us smatterings of [higher] mathematics.

And of course, and then I went on to Bryn Mawr for college, I immediately was discouraged from math. I mean, I think it was — we can get into this more later, but it was one of those things about women: if you weren't — Bryn Mawr was very serious about the sciences, but if you weren't absolutely, if you weren't going to be a math major, they didn't want to bother with you. So it was interesting to me, when I look at my SAT records, it's sort of — I was better in math than verbal when I went in. When I did the graduate records, it completely reversed. So, it's an interesting attitude about education.

ANDERSON: Yeah. Who knows where your life would have gone? You could've ended up not being a writer. You could've been a mathematician or a scientist in a different era.

THOM: I could've been but probably not, because, you know, I didn't want to be a math major, but it was interesting to think about that, so. So, there we are, let's see, in Ohio in the '50s.

ANDERSON: How would you describe your family in terms of class?

THOM: Um, middle class striving towards upper middle class, I would say. My mother was pretty interested in social status and I think this is probably, you know, because of the family she came from but also because her mother died when she was young and she was always — you know, had to make herself fit in. So she — part of her volunteer work was because it was a good thing to do. Part of it, I think, was working in the community and knowing the people that she wanted to know. She did it for us, a lot of it. I mean, it was very important for them, for my mom, that we'd go to the local cotillion when we were 16 or 18, whenever it was, and so she worked towards that.

But my father was less interested, I think. I mean, he was a very good provider. As I said, he worked for Bethlehem Steel his whole life, but he rejected an opportunity to be transferred back to the home office in Bethlehem, for instance, because it wasn't something that he wanted to do. He didn't want to move the family. So he didn't really have a —

And Mom wasn't materialistic in the monetary sense, either. I mean, I think we always felt that we had enough and that, you know, money just wasn't something that we were — and I'm trying to think, is it because we were, you know, in that polite era where you didn't talk about it, whether that was it, or — but I think, really, it was that it wasn't terrifically important to the family, as long as we had enough.

And that was a struggle. As I said, we had scholarships and my parents, you know, they probably, after we left to go to college, they did a lot of traveling, which we hadn't done before, but we always took family vacations. We drove across the country to California one summer and we would often drive to Florida where, later on, my mother's family had a house. And we would drive up to the Cape. Usually we'd take vacations

with other families or with our family. So, that was the sort of — you know, economically, that's what I would say.

ANDERSON: And what about politically? How would you describe your family politically?

THOM: Taft Republican, which is to say, it wouldn't have much to do with the evangelical religious Republicanism similar to today, but it's very conservative in terms of economic policy. Very much supporting the government, supporting — I'm trying to think. My father wasn't in World War II, he was exempted, I think, because he was working for either the steel — probably for the steel industry, and he had other, physical problems. My uncle had been World War II and so, you know, it was — they were very patriotic. They were very much into support of Eisenhower. That's the first one I remember.

ANDERSON: Did they also support Kennedy?

THOM: No. They didn't support Kennedy. They supported — no, they were very much, you know, Republicans. And one of my best friends was the daughter of our Republican Congressman. So that's how I grew up and it was interesting, because I remember being interested in Barry Goldwater and reading that stuff and thinking — at the same time I was becoming interested, probably through friends and through folk music and things like that, in more left things.

And I was involved, at least to a certain extent, with the Ban the Bomb [movement.] I knew the Ban the Bomb marches were going on in Cleveland and I wanted to go to them. I was too young or something. I told Amy [Swerdlow] this, but one of the reasons was that Arnold Steinhardt, who later was part of the Guarneri Quartet [was] the very young concertmaster of the Cleveland Orchestra at that time and he was part of the Ban the Bomb movement, and he was very good looking, so I think a lot of high school kids got excited about that.

So I had these conflicts, and then in high school, it was interesting, too, because I — there were a couple of moments when I realized that I had different opinions from people in my class.

ANDERSON: Like what?

THOM: The first was, a wonderful history teacher, Julia Shepard [Gregory,] was probably a major influence on my life, showed us a movie about HUAC, and it was a movie that was supposed to show you how dreadful HUAC — the House Un-American Activities Committee — hearings were. But half my class and the class ahead of me — she showed it to us when I was a junior and the other people were seniors — got hysterical about communism, seeing this movie. And I was, you know, it's like, what?

spelling?

That wasn't the point at all. [The movie was supposed to scare us about HUAC and McCarthyism.] So there was that moment.

And then another time when we were seniors — or juniors, I can't remember — and we're having a picnic for possible incoming students to this very all-white, middle-class school. A black girl was there as a potential freshman. And again, one of my very best friends got extremely upset at the idea that there would be a black kid in the class. Once again, I just, I thought this — it hadn't been something that I expected from her or that a lot of people expected from her. But there were people like that in my school who were very good friends.

ANDERSON: Where do you think that came from? Why were you diverging from your peers and your family?

THOM: Well, I don't know, I mean, I don't know, because — another thing I will tell you that I certainly remember — I'm trying to think if my — we knew about prejudice and we knew about differences, and there were sort of general, almost anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic [attitudes], although there were lots of Jews in my school, in my class, and who were friends of mine. And my father, I mean, he would make these remarks about mackerel snappers and things like that, but then on Friday, he had a regular lunch with the local monsignor, you know. And we would go every summer and go down to Zanesville to a farm which belonged to a friend who was his customer, and they were Jewish and we'd have seder with them and everything. And so, there were these conflicting attitudes.

I remember in junior high school, a close friend of mine was Linda Rothman, and I went a couple of times to synagogue with her and I remember my mom saying at that point, you know, "It's nice that Linda's your friend but she doesn't have to be your best friend." And I think at that point, I was just at the point where you could start dating and my mom was probably — those things were going through her head. And I really said to her, "You know, if you wanted us to feel this way, you should have started a lot sooner." (laughs) And that she never said — I mean, I think she was embarrassed by it. So there was this strange double standard and I think it was mostly my father who was just open to people and so it was hard to be as affected as some people were growing up in Ohio at that point, by the level of prejudice and racism and anti-Semitism that was around.

ANDERSON: What do you remember about some of the big flash points in the 1950s and '60s in your family? How did you guys talk about civil rights — were you watching that on TV? Or the Rosenbergs?

THOM: Yes, I was. I'm trying to think if I watched the hearings. I don't remember watching the Army McCarthy hearings. I think that was a little early for me. But we did watch — I mean, I got involved in — I mean, as I said, I had this sort of very quick transition in my teen years from flirting with

Goldwater to becoming much more radical. A lot of it had — and I subscribed to *Sing Out* and my mother was afraid that I'd be on some list, because that magazine came to our house — which wasn't a completely, you know, wild assumption on her part.

And actually what happened, too, is I went to summer school, at least one year, with kids from public school, and I had a very close friend whose family was artistic — I don't know if her father was a photographer or not for his main job — and listened to jazz a lot. So we listened to jazz. I listened to blues. As I said, I got involved in that. And these kids were probably the first — not the first, there was one Democratic girl in our high school in seventh grade — but were about the first kids who had other ideas, and so we had discussions.

And then I worked for several summers at the local Shakespeare festival, which was a very important thing to me and to the community. It was run by Arthur Lithgow, who was actually John Lithgow's father, and he had been at Princeton. He ran the theater — I can't remember the theater he ran in Princeton, but in the summer, he would come and do the Great Lakes Shakespeare festival. It started off at Stan Hewitt, which is a Tudor mansion built by one of the rubber barons in our town, if I could describe the social strata of Akron. And then it moved to a theater, and we would just volunteer. So for like, three or four summers, I mean, I saw the whole — I worked mostly cleaning out the theater and selling concessions and things like that. Other kids were working the lights. My friend Ruth [Hornbein] was doing that. And then other kids were doing other things.

And at the summer school Robin Lithgow and John, who's younger, were there. And so that was part of — it was a different — I had an influence from different kinds of people than I had at school. And that was important to me. And really, they did a lot of Shakespeare. They did the whole histories of *Henry IV* through *Richard III* and all this stuff, and a lot of the comedies. *Twelfth Night* became my absolute favorite and that stayed with me. So that was important.

ANDERSON: So you had all these people coming from different areas and different ideas, and the artistic community, so you had all these different things coming in.

THOM: Yeah, absolutely, and that was part of the reason that I described my school as sort of parochial. And it was, in terms of the kids that were going there, but it wasn't in terms of the teachers. I mean, they got very good teachers and we had this wonderful — I mentioned Julia Shepard, and very good literature teachers. We had French through all the seven years I was there, and the math teacher was wonderful. So, it was — there were those influences. I'm trying to remember, I do remember in primary school being taught to get under the desk for, you know, as though that was going to save us from the atomic bomb. So I remember that sort of thing. I have a vague recollection of some, you know, or maybe it came

after the *Reefer Madness* thing with marijuana, I don't remember that, but it certainly would've flown in our community.

And Akron, as I said, was a strange town, because there were — at that point, all the rubber companies were headquartered there. And so you had the Seiberlings [F.A. Seiberling of Goodyear Tire & Rubber] and O'Neals [Michael G. O'Neal of General Tire & Rubber] and the various families that were extremely well off and they supported the arts and the art museum and the restaurants and the cultural institutions, so there was a lot of that. So —

ANDERSON: What were race relations like in Akron at the time?

THOM: What were?

ANDERSON: Race relations.

THOM: Do I know?

ANDERSON: Well, what was your memory of them?

THOM: I remember — I didn't know — there was one black kid in my primary school. There was no problem with him. I mean, it was mostly because of class. There was a black man who worked for my father who would come and do odd jobs, and you know, he was fine. We had black — my mom had both black and white people helping out. She never had regular help but she had people come in and help with cleaning. We had baby-sitters. I remember one time my dog barked at this black man as he was coming and my father was just incredibly embarrassed, but it was — you know, now it's a very mixed neighborhood and I suppose it was beginning to be mixed, but — and I think there was [racial] tension in the [middle] school that I would've gone to, which is probably part of the reason I was sent to Old Trail instead of the public school.

And I do remember that my friend — one of my best friends, who lived across the street from me, because we were born on the same day and we used to have our birthday parties together — and I remember listening to her and she did go to that high school, to the junior high. The high school was better, but the junior high, I remember her talking how terrible it was between black and white kids, and it was interesting because I think she had more — she was more prejudiced than I was, because I never — I didn't have to confront any of that. I don't know what I would've done if I had to, I can't say — until, as I said, that incident with the girl who was applying to school and how my friends reacted.

I didn't think much about race, although I did watch stuff. Well, it was just beginning. I left in '62, so —

ANDERSON: But you would have seen all the desegregation stuff.

THOM: I had seen the desegregation stuff and I was certainly all in favor of desegregation and that stuff before I made it to college, but it wasn't something that was happening around me.

ANDERSON: What were the messages that you got about being female? Tell me about the gender roles and expectations in your family and community.

THOM: Yeah, that's interesting. My father somehow — and my mother, too, but mostly my father — made my sister and I think that we could do anything we wanted to. I mean, as unrealistic as that was, that was his attitude. He really — and that wasn't something that I connected with gender as much as I connected with just him being a supportive parent.

