Andrews: The following interview is being conducted with Patricia Benavidez on behalf of the Washington Women’s History Consortium for the 1977 Ellensburg/Houston International Women’s Year Conference’s Oral History Project. The interview is taking place on April third, at the home of the interviewer in Seattle. The interviewer is Mildred Andrews.

As a beginning, Patricia, would you tell me briefly about your growing up years? Your family, your community, your school? How you developed your ideas about your role as a woman in the home and in society?

Benavidez: Okay. I was born in New Mexico in a very small rural community. I grew up with five brothers. I was a non-English-speaking student when I started school. But fortunately for me, I had a phenomenal, phenomenal first year teacher that just really took a liking to me. And I really attribute all of my later success to her encouragement. And I would say that I’m a teacher today because of her. And her name was Miss Pegram.

And I would give anything to know if she is still living, because I would go see her in a second. She was just such an influential person in my life. And my five brothers were very protective of me. And I think I got a lot of my strength from that, as well as from a very strong, nurturing family. We were poor; I didn’t know we were poor. But I had a family that was very supportive of me.

And we used to go out in the fall and pick cotton out in the cotton fields. And my first impression of setting a goal came from my mother, who used to take me alongside of her while we were picking cotton. And I was real tiny then, and the cotton stacks were way too big. So Mom made me just a real small cotton sack, and I would fill up the little cotton sack with cotton. And then put it in her bigger sack, but then she would carry it up to be weighed.

And she also, besides that at the time, would take in a lot of ironing and laundry to do for other people. And the people that ran the floral company were one of her clients, and they were real nice people. And the men always liked to tease me if I missed a (?). And he told me one day, he said, “If you pick two hundred pounds of cotton,” he said, “in one week, I will get you a pink cotton sack.” And I thought that was just way cool.

And so I really worked. And I used to take a lot of care picking my cotton. My brothers and everything, they’d throw rocks and dirt and everything into their cotton sacks to try to get more weight. But I was very meticulous. And I would pull the cotton out of the boll, which made it even lighter. And so, you know, it took me forever. But I did, I met my goal. And I was so excited that I was going to get a pink cotton sack. I don’t know why, but I was. Anyway, Mr. Wolf never came through. And that had a real
impact on me, because, you know, I had met my goal. But I learned to hate pink. From that point on, I did not like pink! Until about 1980, in the ‘80s, when I was working with a spiritual teacher, and she helped me work through that issue. And pink is now again one of my favorite colors.

But that taught me a lot, because it taught me, you know, that you could set a goal, and you don’t have to reach it at one time, but you take it in small steps, and that really stood out. And I must have been seven or eight at the time, and that really stood out to me.

So even as a little girl, I never liked doing all the traditional, domestic things. I always loved being outside with my dad. He worked on a ranch, and I was always outside riding horses with him. You know, being out in the outdoors, riding the horses. And then in the fall, picking cotton with my mom. I was just very attuned, and my dad was very instrumental in that he really challenged me to learn the English language. And he didn’t speak very much English, but he understood it. He would read the paper, and then he would ask me how you would say certain words in English. And so his challenge to me was to learn a word a day, so that improved my vocabulary.

I went through school; the school didn’t realize that there was racism, didn’t realize that there was sexism, all those terms at the time. I just thought you went to school, did work hard, played by the rules, and you’d be successful. But the first inkling I ever got that things were different between boys and girls was when I was a sophomore in high school, and I was very goal-