And my mother had sort of — I don't know what she thought about gender. I think she always felt bad that she hadn't gone to school [college.] She wanted us to do that. She felt a little intimidated by the level of our education as we went on. She was always the peacekeeper in the house. I mean, she played that role. She died last year, and towards the end of her life she began becoming more demanding and you know, she would just ask for what she wanted, then she would speak in anger. She'd never done that that we could [remember]— I mean, I remember one incident where she came up — my sister and I were in her bedroom and we had broken a lamp. I — my sister had broken the lamp, and Mom came in and —

ANDERSON: For the record, it was your sister.

THOM: For the record, and importantly so, because my mom came in and grabbed me and spanked me, and it's the only time I can remember being spanked by her, and it was so outrageous, because it was my sister who had done it. But there was seldom this anger. I remember one time my parents were having an argument quietly, discretely, in their bedroom, and I came in and my mom was crying and I almost got hysterical, you know, so that she had to come over and say, "Oh, really, this is nothing. There's no problem." So it was a very tranquil kind of a — but probably, under the surface, there were tensions, but they were never brought out in the open. I mean, we were very close-lipped, midwestern. We were affectionate and touching each other and kissing and all of that sort of stuff, but there was no confrontation. And my mom had a lot to do with that. So that was one of her roles.

ANDERSON: Did she expect you and your sister to behave like that as well?

THOM: No. No, she didn't. I mean, she was often making peace between us and my father. That was her role. I mean, she had different ideas for us, you know. And as I said, the main thing I can think of about my family was how incredibly supportive they were and how we had this confidence, you know, because of that. It was silly to think — when we applied to schools,

you know, the counselor would say, “Well, you have to have a safe school.” And my father would say, “Apply any place you want,” you know. It was really a gift, I think.

ANDERSON: Did they always expect you to go on to college then?

THOM: Oh, yeah. I don’t think there was any — I don’t think we could’ve even — I mean, we weren’t rebellious at all. I remember one time I got lost. This was in Cleveland, so I must have been under six, and I don’t know if they had the police out but they certainly had the neighbors out looking for me. And eventually they found me around the back of our house, you know, the houses behind us on the porch. And I remember either hearing them say, or thinking afterwards, or maybe my sister told them, “Well, you knew she wouldn’t have crossed the street.” It would’ve been very easy to find me. So we didn’t do a lot of rebelling.

My mom had this white convertible Chevy, ’56 Chevy. It was a very hot car, and I drove it and my sister drove it, mostly because we could get to school that way and my mom wouldn’t have to chauffeur us around or my father would usually take the kids to school on his way to work. We had a driving pool sort of thing. And we would drive around in that, and I remember, like one time — we probably had, you know, we were drinking beer and doing that sort of thing, but I had tons of kids piled into that car, and I remember missing a turn and landing in the middle of a field and getting — I mean, that is the scariest memory I can think of having in my high school growing up. So that’s as bad as I was. (laughs) That was probably the extent of my wrongdoing.

ANDERSON: Did you rebel once you got to college?

THOM: Well, um, I suppose so. I certainly did things that — I was trying to think, also, I didn’t know the facts. My mother — she took us to, I think they showed it in Girl Scouts, I was a Girl Scout until I was 18 and they showed us, you know, a facts-of-life film. That’s basically how I learned about the facts of life. I think I read *Facts of Life for Teenagers* or one of those books, and my sister was a source of information, and I think my mother probably talked to her more about things and then sort of depended on her to talk to me. So my sister said to me — was it before I went to college or after? — she also went to Bryn Mawr — as I was going, she said, “You’ll be *doing* things.” She meant I was going to be having sex. “And you can pretty much do what you want to do as long as you keep it from our parents.” (laughs) That was basically the attitude I went into it with.

And so, when I did get to college, I was also involved in a lot of antiwar movement and civil rights movement activity organizing things.

ANDERSON: Tell me about that.

THOM: And that, again, was something, just to complete my thought, that my sister didn't particularly — gave me a sign that I shouldn't bring up at home. So I didn't, although eventually, they learned what I was doing. Um, so, when I got to college, one of the first things I remember was — politically — was an enormous conference that Kathy Boudin actually organized and engineered to bring — it was called the Second American Revolution, maybe that was it? — to bring kids from the civil rights movement, from the South, SNCC and organizers to campus, along with other kinds of political organizers. It was a two-day conference, and it was very mind-altering, I think, for probably many people who were there. It wasn't that I was — I had already been, you know, pro-civil rights and supportive and all that stuff, but to actually have the people there who were doing things and who knew things was incredibly exciting.

And Joyce Ladner, [the sociologist] who was a big — she was a student at that point, and some other kids from Tougaloo were there and we formed ties with them. Later on, in college, I went down to Tougaloo and stayed with them. Not for long, because Bryn Mawr never let you off campus for long. They would never organize exchanges, for instance, because they just didn't. They were too snobbish, educationally snobbish, to put up with that. But that was one of the things.

The other thing is that Bryn Mawr — more so Haverford, where I dated a lot of people — was Quaker, so the peace movement was a big thing there. And the guy I dated I went with my whole senior year and then later on in New York we got together again, is a guy named Ben Stavis, whose father, Morty Stavis, was with the Center for Constitutional Rights, and a friend of the Boudins and various other — he was a civil rights lawyer and labor lawyer. He did other kinds of law, too. So this was incredibly romantic to me, this family. I think was more so than Ben, but — and I would go. In my freshman year, I went there, to the seder at their house and met this family.

And his roommate, Steve Smith, actually was going out with Kathy Boudin, and so, she was a pretty big influence, although we weren't close, but she was head of the Alliance [the student political organization on campus.] She had figured out that, because none of the people that felt like me would run for political office on campus, or for student office or anything, but she had figured out that these student groups had budgets and so she ran for head of Alliance and she got it. And I think that's how — it could've been before or after she organized this conference but she — and under that Alliance for political affairs, which had traditionally been the home of the Young Republicans and Young Democrats, I started with my friend Virginia [Ginny] Kerr an organization called — I'm trying to think of what it was called, it was a political action — I think I said it.

ANDERSON: You did. I need to find it in my notes. Student Action Committee.

THOM: Yeah, Student Action Committee, SAC, which was sort of an embarrassing acronym [since it also meant Strategic Air Control,] but

nevertheless, and under the auspices of that, we organized things. One of the things we organized was a “fast for freedom,” which was, we negotiated with the people who ran the meal service at Bryn Mawr. Students would fast and the money for that meal would be sent to SNCC. Now this was a token amount, but it was a way of involving lots of people, and I’m pretty sure we organized that whole operation. We organized SAC. We did that and some other actions, sort of from the suggestion of Kathy and her friends, in my junior — it must have been my junior year. Kathy was off campus, because she had gone to Russia, so there were other people involved in that, but that was a big thing.

Some of the other — let’s see, other organizing we did. Eventually, they had started — Kathy had started this when she was there, which was to try to organize the maids in quarters.

ANDERSON: Oh, that’s right. You mentioned that.

THOM: Which was — I mean, Bryn Mawr was such a plantation system. I think they all were at that point, but — because they would never fire any of these people. I mean, my sister’s dormitory had a maid who was in her eighties trying to answer telephones and not doing a terrific job, but there was nothing to do because there was no pension system and they certainly were not going to throw her to the wolves.

ANDERSON: So you were trying to unionize the staff?

THOM: Yeah, we were trying to unionize. And we would mostly get friendly with the younger women who were there because they were really — because one of the issues was they lived in these little rooms and they couldn’t have men in. And so, we did do a certain amount of organizing with them and getting them to state their — but we couldn’t get very far with the administration because, well, it was a hard problem. There was no solution to it. Eventually, they just stopped having the service. That’s how they solved it. That’s how all the colleges solved that problem.

But I did feel that because it was sort of my junior and senior year, I suddenly realized, you know, I’m going to go away. I’ve gotten these people, these young women, young black women mostly, upset and discontented with their jobs, and I’m going to go off to graduate school, you know, and I felt really like it was cavalier, and it wasn’t right. But we did make contact with some union organizers in Philadelphia so that they had people to work with, so it wasn’t so terrible.

But I did have that feeling that there we were in the ’60s and lots of us had this feeling in the civil rights movement, too, antiwar movement to a certain extent — because I wasn’t going to be drafted — that we were, I don’t know, we were patronizing in a way, and that’s why, I think, when feminism came along, it was so resounding to a lot of us, that here was a way of approaching these issues from our own understanding and our own way of getting at them.

ANDERSON: Were there African American students that you remember at Bryn Mawr?

THOM: Oh, yeah, there were, and they were friends and there were a lot of Asian students. Bryn Mawr always had — I think they always had a special sort of Asian connection. I think they had had probably missionaries earlier on who worked in China and then Japan. And as I said, when we had made this connection with the Tougaloo kids and it must have been my junior year, we went down to Tougaloo for like, two weeks or something. And it was great. We had a great time. We listened to a lot of music. We drank a lot of beer. We probably had very good —

ANDERSON: Were you also organizing. What was the stated intent of the trip?

THOM: It was just really — the stated intent of the trip was an exchange. We had Tougaloo up for two weeks at Bryn Mawr — and you know, Antioch was doing this. A lot of colleges were doing exchanges, but as I said, Bryn Mawr wouldn't let a semester exchange happen, so we did a little mini-exchange. It was just to — but we did drive around Jackson at a time, in integrated cars, at a time when they had a tank that was patrolling the streets. I mean, it was pretty scary. But these kids were great. They just sort of brushed it off.

ANDERSON: What was that like, being, for you, in a primarily African American environment — coming from Ohio and Bryn Mawr?

THOM: I didn't have any problem with it. For one thing, they were gracious and sort of Southern hospitality, accepting. I mean, we had arguments about the Beatles (laughs) and that's about it, you know, as opposed to Sam Cooke or something like that.

ANDERSON: Right. They knew you were allies?

THOM: Yeah, they did, they did. But they would tease us about white culture and things like that. So that was very comfortable. Earlier, I must say — I think, was it at the conven[tion], the thing that Kathy organized later? Some of the — what were they called, the Freedom Singers from SNCC, the one Bernice Johnson Reagon was in — two of the guys — Ginny and I were, I think, assigned to show two of these guys around during the time they were up there, and [it] became very clear that they — well, they made a play for us and I think this was probably part of our duty but we, of course, had no idea that that was expected of us, and we resisted. They were very nice. I mean, they weren't seriously — they were just sort of testing the waters and things like that. So, and I went out with black kids — a black student from Temple. I had also gone in and worked with CORE in Philadelphia, and that's how we met when I went to his church with him and stuff like that.

Then, the summer of my sophomore year, I came to New York. And this actually *was* a rebellion against my family. I mean, they were shocked. They'd come to pick me up to take me home and I said, "No, I'm going to New York for the summer." And so I sort of left them packing my stuff to take back to Ohio and I went to New York.

ANDERSON: What was your plan? Where were you going to stay?

THOM: I didn't have a plan. We — I got there, I was going with my friend Ginny and my friend Sarah, all from Bryn Mawr. And I got there first and I got a room at the International House, and they came a little later, and we were like, three people sleeping on the floor of the International House. We were there for about two weeks and then we found a sublet at 116th Street. And we all just found jobs. I mean, I found a job waitressing. I worked at the World Fair that summer, waitressing. My friend Ginny found a job with a teacher's college. I can't remember what Sarah was doing. And Ginny and I started working with CORE in New York, and that was '64, the summer of '64. It was when Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman were killed.

ANDERSON: What'd you do with CORE in the city?

THOM: We would do a number of things. One of the things I remember we did, because it was organized by a white kid who was involved with SDS, and our — by the way, the Student Action Committee became the sort of overall place where SDS people organized, after we founded it. (phone rings) So one of the things I remember we did instigated by this kid was to go down to the Lower East Side and work with actually white people and try to organize rent strikes. And that was very ideological. That was at the moment where [people were saying], Well, why don't you [white] people see to your own stuff? And that was the first time I'd thought of that, that there was, you know — although we had much less in common with these white immigrant families in the Lower East Side than we did with the black Americans who were part of the civil rights movement. But still, we had this idea that we could go organize that.

But we also did — there were demonstrations, there was this kid who was killed by police in Harlem that year and we had demonstrations down at the central court house and I remember those being a little frightening, because there were lots of white Italians throwing things at us, and at one point we sort of ran into the subway or were directed into the subway by — and I was going out, I dated this guy who was about ten years older than I, a black guy, and that was very — you know, he was going, he was teaching me all about jazz and stuff and that was a very funny relationship but it lasted, it actually lasted into the next year.

ANDERSON: Did your parents know about that?

THOM: No. They never knew about that. That was one of the things my sister was determined that they wouldn't know about. But, you know, we had a good time. And we used to go — at that point, you could go into the Five Spot, for instance, which was a jazz place where Charlie Mingus played regularly. And for the price of a beer, you could sit there and listen. I mean, you could never do that now.

So, I had moved in from the little apartment we had uptown to the Lower East Side where Doug, this guy, had an apartment. And I think that Ginny had moved out as well into some other relationship. When I think back on it, we would go out at all hours and part of what we'd do is raise money, we'd stand on corners and raise money for SNCC.

But we'd also go around all the time. I remember going into Riverside Park with these kids who were at International House, of all races, you know. I remember fighting off, almost getting raped several times. I mean it was completely ridiculous, what we were doing, but we didn't know any better and actually no dreadful thing happened, so I was propositioned by the guy I worked for. I had to quit that job. It was the sort of typical experience that women had, and probably still do.

ANDERSON: But before the women's movement.

THOM: But before you knew this shouldn't go on.

ANDERSON: Right. And did you come to New York to work with CORE or did you stumble onto that?

THOM: No, I think I must have had that in mind. I don't remember. We wanted to spend the summer in New York and we wanted to work for civil rights and then we got these jobs, you know, so that's what we did.

ANDERSON: Do you remember what you felt like being part of an interracial couple at that time?

THOM: I was pretty proud of it, you know, I mean, we all were. This was a political act. You'd walk around downtown and people would look at you and, but not — it wasn't dangerous or anything as it would be someplace else than New York. There was a sort of class difference, too, when we would go to Philadelphia and be near his family. I think he was separated but not divorced. They were always very nice to me, but it was a little uncomfortable. I certainly never considered — I would have fantasies of what would happen if he came to Akron to visit me, but I never, you know, I would never have invited that. And eventually, we just, as I said, I stayed with him through the next year when I was in school. I must have been — was I a junior? I guess I was a junior. And I remember spending a lot of time in New York and skipping classes and stuff like that through the next year. So it was fun, you know, it was exciting.

ANDERSON: And then you graduated Bryn Mawr in the four years and came straight to graduate school at Columbia?

THOM: Right. I made that decision because, well, I wanted to study intellectual history and there were three places that I thought I could do that, and one was Columbia and one was Berkeley and one was University of Wisconsin. There were good people — Peter Gay was at Columbia — who I wanted to work with.

But the other thing is I had started going out with this guy Steve, who I was with for five years afterwards, who was my sister's — he was sort of around Bryn Mawr and Haverford. He had gone to Harvard but he had come there to work or something and knew a lot of people and knew my sister's generation of friends. So we got involved with each other my senior year and so that was the decision. The guy I had been dating at Haverford was going to Berkeley, but — and then Wisconsin would've been nice.

But that's really why I came to Columbia. It must've been. So I came there and I was living with Steve, although I had a room at Johnson Hall at Columbia. I was in the graduate faculty in history. And I was enjoying it. I loved the classes. The thing that was difficult was that it was so big. Everybody was going to graduate school at this point because they were avoiding the draft. So my class was like 200 people or something like that. It could've been more, in graduate school, which you wouldn't find today anywhere.

And Peter Gay, who I went to work with, never held classes and he didn't have seminars. There were other people who had seminars who were terrific, but I was supposed to do my master's thesis with him and I was supposed to make appointments to see him and it was all very — it was nothing like Bryn Mawr. It was all very political and difficult. So, I was there for two years. I loved the classes, but I never even did my master's thesis, which would've given me at least a degree to leave with.

And then at the end of the second year, there was all the organizing around — there was the bust, the campus bust, and all these things which I sort of missed out on because I had — I felt I had to be back in my apartment on 100th Street cooking for Steve, you know. I was in this relationship which demanded that sort of thing. Although I went to all the strike meetings and I voted for the strike and I went out on strike. And it was a combination of, if you remember — I don't know if you've read about it, but —

ANDERSON: You might as well say it for the tape.

THOM: Yeah. The Columbia issues were a combination of Columbia expanding into the black community and taking up a lot of space in Morningside Park and plans to — and so the students were organizing to stop that, or at least to have the community involved so that they would have facilities that would be open to them. That was part of it. Part of it was the war, and part

of it was, especially for us in graduate school, was how graduate students were being treated at the time, as basically cattle. I mean, they were making a lot of money from kids who were flowing into graduate schools. There were no jobs. I mean, there were plenty of jobs but not enough for the people in graduate school who were graduating, especially with history and literature degrees and things like that. And also, you know, they were not — this was an issue in California, too — they weren't paying TAs. So, it was those three issues that we went on strike [for]. And I basically went on strike and never went back, so that was my graduate career. (laughter)

ANDERSON: What was it like being a woman at Columbia in graduate school? How many women were in your class, do you have a sense?

THOM: Oh, many. There were plenty of women. I was just — what I couldn't deal with was just being in such a large group, and I think the guys were more aggressive in terms of politicking but there were plenty of women who succeeded. I mean, Columbia was a terrible place for women in many ways.

ANDERSON: Well, it still has that reputation, so I wonder what, 30 years ago, it was like.

THOM: If you talk to Carolyn Heilbrun, she would tell you. And most of — I'm trying to think if all of my professors were male? Probably, probably. But I don't know, that didn't intimidate me. It's probably because I was at Bryn Mawr and I had had women professors take me very seriously as a scholar and a student. So, that didn't — what bothered me was the idea that I would have to sort of fight for my status and go in there and sort of — I wasn't prepared for that at all. I don't know how the history department was for students, for women students. I probably would have found out if I had done more than just take classes and seminars and started working.

ANDERSON: So this relationship you were in at the time was very traditional?

THOM: It was pretty traditional, it was pretty traditional. He was older and brilliant. He was a mathematician, actually a brilliant mathematician, and so I didn't have much to say for myself in that relationship, which is probably part of the problem. It's probably part of why we went our separate ways, because eventually he wanted to — he made like a million dollars or something. He was in computers. He started — he was in a software company and they sold it. And he eventually wanted to retire, basically. I mean, he didn't want to work so hard.

He came from a traditional, pretty orthodox Jewish family — although he wasn't that observant, he was somewhat observant — in Westchester, and started out in Brooklyn, I think, and then went up to Westchester. And his father was an insurance salesman, and I think he just didn't have that

image of himself in mind, as someone who would work his whole life and earn money.

So he earned a lot of money very quickly and then wanted to go up to Boston. This was interesting because he said — I was prepared to go to Boston with him, at one point — and this was after *Ms.* started, or right before. I knew it was starting. He said, “Are you sure you want to come to Boston? Would you go to Boston if I wasn’t going?” And I said no. And at that point, I think he had realized, and we both realized, that we were not going to continue this relationship, so he went off to Boston and I stayed. And *Ms.* had started at that point.

So yes, it was very traditional. But what did I know? Certainly my parents’ relationship was that way.

ANDERSON: How did his family, being orthodox, feel about him dating and living with you?

THOM: I think they had given up any idea of controlling him and they were very, you know, I would go up there and I would use the wrong silverware or something, and his mother would correct me and I’d get embarrassed. I mean, it was that kind of discomfort, but nothing — and his sister had also gone to Bryn Mawr and so she was older than me, but that was pretty comfortable.

ANDERSON: Thank you. We’re going to pause.

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

ANDERSON: So, where do you want to pick up? I mean, I'm interested in learning about your entry into the women's movement, what you knew about feminism, and how you found that. You can start wherever you want.

THOM: Well, I think my entry into the women's movement was partially in school at Bryn Mawr, although we didn't call it feminism at Bryn Mawr, although it was a feminist school –

ANDERSON: What do mean when you say it was a feminist school?

THOM: Well, back when M. Carrie Thomas was president, it was definitely very active. But it was mostly, by the time I was there, from '62 to '66, it was very determined that, you know, women's education was no different from men's education. The standards were the same. It was antifeminist in that sense. But still, because I was organizing, first I was organizing the maids and that, you know, brought up a lot of women's issues because a lot of their issues had to do with their sort of thwarted sexuality and the situation they were in, and the fact that they were very low paid. And because I was organizing, part of what we did was to fight for looser rules for students, for women. I mean, we had much tighter regulations than the boys at Haverford, the men at Haverford had, for instance. So we were fighting for the right to sign out overnight — I mean, just very simple things — and have men in the dorms. All these things moved very quickly and changed by the time — you know, two years after I was there, things were changed completely, I think.

ANDERSON: That's fast.

THOM: It was. It was extremely fast. Well, the Ivy League schools had opened to women just pretty much a couple of years after I had left Bryn Mawr. So they had to change. They had to change fast. And people just wouldn't put up with those restrictions. But certainly we recognized that we were being restricted as women.

ANDERSON: So you had a feminist analysis of your experience as female college students, but you wouldn't use the word.

THOM: That's right, exactly. I don't know that I would have rejected the word, but it wasn't something that came up. And I was not directly involved with groups that were organizing early feminists, like women's lib, women's liberation groups that were organizing in New York and in Chicago and in various places in the late '60s. I wasn't involved in that. I was involved in — you know, I went on antiwar marches and things like that and civil rights things. But I didn't get involved in that. I guess the first typically

women's movement thing I was involved in was the '70s march in New York.

At that point, I had come to New York. I had gone to Columbia. I dropped out. I left during the strike and wasn't going back, and I started working at something called Facts on File, which is a news reference service where we digested the news and it went to all libraries and to news organizations and stuff and was very well indexed, and still, I think, is probably available online. And it's a way that [media] professionals mostly, and other people, could find out a date, find out a little story about it.

It was good for me because, whereas I couldn't manage to complete a master's, you know, a 60-page master's paper that would've gotten me a degree, I had to churn out, like, 1500 words a week or more — 3000, 5000, I can't remember. Tons of copy. And I worked with an editor there, a guy who was an old newspaper guy, who was very good in terms of training. And the guy who was my boss, Howard Epstein, was married to Cynthia Epstein. Do you know who she is? She's a feminist scholar.

But at that point, suddenly, Joanne, my friend Joanne Edgar, worked there, and Susanna Margolis, the three of us realized that we were earning much less than — what was his name? I can't remember. There were two guys who were our contemporaries who were earning hundreds of dollars more a week than we were. And so we decided to go on strike for Women's Equality Day, and we did. And it shocked Howard, who was this liberal guy (laughs) who was married to an emerging feminist scholar.

ANDERSON: What was he thinking?

THOM: What was he thinking? Well, he wasn't thinking. But I mean, you know, that's what you hired. Young women came from all the colleges into New York and, you know, it was a relatively good job. I was earning more than I was offered at any publishing company where I was looking for work. But immediately, we got raises.

ANDERSON: Not fired. You got raises.

THOM: No, we got raises. I mean, he was suitably embarrassed and I don't think we came up to Dan's level because that would've — I don't know that the company would've allowed that. I mean, it was owned by Commerce Clearing House at that point. But he certainly gradually upped our salary. If we had stayed there, eventually we would've been making as much as — it was a very successful protest. We wouldn't have had to go out on strike. We probably would've had to have raised the issue but we did participate in that mass demonstration in New York. And I didn't march in it. Susanna, I think, was a Democratic [district leader] — she wasn't in the committee, maybe a committee woman or a district — she was in some position that she had to run for in the Democratic politics, and we spent

that day, Women's Equality Day, taking signatures for Bella Abzug's campaign. She was running for Congress for the first time.

So I heard — wait a minute, was it before that? I guess it was after that. It was after that that we were — that was my first contact with Bella Abzug. Gloria made a speech. Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan and Bella all made speeches that day. And we were getting petition signatures for her campaign. So that was the first thing I did, which was funny because I had been so disdainful of electoral politics in college, you know, [it] was completely unfashionable to think this was — revolution was what was going to change the world, certainly not electoral politics, but Bella had different ideas.

And then, let's see. I left Facts pretty quickly in '71 and I went, actually with Steve — he had a teaching position in Grenoble and we went abroad for a semester, a little more than a semester. We were breaking up at that point, but we did that. It was sort of lovely. I lived in Grenoble for three months and went to the market and sat in cafés and had croissants while he went off and taught mathematics with the people. We went skiing a lot. I stayed with my friends in Rome for a couple months.

But that was just at the point that *Ms.* was beginning. Right before I did that, I had worked that summer. It must have been the summer of '71, because the Women's Political Caucus was getting organized, and my friend Ginny from college was in Washington and she was one of the staff people at the emerging caucus and this was right after the first organizing meeting.

So I went to Washington and I had left Facts and I was thinking maybe I'd work in Washington and I worked at the caucus office as a volunteer. And that was very funny, because we were — they had a board of like 35 very opinionated women whom the people in the office would have to get to sign off on various policies. And Bella was always calling and saying, "Do this and do that." And Friedan would complain and you'd have to work all these people together and it was pretty heady stuff because we were also at that point organizing. Nixon had his Supreme Court appointments happening and we were getting a list of women appointees and it got enormous press. Everything we did got immediate press, because feminism was so hot and this was a new organization with big names attached to it. And it was funny, because we were dealing with all these egos, but it was pretty exciting, too.

And I interviewed, at that point, with Representative [John] Conyers. I thought maybe I'd work for him. And we had a good interview and we sort of left it up in the air. And I interviewed with Bella's AA Margot Polivy at the time and she said, this is what I remember, "Mary, you know Bella. Why would you want to work here?" And I said, "Well, that's true, but I think I have the temperament, you know, to be able to deal with that." And so, we sort of left it there and I hadn't gotten an offer when I went off to France with Stephen. And while I was there, the magazine *Ms.* was starting.

And Joanne, you can talk to her about this, too, Joanne Edgar, who I worked with at Facts on File, she had graduated from Columbia School of International Affairs, and we had worked on Facts and left Facts to work with Gloria. Her friend from Mississippi — she's from Mississippi, Patt Derian — had introduced her to Gloria and so, after Joanne had been down there working on the Evers campaign, not Medgar, Evers's brother, Charles, was running for something [governor]— so Joanne had come back to New York and was Gloria's assistant, basically, when the magazine was starting.

So she was in there, working on the preview issue, and I had come back from Europe, and just at the time the preview was out and it was clear it was going to be a success and they were close to getting money to start the real magazine, Joanne realized that she very soon going to be head of research at the magazine and she didn't want to do that. So she told me to come into the office.

We were all volunteering at that point. So if you had any skills at all, you could sort of come in the door and be put to work immediately, which is what I did. And I was — you know, that's what I did. I did the research, but I had no idea how to do research on a magazine. Later on, the people I hired taught me. (laughs) And we didn't have time. We were putting together this volume 1, number 1 issue and all I could really do — as opposed to what you're supposed to do, which is go over every word and put marks on the things you've checked — all I could really do was read them over, just have a sense of what was a problem, and then try to solve those problems. And I was pretty good at it, I mean, just from my academic training. So I did that. But right away, also — I don't know if we should start on the *Ms.* stuff —

ANDERSON: Sure. Go ahead.

THOM: I should also tell you about when I was trying to buy this apartment and how I couldn't get — well, I'll tell you that later. Anyway —

ANDERSON: Let's back up for just a second, and just your experience at the political caucus. You're just there for the —

THOM: Summer, really. A couple of months in the summer.

ANDERSON: But can you just sort of describe the culture of the place, describe the racial makeup?

THOM: It was like — yeah, I'm trying to think. Well, certainly, there was an attempt to get all sorts of people on the board, whatever it was called, the board of directors or whoever was running the place, and one of the people I remember was Fannie Lou Hamer, who was just wonderful and would come in and she'd, you know, sit there while all these women were fighting. There was lots of Republicans. They made an effort to get good

Republicans and Democrats, but it was hard to get these people to agree to things, as I said. And Fannie Lou would just stop the meeting and say, “Listen, we’re all here to do something very important.” I mean, she didn’t say it that way, she said it in the way Fannie Lou would say it. I would have no — I can’t remember now, but she would really stop. I remember her exercising her leadership by stopping the squabbling and saying, “What we’re after here is more important than what you’re talking about.”

ANDERSON: What were the roots of the conflicts, do you remember? What was your — I mean, you probably don’t remember specifics, but what was your feeling about it?

THOM: I don’t think they were — well, there were some conflicts, I know, and I don’t remember if I know from afterwards or before about — I do know that they were from them. For instance, [at] the very founding of the caucus, Bella wanted part of the statement of purpose to refer to peace and women and stopping war and aggression. And Betty Friedan didn’t think that was warranted. It’s not that she didn’t think it was important, because I think she was certainly in support of the peace movement, but she didn’t think that was an issue that a woman’s group should — she didn’t want to dilute women’s power. I think she had problems with abortion. At that point, you know, what we were saying is, you know, Free abortion on demand. It was pretty radical, and we certainly retreated as a movement from that. But she was worried about that and she was certainly worried about the gay issue, the lesbian issue. So there were conflicts about that.

There was a certain amount of conflict — the Republican women were always anxious that it be — they didn’t call it bipartisan. They called it a multipartisan organization, because certainly there were socialists and other party groups there, too. But there was certain tension, I think, from the Republicans to make sure their voices were heard. And you know, trying to work across the aisle, although it was a lot easier then than it is for women today, I think.

But there were mostly just strategic battles about what we should do and what we should concentrate on and there were so many things to take up. I mean, there were issues of — one of the big issues was women and credit then, and a little later, and it was amazing. I mean, I couldn’t get a credit card when I came to New York, even though I had a job. I had a summer job when I was at graduate school and then later had a regular job. I had to have my parents sign for me to get a Bloomingdale’s credit card. So there were all these women and credit issues. You couldn’t get credit in your own name. You had to have your husband — if you were married, it had to be in your husband’s name. And there was the judges issue — trying to get women in the judiciary. And goodness —

ANDERSON: How did the lesbian issue play out at the political caucus? The story’s been told about how it played out at NOW and other places.

THOM: Right. I don't think it was that much of an issue there, because there wasn't a lot of gay legislation. Bella had supported — it was probably later than I was involved in the caucus — was supporting gay legislation. I think it was a matter of who was visible, who was being visible, and that was difficult. I'm trying to think if —

ANDERSON: Were there any out lesbians that you remember?

THOM: That's what I'm trying to remember. I don't think so. There were later. But there probably — Charlotte Bunch, was she involved? I don't think she was. The lesbians that I knew of at the time were more involved in more women's liberation groups than they were in politics. But there were a couple — and then there were, quickly, women who were running for office. There was one in Massachusetts. [Elaine Noble, running for the state legislature in 1974.] I just can't remember names now. But certainly, the caucus was supportive of these women. I don't think there were a lot of battles about that. I think it would've been — I don't remember them substantially. I remember them personality-wise, like who — I remember one time, Betty Friedan had wanted to go down and campaign for Fannie Lou Hamer.

Fannie Lou was running for the legislature — I can't remember what she was running for. And so, she — I was the one who was supposed to — Friedan would call the office and say I was to organize it with Fannie Lou. And so I would call Fannie Lou and say, "Betty Friedan wants to come and help you out in your race." And Fannie Lou said, "Well, she's welcome to come." Fannie Lou was always very — it was clear to me that she didn't really care whether she came or not but she was going to be welcoming. And so, Friedan wanted this whole schedule of what she would do when she got down there, and it was very difficult to get that from Fannie Lou because they didn't really have schedules like that. They didn't have a campaign organized around appearances and all these things. And so, I remember that being a frustrating job.

ANDERSON: Did Friedan end up going?

THOM: She did. She went and she got some press, I mean, for Fannie Lou, I'm sure it was. I think it was a completely worthwhile thing to do. So, Fannie Lou didn't win. I had met Fannie Lou Hamer in 1964, because we had gone from CORE in New York to the Democratic National Convention in Baltimore — where was it, Baltimore? I don't remember.

ANDERSON: Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party? Is this when she —

THOM: Yeah, this was the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and we were demonstrating outside and she would come out and address us. The SNCC people would be, you know, orating to us. That was pretty exciting. We just went down by the day from New York in a bus, so it couldn't have

been very far from here. So, but that's where I first knew Fannie Lou. And, well, I didn't know Joanne then. That was before I met Joanne, but she knew her in Mississippi, too. Anyway, she was the most memorable.

Well, and then Eleanor Holmes Norton was one of the early caucus — she used to be a fundraiser for the caucus. Whenever we [the caucus, NWPC] had a benefit or a meeting or something, she would be the one who got up at the end up said, "Put your money where your mouth was," and get everybody to cough up.

ANDERSON: From those early days, who were the people who were the most inspirational and extraordinary to you? Was Fannie Lou one of them?

THOM: Oh, yeah, I would say Fannie Lou was definitely one of them. And Bella. And as I say, Eleanor and Gloria Steinem as well, before I knew her at *Ms.* Liz Carpenter was wonderful. She was Lady Bird's press secretary, Lady Bird Johnson's press secretary at that point, and was one of the main people at the caucus. Ellie Guggenheimer here in New York was one of the main fundraisers. I spent some time in her house sending out caucus mailings and she gave office space in her house to the caucus. So, when I got back to New York — I'm trying to think. There are labor people. Um, Millie Jeffrey, from an early time. Was she United Auto Workers? [Yes.] I can't remember. But she was a very close colleague of Bella's and I always remember Millie following Bella around — Millie later was president of the caucus — carrying Bella's briefcases. Bella sort of stormed through whatever she was storming through.

ANDERSON: This is feminism.

THOM: This is feminism, exactly. (laughter) Amy Swerdlow — I'm doing some work on Bella and as I told you, tells the story about how she was working on something at Women Strike for Peace with Bella and it was late and Amy had to go and collect her kids and she had to leave and it wasn't done, and Amy said, "Well, you finish it." And she was typing. And Bella said, "I don't type." Oh, great.

ANDERSON: Can you compare the culture of working at the caucus versus *Ms.*? How did they feel in terms of hierarchy and space?

THOM: Oh, hierarchy. Well, there was a hierarchy at the caucus, but Doris Meissner was the staff leader and she was later head of the immigration agency in Bill Clinton's administration, so, in terms of the staff, it was pretty — I was a volunteer. There was Doris and Ginny and a couple of other people. And Shirley Chisholm, of course, was very important. And Shirley Downs was Shirley Chisholm's AA or something and was very involved in working with the caucus people. In fact I tried to get an interview with Shirley Chisholm right before she died and I wasn't able to do that and it was too bad.

So, it felt — I guess there was a hierarchy but not a stringent one. There was certainly a hierarchy in terms of who were the political leaders and who had a say, but in terms of the staff, we were just struggling to — I mean, we all drafted press releases, we all answered phones, we all did a lot of that stuff at the time I was there. It was like a political campaign. That's how it felt, because there was too much to do and too little money and too much press attention for our own good, probably. I mean, because we would have to — especially around, I remember, around the judges thing — we would have to get all these people to sign off on these statements, and so, that was difficult to do. So there was probably a lot of authority left to the staff that wouldn't have otherwise, in a more mature organization, happened.

Now when *Ms.* started, it felt like a movement organization. I didn't have a desk. I sat in a corner with a pile of stuff. I mean, there were two rooms. There were maybe six desks. Mary Peacock, who was an early editor, I remember, I think it was Mary pulled her little chair up to some cartons. That was her desk. So, I remember Joanne called me and I went into *Ms.* and I immediately got a migraine, which I am subject to. So here I am, sitting in the corner —

ANDERSON: And that was your cue that this is where you should stay for the next 20 years? (laughter)

THOM: I guess so. I don't know why. The migraine went away. I didn't get a desk for a while but the migraine went away. So that was very exciting and Gloria and Pat Carbine were making their little trips out, trying to raise funding for the magazine and the rest of us were trying to put an issue together — and counting the subscriptions that came in from the preview issue, which were just incredible. They would just come in by the load, along with letters from people who wrote — just a tremendous outpouring of, you know, I say how many in my book on letters, thousands of letters, and people would tell their life story. And this was in response to the preview issue and to articles like Jane O'Reilly's "A Housewife's Moment of Truth," and it would just generate story after story from people who were in towns that didn't have women's liberation groups, didn't have caucus organizations, maybe had Planned Parenthood, you know, some of the more —

ANDERSON: This is even pre-*Roe*.

THOM: What?

ANDERSON: This is pre-*Roe*, even, when you started *Ms.*

THOM: Oh, yeah, it's pre-*Roe*, so Planned Parenthood was pretty radical, I guess. But people have been involved in, like, traditional women's organizations, but they were becoming much more radicalized, and even in the university

women's groups and things like that were starting, too. But mostly they were just individual women who felt that all these issues that they had with their own family life, with their work life, were things that were problems to them individually and no one else, you know, they had to cope with individually. And they were incredibly relieved that there were other people who had similar issues and there were people who would take them seriously.

ANDERSON: Was reading the letters something that you always enjoyed?

THOM: I loved it. I loved it. Gloria does, too. Gloria will tell you. I would go in to the mail box and just opening the letters. I guess I edited them for a while — I edited them later. At this point, Margaret Sloane, who died recently — she was a black woman who was an editor and was one of Gloria's speaking partners. Gloria at that point was going out speaking with various people and Margaret was among them. But I would go into the pile of Letters to the Editor in the mail room and just start opening them. We would stay there late at night. We worked late and those of us who didn't have kids to go take care of would stay late at night and I remember just going to read the letters. It was incredibly moving and exciting, to just get that kind of response. And no one had expected it, of course.

When *Ms.* started, they had — I'm sure you've heard this story — had expected the preview issue to be on the stands for six months and it was sold out in two weeks. And we all went around to do media. I was on the *Phil Donahue Show* with Mary Peacock and Margaret, Margaret Sloane, I think, when they were all in Chicago — not in Chicago, in Dayton — before they moved to Chicago. And so we were all just talking. However much we knew about them — because we were suddenly the authorities and that was always something that was interesting at *Ms.*, was how you had to sort of struggle against that, against being looked at as feminism central. So we would always say, you know, we reflect the women's movement, we aren't the women's movement. But at that point, we pretty much were. I mean, in terms of what people could — I mean, there were tons of people that were calling the office, from political people who wanted to organize this enormous emerging group of people to business people.

Pat Carbine was among the first women who would go out and sell space, advertising space in the industry, and there were a couple of people at advertising agencies who knew this was an emerging market and were trying to alert advertisers. This was the time of ads like "Ring around the collar." The wife should — some of these recently, too, actually — the wife should be ashamed because her husband had a dirty white shirt. So there was plenty to do and there were people who would call on us all the time and they would hope to get Gloria or Pat but they couldn't always, and so —

ANDERSON: So anybody who worked there had to be ready to fill that role as well.

THOM: Fill that role. And one of the things I did, I was remembering it recently, was answer some of Gloria's mail, you know, because people would be always writing to her and then I would say, "Gloria Steinem asked me to answer your letter." And so we were help central to tons of people who had problems. Some of that was devastating because they were really people who needed serious help who were victims of domestic abuse and things like that.

And we tried to — Gloria and Brenda Feigen and some other people had started the Women's Action Alliance around the same time, and they were trying to get the resources to be in contact with groups around the country that were working on these issues. So we used them a lot, although they didn't have the resources. We didn't have the resources, they didn't have the resources.

And I just remember people — you know, I had this picture of these women in phone booths saying, Can you get me a lawyer? Can you get me this? Can you get me that? And you couldn't. And it was incredibly frustrating. It was moving and frustrating at the same time. There were a couple of women's law groups that were starting, and so if they happened to be in San Francisco or Chicago or Cleveland you could probably refer them to someone, but these places were also overwhelmed.

So a lot of that feeling I had was everything happening at once and being very excited by it all but also frustrated because that's — *Ms.* had an enormous staff and that's why. I mean, we were part of the sort of operating staff of the women's movement. We were one of the few institutions that could manage to exist. And part of the thing that made it successful for us is we had to put out an issue of the magazine every month, as opposed to many other organizations, the Women's Action Alliance among them, who got into enormous difficulties just in terms of their own structure and arguments over hierarchy and all these things. We didn't do that. For one thing, it was a very open place. And if you wanted to do something — like, I was there, I was head of research: if I wanted to write an article, no one was going to stop me, you know, that was fine.

ANDERSON: Was there anarchy because there wasn't any hierarchy?

THOM: There was controlled anarchy, and I don't know — let me just try to think if I can understand why. Part of it was because we had to put out an issue. So the bottom line was, that issue had to go out. Part of it was, Suzanne [Levine] was really running the operation. I mean, Gloria will tell you this, anyone will tell you this, and Pat was supposedly editor-in-chief, but Suzanne ran the [editorial] organization, and she was very good, just very good at letting people have their way. I think the copy and production departments with Cathy O'Haire would get very angry at her because she would leave the issue sort of open till the very last moment.

So, first of all, we were trying to be a news magazine as a monthly, which is a very difficult thing to do. So we had to have last-minute things

get in. And we had many more people, just because we had people coming in and volunteering who eventually would maybe put on the payroll, maybe not. We had lots and lots of people around, more than any magazine could afford to have today. We weren't paid much, and Pat and Gloria weren't taking much.

But we had lots of people around, and the remarkable thing was that you never felt like you were afraid to ask questions. You never felt like you were afraid to show that you — first of all, a lot of us had come from publishing backgrounds. I had come from sort of half publishing, half activist — a lot of people came from activist backgrounds. There were a mix if skills. And Suzanne, who'd been mostly in publishing and not particularly activist, would defer to our political knowledge or our organizing knowledge and things like that.

But we were doing a lot of other things besides putting out a magazine. We were coordinating with national staffs about legislation. Very soon after the magazine started, Susan Braudy, who'd been at Bryn Mawr and I knew before, came in to start the *Ms. Gazette*, which I started with her, and that was sort of the news organ of the magazine. It had a late closing deadline. It had a front and a back. She was a wonderful — she had worked at *Newsweek* and what I learned from Susan was not to be afraid of asking questions of a reporter. She was fearless. She would call up the Pope, you know. She didn't have the fear that I often have of — I would often over-research something before I would try to call someone, because I didn't want to look stupid. You know, she had no fear. She would just call. That was an important lesson.

But I also did the four pages in the back, which was a really — it was like a typical women's magazine help section, but it was about to how to organize your campus [or how to organize on the job.] So in that way we were involved with a lot of different groups around the country, trying to identify where the centers of feminism were and what the activities were. So, we did that.

And then, like, on occasions, we would be actually — the main example I can think of is the Houston conference. The conferences — Bella Abzug had organized this, after International Women's Year and the Mexico City conference, she had organized a national and gotten funded by Congress this whole national conference, this women's conference that ended up in Houston. They first had state conferences in every state in the union and we went up to the Albany conference. And at that point, I mean, we really were the operation of the Albany conference. We, as staffers of *Ms.*, we would be the one's who ran off the mimeographed statements to try to organize the feminists who were there, as opposed to the antifeminists who were there. And we would run around the floor, trying to coordinate with the different groups. I mean, we weren't delegates there, but we would staff — so, in that way, because there weren't that many women's organizations that paid people to be feminists, I mean, we were one of the few, and so we had a lot of roles like that.

ANDERSON: Tell me about Houston.

THOM: Well, first there was Albany, and Albany –

ANDERSON: Albany you covered a bit inside *Ms.*, too.

THOM: What strikes me about Albany and then later at Houston was [that it was] the first time that I saw organized antifeminist groups, and these were these women who came in on busses and there were men who directed them — I mean, openly, you could see them directing them from the corners of this women's conference. And it was shocking, you know, because you just didn't know that this opposition existed. I guess Gloria knew, because Gloria had been around — she would go talking.

ANDERSON: She was on the road more.

THOM: She was on the road and she would come back and tell us stories. For instance, she'd tell us she was someplace and there were these signs held up saying, "Gloria Steinem is a humanist, a feminist humanist." And Gloria said, "Well, that's nice." But it turned out this was an opposition sign and they were complaining about her. (laughs) So, Albany and then Houston was definitely the first time that I saw this kind of opposition. And it was pretty scary, because they were pretty determined and pretty mad at us. I mean, you live in New York, you don't have a lot of people — I suppose, as I said before, even in the civil rights stuff, you have people throwing stones, but this was organized against you and we had seen it rising out of *Roe* when *Roe v. Wade* became law and coming sort of slowly and there were rightwing women's organizations that were developing and there were ones, like what's the California funny organization? Women Who Love to be Women. I mean, there were organized groups that were –

ANDERSON: Eagle Forum and all that.

THOM: Eagle Forum, but also I was thinking of the feminists groups that organized to mock these groups. But they were definitely there in Houston. We were up all night in — I have to remember her name, who was lieutenant governor at the time [Mary Ann Krupsak,] I'll come up with her name, but anyway, she had organized [in Albany] for us. Bella was there, Gloria was there, and Joanne and I and Cathy O'Haire, we were, as I said, just running off these pro-plan things because we had to have a pretty tight organized agenda to make sure that antifeminist initiatives didn't pass. And we succeeded in that.

And then a similar sort of thing happened in Houston. When Koryne Horbal, as I remember — Bella was organizing the overall organizing thing. Koryne Horbal, who's a feminist from Minnesota and was part of the Democratic Labor organization up there, and she ran the floor

operations, I remember, in Houston. And what would happen — at Houston they had developed this whole plank of issues to vote on and when it got to Houston, there were groups that wanted to amend them and the trick was to let that discussion go, let that happen, without turning it into a free-for-all, because then the anti-people could have anti-gay stuff coming in, and abortion and gay issues were what we were very worried about.

So Gloria would be up all night. She was rewriting the minority plank with Maxine Waters and people like that. Coretta Scott King eventually presented it, but I think Maxine and other people were very involved in rewriting — and Native American women and Asian women. So this was an enormous task, because the one that was presented was just too white meat. It was just an overall statement of anti-prejudice, as opposed to anything that really reflected the enormous diversity that was emerging and it was emerging through the women's movement. It was pretty exciting, because you would never — I don't think other movements had that kind of space for women who were Pacific Islanders, for instance, to recognize themselves as women, and as people that had an agenda that had something to do with Chinese American women, for instance. But it happened in that — and handicapped women who had disabilities.

So some of the planks were rewritten and were voted on. I think there was a labor plank that was developed much more than it had been. And this all had to be done in a very short time. So, our job as floor operation was just to communicate and let people know that this work had gone on, that, you know — I mean, people knew it, because the delegates had been involved in all these caucuses, but just to make sure that everybody — and to take it to Bella, to get word to Bella if someone was going to be really upset if they weren't able to speak on a point, and things like that.

And Bella wasn't the chair all the time. The woman [from NOW, Anne Saunier,] she was one of the chairs of the convention who just was a knockout at keeping everything going and everything moving. It was very exciting. Houston was very exciting. There were important people there but it involved thousands and thousands and thousands of women, if you think of the state conventions, [and they] all felt they had a stake in that. So, although all the first ladies were there, the real guts of it was very grassroots in its outreach.

So it was a pretty amazing event. Of course, the legislation didn't go very far, but it was an important time and was an important thing to happen, an important way of getting people into feminism, getting into issues that concern them.

ANDERSON:

From the early '70s, when you first became identified as a feminist and involved in women's liberation, can you remember what ideas were the most exciting to you? What helped you? Like, what were you reading and what mattered to you the most?

THOM: Well, reproductive issues mattered a lot. At that point, there was some tension in the women's movement between people who were very concerned with abortion and people whose definition of that issue was broader, to include sterilization abuse. And I remember one early conflict that was very interesting to me, was that there was a group called CARASA [Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse] that were pointing out that there was forced sterilization of women, of mainly of Spanish women, Hispanic women, was going on at a great rate and that they wanted the hospitals to have a consent form that would give a day's waiting notice before a woman could be sterilized. And there were people at NOW and also probably the pro-abortion people who were completely against us because it was, first of all, it was saying that women didn't have the authority to make a decision without a waiting period. There was real issue involved there. But I thought it was so interesting, and I was certainly on the side of CARASA, that would recognize that this was something you had to take into consideration.

ANDERSON: So do you think that that issue fell on deaf ears in terms of the mainstream white organizations at the time?

THOM: Not in New York, but I think yes nationwide. I think there are the same issues that came up in the health organizing that went on in the '90s and more recently with communities around the Mexico-Texas border, for instance. I don't think that's been resolved to an extent. But then, it was pretty — I think CARASA basically won, who got the support of most women's groups for this kind of informed-consent kind of thing.

The other issue that interested me was — and maybe this was later than the early '70s, maybe it was in the '80s — was the pornography issue. And that was very contentious. Andrea Dworkin just died recently. She was on one side of the issue in terms of — the pornography issue made a great split in feminism between those to whom free speech was a paramount issue, and those to whom, you know, pornography could be controlled through what the other side would call censorship and what they would call legislation to prevent discrimination against women. So that was a big deal.

ANDERSON: And where did you fall in all of that?

THOM: Well, I fell more to the free-speech side of it. But I certainly respected, you know, especially someone like Andrea, you have to, even when you disagree with her, she has such drive and such fierceness, that there was one line in her obituary that said that she never — she herself would say she never was afraid of emotion or commitment. Those aren't the words, but she was also never afraid of controversy or error. So, that was just wonderful in terms of how she operated.

Now, I think it was probably just from [being] involved in the left that I came down less on the anti-pornography side than Gloria was or Robin

Morgan, people who are my very close friends. But, you know, we tolerated each other and I think we covered that very well in the magazine. I think we did a good job, finally. I mean, it took a long time because there was a lot of debate on the staff and there were a lot of pieces that some of us would not like and others would. And finally, there was a piece that Mary Kay Blakely did that really covered the issue in a substantial way and got out the various sides. There was an early conference at Columbia, I guess, the Barnard conference, that brought out a lot of those issues.

ANDERSON: What were some of the other issues that you remember being the most controversial on the staff?

THOM: Well, lesbianism was always controversial, and it was controversial for *Ms.* because there were always people who would want us — there was a certain amount of members of the lesbian community — I mean, there were lots of lesbians on *Ms.* staff. It wasn't so we were — but organized groups that would want a section of *Ms.* for lesbians, which was a reasonable idea, but most of us, I think, wanted to integrate lesbianism into all the things and not have that separatist — I think it would be interesting to talk to Charlotte Bunch about it.

There was an early impetus for separatism from within the lesbian community, and that was the reflection of that, and that was a controversy in *Ms.*, and we would always be — one of the very funny things about *Ms.* when I went back and did the Letters book was how defensive we were in our Letters to the Editor pages. We would publish criticisms but we would feel that we had to answer every one. I mean, we were certainly not comfortable just sort of putting out all these opinions and not commenting on them. And it was a symptom of our insecurity, I think. We eventually got more comfortable. But we had delegations visit us, organized —

ANDERSON: Lesbians?

THOM: Of lesbians or of — I'm sure others. I'm sure others. I remember lesbian groups coming in to take us to task in various ways. And of course we always met with them and took these things extremely seriously and tried to resolve things. But —

ANDERSON: Do you think lesbians felt comfortable working at *Ms.*?

THOM: Oh, yeah. I think they did. There were several office romances. And there were people that were not out but then came out, sort of, if not to the family, at least within the comfort of the *Ms.* offices. I think so. There was also — I was trying to think. There was, early on, there was actual consciousness raising that was going on at *Ms.* I mean, people would meet for consciousness-raising groups. I never participated in this. I didn't want to become involved with my colleagues to this extent but there were

people that were doing that. So there was a lot of sort of process that was always going on.

ANDERSON: Were you in a CR group outside of *Ms.*?

THOM: I wasn't.

ANDERSON: Did that not appeal to you?

THOM: No, it didn't appeal to me. I don't have that — I don't know. I don't like to be that revelatory, I guess. I'm trying to think if we had — we probably had something close to CR groups in college, in a political context, where we would talk about issues, but no, I didn't. I didn't invite that kind of process in my own life. But I always had very close relationships with women, close groups of women friends, and I still do. I mean, Susanna and Joanne and I, from Facts on File, still have dinner once a week or once every other week, and I have dinner regularly with Gloria and Robin and Suzanne. So, we've done that for years and years and years.

And my sister and I have always been close. My sister is interesting. She was married and had my nephew Thom in 1974 and she had been teaching French. She had gone from Bryn Mawr to Yale and then had started teaching French in high school, and when she had Thom, she quit that job and she came to work at *Ms.* as Gloria's assistant when Thom was very young. So Thom was one of the *Ms.* kids, and he would come in. Alex, who was the first *Ms.* baby, was about three months older than Thom — she was there as a toddler. Thom came in as a one-and-a-half or two-year-old. My sister was working for Gloria and Thom would ride his motorcycle up and down the hall at *Ms.*

I can't remember what I was thinking about my sister, then Susan Thom Loubet — went out to live in New Mexico with her husband and she was the head of the National Women's Political Caucus in New Mexico and also started a Women's Agenda Project there, which she still is involved in and she has a women's issues radio show on public radio there. So she was always — I don't know why I thought of her.

ANDERSON: You were thinking of your close relationships from those days.

THOM: Oh, that's right. Yes, exactly. So I was always very close to my sister and with her group of feminist friends out in New Mexico and things like that.

ANDERSON: Did yours and your sister's feminism cause any difficulties related to your parents after that? Was that a conflict, or is that another thing you just kept from them?

THOM: No, no, no. They certainly knew about my feminist activities and they were very proud. My mom, you know, subscribed to *Ms.* from the beginning to the end. The conflict I had with my parents was more over

the antiwar issues — not civil rights, not feminism, but the war issues. And also with my uncle, who had been in the war. And I remember going to see my uncle with Ben Stavis, who I mentioned. [My aunt and uncle] were living up in Casanovia and Ben was at Cornell getting his Ph.D. and we went and visited them. And we started talking about the war and Ben started talking. I said, “Just be quiet. We don’t have to deal with this.” But I do remember, not on that occasion, but on others, that I would argue with my uncle to the point that he would start yelling at me and I would start yelling at him.

I never argued with my parents. My father — here’s what my father would do. He would start saying, “Listen to what my daughter has to say about that,” in a way that was very ambiguous. It was sort of like bragging about me because I had these opinions, but also things that his friends would think were ridiculous, you know. And he, I’m sure, probably thought they were ridiculous, too. But I think more tension around the antiwar issue — because that was patriotism, that was not supporting the soldiers, that was going against your government — than the other issues.

So feminism was not something that they had a problems with, although who knows, they might have had a problem with some of it. But I had thought before that I should tell you that when I — I said when I came here, I couldn’t get a credit card except being signed by my parents, so my parents thought that was completely ridiculous. My father was always — I don’t know why I’m thinking of this, I mean, this should be in another section, but at one point at Old Trail, I got in trouble because we played a prank. My friend Judy Ayres, whose father was the Congressman, and I decided to put alarm clocks in the lockers in one of our classrooms and they were to go off all at the same time. So we did this and it was completely successful. It disrupted the class. And we were brought up before the student council for a reprimand and the head mistress sent a letter home to be read by my parents and signed, you know. And I took it to my father and he said, “Are they serious?” I mean, he thought that was completely ridiculous. So, as I said, he was pretty supportive, even when we disagreed about things.

ANDERSON: And when he wasn’t, that midwestern politeness worked in your favor?

THOM: That’s true. That’s probably true. (laughs)

ANDERSON: OK. I’m going to turn this off.

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

ANDERSON: Let's talk some more about *Ms.* Is there anything else that you want to say in terms of — we started to talk a little bit last time about how some things were controversial in the office and we ended up by talking about the lesbian issue a little bit. Are there any —

THOM: Well, I said about the delegation that came in, probably organized by Charlotte Bunch — we talked about the coverage of lesbian issues. There was also another one that was just general left that Robin Morgan was involved in, and this was before she became an editor at *Ms.* and would come in and just take us to task.

There was a group that came from Connecticut [brought in by Sheila Tobias] who were women in politics and they weren't so confrontational but they did want more coverage of their specific things that were happening outside of New York. And that was one of the issues, I think. We were always looked upon as too much New York — or that's what we'd try to keep in mind all the time. It was hard not to have too many writers from New York and too many stories that involved New York, and to get —

But part of my work for the *Ms. Gazette* was [with] Susan Braudy — and then after she left, I was editor of it — was to develop almost stringers among women who were involved with feminism, some of whom were journalists, some of whom weren't. And that was difficult, because it was difficult to get an even quality of writing and to make sure the facts were right. So we had a lot of people who were reporting from around the country who we rewrote. We could for the *Gazette* because it was a sort of styled section. We could rewrite their work. They weren't essays and things like that, they were news reports, so we did a lot of that.

And we did develop — I remember writing to around the time that we did a back-of-the-*Gazette* feature to try to talk about all the feminist media that was around. We did a couple of them. One was for newspapers, because at that point, in the early '70s, there were hundreds of feminist newsletters and newspapers around the country. And we did a piece both to feature them, because they were feeling sort of out-voiced by *Ms.* and that was too bad — both to feature them but also to develop sources for more local kinds of news. So, I remember doing — there were a couple of outreach things we did like that — I remember doing a mailing to all these newspapers saying, "We want to include you. Send us an issue and describe your thing and also give us some names so we can have some ongoing relationship." And that was pretty useful for that time that there were so many thousands of little underground feminist press stuff going on.

Another sort of outreach issue like that was — well, there were two, there were two petitions we did, one for "I have had an abortion." That was in the preview issue. And again, that got hundreds of names that came in, people who were signing the petitions and felt they were participating.

Another one was on lesbian issues. I can't remember — a Petition for Sanity, I think it was called. "I support lesbian couples." It wasn't necessary — it could be signed by both gay and straight people but it was another one of those outreach issues.

But it was very interesting, because we did think seriously, this isn't about conflict. Of course I moved quickly away from that. We did think seriously about how this was a constituency, not just a group of readers, and how to involve them in the magazine. And that's why the Letters column was so popular throughout the time.

ANDERSON: What did you enjoy writing the most?

THOM: I did politics mostly, in a broad sense, just because that's what I knew. And I did women's history things. Later on, I went to a lot of academic conferences. I started off going because I was a budding historian, when I was in graduate school, I went to the Women's History, the Berkshire conferences, and that was really exciting to me — I mean, Gerda Lerner and all these people. They were so — in women's literature and women's history, those two areas. I suppose in sociology and others, too. But there was so much rich women's scholarship that was going on in the '70s and '80s, and the Berkshire conferences were particularly exciting to me. And I would go and then I would try to come back and try to translate some of these ideas, academic ideas, into articles, and that was always difficult. But we did make an effort that way, too. We had a board of scholars —

ANDERSON: You had Kate Stimpson —

THOM: Kate Stimpson and we would have people come in and lecture us. They were wonderful, you know. We'd have these day-long or two-day-long groupings with the *Ms.* board of scholars and then we could call on them during the year to help us with sources or ideas or check things, and some of those people I just still see and adore. Kate and Marisa Navaro. I can't pronounce her name. I see her every once in a while. And I just, you know, they're just wonderful people. Rayna Rapp was one of them — just a great group. So, that was partly because we'd gone from the status of being commercial to our educational status and we took — and that was part of that. But it was what we did anyway, I mean. It was trying to take all the resources that were around about feminism and let other people know about them, write about them in interesting ways. And that was a lot of the stuff I did.

I didn't know fiction. Ruth Sullivan did a lot of fiction and then Robin Morgan later, various other people. Joanne edited Alice Walker so she did a lot of that, too. But I did a lot of the electoral politics and the women's movement politics and things like that.

ANDERSON: Which era of the magazine was the most meaningful to you — because it's had so many different periods and editors.

THOM: It has had so many different periods with different editors. They're different. Because I was there not only through the original ownership and then the nonprofit status, I was also there when the Australians, two editors, came and took over the magazine. And then I was there again into a bit of the non-ad, nonprofit, again Ms.-controlled period, when Robin was editor. I guess I would have to say the '70s, though, because everything was so exciting and so new. I think intellectually the '80s were more interesting.

ANDERSON: How so?

THOM: Because the feminist academics had kicked in and while a lot of times you feel like they're recreating something that is sort of simpler and natural, more natural, a lot of the time they are digging out wonderful, exciting thoughts and concepts and there was a lot more of it going on in the '80s. There was a lot before we even started. There were feminist syllabuses coming out of places like the University of New York, SUNY in Syracuse, I think. I don't know. You might have, they probably still exist. But the Feminist Press was in existence and was publishing things, and KNOW, K-N-O-W from Pennsylvania, was publishing things. So there was a lot of feminist scholarship already going on, but it just — I think people got into the place where they could get tenure and could start doing research and had students, so they could pursue things in the '80s and there was a sort of blossoming of books and articles and conferences and —

So those two. I guess the '70s, I'd say, for just the sheer newness and exuberance and anger that was around. And self-importance. I mean, no one had a doubt that this would be a transformative movement, which indeed it was. There was no — people weren't tentative. And the '80s, because of what I said about the scholarship.

The '90s — you know, there were plenty of things going on but it was such a struggle, I mean, also towards the end of the '80s, just to keep alive, keep the magazine alive. It always was a struggle and that fell very hard on the shoulders of Gloria and Pat. The rest of us were somewhat insulated from it, but not completely, certainly. We had a lot of negotiation and confrontation, but mostly negotiation with the Writer's Union, which a lot of our friends were very high up [in]. And then for a while we, like I think the [*Village*] *Voice* did, thought about whether we should join the union, but I think we just didn't. It was just too hard for our structure — first of all, we had never defined ourselves as who was boss and who was not. I mean, that was something that happened. But we never had titles throughout the early part of the magazine, until the Australians came around and all of a sudden, we had titles. That was pretty funny.

I mean, here's the way we operated. At one point, I was doing research but I was also editor of the *Gazette* and I was writing pieces and I was doing what everyone else was. So I was doing a lot more writing than some other people who were editors and Gloria said, "Mary, would you

mind being on the masthead under the research department, because we have to have someone under the research department.” And I said, “No, I don’t mind that, but if I decide to leave *Ms.*, you’ll have to put me under editorial for the last several months.” And that was the only way you could get a credential, because we didn’t have any titles.

ANDERSON: How did you like going into management at *Ms.*?

THOM: At *Ms.*? Let’s see. I guess — I really didn’t do that. Well, you know what happened? Suzanne took a leave of absence because she was having her baby and I more or less took over and started — again, I didn’t have a title, but I was being the managing editor and doing the lineup of the stories and everything.

ANDERSON: Did you like that?

THOM: Yeah, yeah, I liked it. And hiring and firing. I always hired people as head of the research department. Once we decided we needed two people doing it, I hired someone and it was never a question that I wouldn’t hire them and someone else would hire them and be over us, you know. It just evolved that way. So, as I think I mentioned, I hired these people that actually had experience doing research for magazines and I learned that my sort of holistic way of doing research was not up to standard, so that was fine as long as they wanted to do it and I didn’t have to. So I did that and then, as I said, I sort of did some managing editor stuff for Suzanne.

There was a little bit of conflict, I remember, at one point, in my feeling, when another editor, Harriet Lyons, really wanted to be named an assistant managing editor and I thought, Why should she do that any more than any of the rest of us? And she didn’t get that title, and I think she was very upset and eventually left the magazine, although she’s completely close to the magazine. Once you’re at *Ms.*, you don’t really leave. So we just did a project with Harriet where we organized a whole series of pictures that Rita Waterman, who was the head of production, had done over the years, and we gave — it’s for Smith. It’s in the Smith Collection.

So there was never — but there was that feeling, and I remember walking home and being very anxious at that point, that somehow this floating structure of no titles but authority, if you wanted to take it and exercise it, would be disrupted because Harriet had this completely natural ambition. Not unnatural at all.

And then when the Australians — what happened was finally Gloria and Pat could not take it any more. We had become a nonprofit entity and we had gone along for another decade or something under this, with the help of contributions, and it was just too much work doing that and also getting ads and everything, and they finally were forced to look for a buyer. And these two Australian feminists, Anne Summers and Sandra [Yates] came along and they knew about *Ms.* and we had — I guess Anne had, or Sandra had used the caucus model to organize women’s politics

things in Australia, so it was a very good little mix, but it was completely different. I mean, basically, we just thought, you know, Well, maybe they'll just buy us and we can all stay. But as it turned out, they really wanted to run the magazine, or Anne did. Anne wanted to be editor and have very — and kept Joanne and me for some reason. I don't think she wanted to. I think Sandra basically made her, because I remember being interviewed by Anne, and it was just a very — you know, being interviewed for my own job was very, very, very weird. It was something I didn't expect, but was happening. And I think Anne would have let us go, but Sandra wanted us to stay. And later on, maybe after a year, I think Anne appreciated us. But it took a long time, because she had very different ideas about how a magazine should run.

ANDERSON: In terms of hierarchy and staffing or ideas?

THOM: Hierarchy and staffing, but also, she didn't understand why we had a research department, for instance, because she thought writers ought to be able to take responsibility for their own work, which they should but they don't. And she didn't understand really what an editor did. She was much more from a writer's perspective. That's what she'd done and that's what she knew. But, you know, these pieces came in and she would just sort of shake her head, because they weren't good enough to go in the magazine. She knew that. But she had no concept of the editing process. So I think she gradually came to appreciate that. And so she appreciated us more.

And we got along pretty well. And we certainly were treated well by them. At one point — she liked Gloria Jacobs very much, who was an editor at *Ms.*, and Gloria wanted to leave. Lots of people wanted to leave. And Anne wanted to keep her, so she offered to up her salary substantially. It would be substantially more than what we, Joanne and I, for instance, were making. And Gloria said she couldn't — she would come back for the higher salary but only if Anne would pay us that higher salary, too, which she did. (laughs) And then Gloria stayed another couple of months and left. So I always appreciated that.

So it was different. It was definitely different. It was definitely being owned by someone who wasn't us, and it was changed enough so that it was a little uncomfortable. We were using a lot of celebrities on the cover. There was a lot of good stuff we did, you know, and basically, my job didn't change because I still had the same kind of beat. I still did the pieces on women's health or women's movement things and political stuff.

ANDERSON: But you were happy to see that period end?

THOM: I was happy to see the period end but I wasn't as unhappy as other people were during that period. When it ended, it looked like *Ms.* was going to become a newsletter at best, so that was very difficult. We all were — a bizarre period of us all sitting in the magazine and playing bridge every

afternoon because there was nothing to do. This was in the period when Lang [Communications] had bought the magazine, before Robin and Gloria basically blackmailed him, I think, into keeping it going as a magazine as opposed to eating it up for the other women's magazines that he owned by saying if you did this, we'll go public and blah-blah — although I think he appreciated the magazine on its own to a certain extent because he knew that the other magazines, like *Working Women*, had come only because *Ms.* was there, so —

ANDERSON: Why did you leave in 1992?

THOM: I think that it was clear that I wasn't — Robin had been made editor. You know, there were various people who wrote for *Ms.*, like Barbara Ehrenreich, who would have much preferred that I be editor, you know, but Robin really had the name and the public persona to be able to do it. And that wasn't a problem, and I had no problem working with Robin. As I said, we became closer, I think, during that period than we had been before and remain, certainly, best friends now.

But you know, there wasn't that much more I could do. I couldn't change my job again, I guess. I'd changed it many times. I had done the *Gazette*, I had done sort of management stuff, I had left and written books — there wasn't another job that I could expand into. And I think at that point we wanted — Gloria certainly wanted and others wanted someone to write a book about the magazine, because people were starting writing books themselves, and we wanted to tell our own story. So that's what happened. I left to write the book. I'm not sure if it was engineered, if I decided or others decided, but it was basically how decisions were made around there anyway.

ANDERSON: So you left to write the book.

THOM: I left because I couldn't really stay there and write a book about it.

ANDERSON: Right, right.

THOM: And then I don't think there was any real sense that I would go back. I stayed as a contributing editor and, you know, when Marcia [Ann Gillespie] was editor and things like that.

ANDERSON: But that was for the next ten years and now you don't have any —

THOM: No, I don't. I mean, what I did, I worked — we all worked on the interim issues that happened after the Feminist Majority bought *Ms.* We put out three interim issues and another one was put out, and I worked on three of those. And then this last — you know, it's going through another transition and I remember saying to I don't know who it was, "Well, we're certainly not going to go back and do another." We had done the best *Ms.* fiction,

the best of *Ms.* I said, “We could do the best of what didn’t make it into the magazine.”

ANDERSON: What didn’t make it into your book?

THOM: Oh, what didn’t make it into my book. I was mentioning to you that Lindsay Van Gelder who I edited at the magazine and who’s a good friend, wrote a review of my book for *The Nation* and she complained that I didn’t tell stories of conflict and all the stories that I could’ve about *Ms.*, although she was very supportive anyway. She said, “There certainly is some story to be told about what” — and I think she’s right here — “about what the difference between Gloria and the magazine is, and how they interacted with each other and how the people at *Ms.* sort of acceded to Gloria being the front person, even when we might have disagreed with her at times, and how that worked itself out.”

And I think that is a story that should be told. I don’t know that I could tell it. You know, I just don’t — my mind doesn’t work that way. And Gloria is so all-encompassing in the way that she would be open to ideas that it’s hard to think of her as someone who was imposing her concepts, because she wasn’t. It’s just that she was so visible that — what I think Lindsay was saying was that she was so visible that it didn’t matter if some of us disagreed with her because hers was the thing that the public thought was *Ms.*’s position, even if we would, you know, publish articles that were contradictory, which we often did. So that was one thing I didn’t tell.

Let’s see. There was a woman who came out as a lesbian and we did this whole interview and we talked about her love affair with someone else who was on the staff who called me in a panic two weeks later and said, “You’re not going to put that in the book, are you?” I said, “Oh. Well, OK, I won’t.” So there are certain stories like that which is the peril of people talking to people they know well. They’ll blab on.

I don’t know. I’ve tried to be as fair as I could to the Aussies, although I don’t think they liked what I wrote. But I do think they were –

ANDERSON: Yeah, I think it comes across as even-handed from an outsider.

THOM: Yeah, I think they were pretty good. I can’t think of anything.

ANDERSON: So for the 20-odd years that you were intensely involved with *Ms.* –

THOM: From ’72, yeah, ’72 to ’91.

ANDERSON: Yeah, did it consume your whole life?

THOM: Oh, it was very consuming.

ANDERSON: I’m trying to imagine what those late night meetings and all that — if there was life outside of *Ms.* and if there was, what it looked like?

THOM: There weren't for many people. I mean, people like Suzanne left and went and had her husband and kids, and other people did that, too. And I certainly had my friends outside the magazine and I always went on a motorcycle trip. That's what our family does. So we always would go out to New Mexico and do our family motorcycle trips. Joanne took sabbaticals, actually, and went off for three months and did things. But it was very consuming. But it was more than just a magazine, so it would be — many of my friends were and are connected to *Ms.*, and the political activities you would do would be connected with the magazine as well. So it was pretty encompassing, but it wasn't just a magazine. That didn't mean I was a workaholic. In a way, I think people work harder now than we did. We spent hours and hours at it, but we were doing lots of different things.

ANDERSON: It was more like full-time activism than workaholism. Were you involved in other feminist organizations at the time, or did *Ms.* take all your feminist energy?

THOM: Pretty much, I think. *Ms.* took all my feminist — I'm trying to remember, except for the women's history stuff. I was always a member of NOW and a member of the caucus. The caucus was more involving because my sister was connected with it as well and so I would go to the conventions and things like that. But I wasn't involved in the Manhattan — I was always involved in these organizations on a more national level than local level, so, and there were some people at *Ms.* who organized, you know, local, domestic shelters and things like that, but I didn't do that. I gave at the office. (laughs)

ANDERSON: I'd like you to reflect, if you can, a little bit about, sort of, the difference of feminism over the years.

THOM: I always find it difficult to do that, you know. If you've watched things evolve, they seem to evolve. But I can say that in the '70s we sounded different to the world, and I think part of this was announcing yourselves. You had to have a rhetoric that identified yourself. A lot of that sounds angry and confrontational and ideological and rhetorical, but it was mostly just a way of branding ourselves as something new and something different than, you know, recruiting people, I guess.

But there was a lot of anger. There was a lot of things that were wrong and ways that people lived their lives. They were angry at themselves, I think, for doing that and angry at other people for creating the conditions that they were in. So that was a different phase, and I think it was healthy, it was a healthy anger. It made compromise pretty difficult, even within the movement, because you'd been asked to compromise so much of your life that even in a forward-seeming way, it was difficult to let your initial ideal go.

And then, I think, in the '80s, we realized that something — because first of all, I think you realize, and I'm sure you do, that all along, people were saying, Feminism is dead. You know, there were headlines we collected at the magazine from 1973 on that would say that, so it was dying every year, but then in the '80s, it really was transforming into something that was quite different and it was because people had refined their commitment to feminism and women in different ways and had started different groups that were doing different things.

There was the Coalition of Neighborhood Women, for instance, who were organizing working-class women on some scale. There were women who spent their life organizing against rape or against battery, and that's very interesting, how those movements — like in the United States, there was early feminist organizing around the issue of rape, but domestic violence took much longer, whereas in England, it was completely the opposite, and I'm not sure [why]. Someone should explore that and find out what happened. It's probably just, you know, these were the causes that caught on.

But anyway, in the '80s, I think there was, it was much more dispersed, the women's movement. It was harder to figure out what it was. It certainly wasn't just NOW and people could sort of think that, maybe, in the '70s. There were all these other organizations that were — and there was an article that one of the *Times* columnists wrote recently, where he took the women's movement to task for not supporting — for not doing any work in the area of sexual slavery. And the only way someone could write something like that is if they didn't recognize that Equality Now is a feminist organization, you know.

So there was a lot of — there has been a lot of confusion, I think, about feminism. They think that it's not vibrant and not as effective as it once was because it's called by other names.

ANDERSON: And you see it alive and well in 2005.

THOM: I see it sort of alive and well. There certainly are periods and [are] still periods now — there were periods in the '80s when young women really hesitated to call themselves [feminists], and now it's still hard. I mean, to call yourself a feminist is to what, say you hate men? Especially [for] women and young adult women, I think it's really hard. And that still goes on today. But I was at a conference recently when the woman — and I won't be able to remember her name, who's head of the Rock the Vote organization, and she was saying, "Don't worry about us. We're really out there." And she actually convinced me. She said, "You know, there's always a sort of tension between older feminists and younger feminists, and younger feminists would say, you know, we need our space to organize." I mean, we were a pretty overpowering group, those of us who grew up in the '60s in very many ways, cultural ways as well as in [being] feminists, because, you know, rock music was our generation's music and all this stuff that we would claim and, you know, that could never change

and whatever. But young women would challenge that and then older feminists would say, Well, you're just reinventing the wheel. We already had that discussion, you know. So I think that always goes on and is still going on. I think maybe younger feminists are more engaged now than they were maybe five years ago. I don't know why I have that feeling, maybe because I've just bought into them.

ANDERSON: Five more years of W [George W. Bush.]

THOM: There you go. There is that. (laughter)

ANDERSON: What lessons, though, would you want the younger generation to make sure that they learn from your generation?

THOM: Right. Well, I'd hate to see the wheel being reinvented over and over again. And we spent so much time trying to figure out how to come into coalition with other groups and how to work in coalition. I would hope that would be easier for people now. I don't know if it is or not.

What lessons? You know, one of the lessons is that as much as you try to work towards it — well, I would say that for younger feminists, because I just know, like my nephew and his generation of men are much better. They've just been brought up — at least the ones that have been brought up in progressive families, they're much more — don't want to have the kind of expectations that men of my generation had of women. So that's terrific, but I still think that women have to concentrate on their own lives as well as what's happening around them, to make sure that they're living them the way they should and not going crazy thinking that they have to raise the kids and have a wonderful career and do all this without any help.

I think people work too hard today. I think young people work too hard in the workplace. I think just what's demanded of people from the workplace, I would say that would be a good thing to organize against. And I bet women could do it because we still have the burden of nurturing the family and that basis of activity.

ANDERSON: We've lost a lot of gains in the labor movement, that's for sure.

THOM: Well, that's true, that's true. The labor —

ANDERSON: I mean, that eight-hour work day is just out the window.

THOM: Out the window, and now they were trying to, you know, the Bush — trying to attack overtime for low-level professional people. I really think that's a good new movement someone should start: a new eight-hour day, or even less — seven. A four-day week, I think.

ANDERSON: So what's next for you?

THOM: I'm working now on a book on Bella Abzug and I'm trying to collect stories from people who knew her and worked with her through the labor movement and the civil rights movement. She was a defender of Willie McGee, who was a guy, a black man, who was executed in Mississippi for his relationship with a white woman. Through the peace movement, she was an organizer for Women Strike for Peace, and through the women's movement, with the caucus. And Bella in Congress and then starting WEDO, which is the Women's Environmental and Developmental Organization, where she sort of started organizing women worldwide.

That's basically what I'm doing. I'm trying to figure out how she managed to do all that in her life, and how she took what she learned from the labor movement about organizing and what she learned from Congress about writing bills into the UN and figured out how to make it work for NGOs and the United Nations and international conferences. It's an amazing life and also very colorful, because Bella is who she was.

So, there is a quote I have from Moe Foner, who is now dead, but was an organizer, a labor organizer, who was asked in his oral history what Bella was like in those days, and they were talking about when Bella was at Hunter and he had graduated from City College, and he said, "Just like today, only less so." I thought that was a great quote.

Anyway, that's what I'm doing now and I don't know what else. I do writing for nonprofits, mostly about women's stuff, still. So, I will hope to continue doing that. Certainly none of us can retire. We didn't build up a nest egg, so.

ANDERSON: The feminist pension fund — nobody's created that yet.

THOM: Right. (laughter)

ANDERSON: Is there anything else that you want to add that we haven't —

THOM: Not that I can think of, but you know, I could call you up and tell you I want to write a paragraph or something.

ANDERSON: OK, great. Thanks, Mary.

THOM: All right. Thank you.

END TAPE 3 END OF INTERVIEW

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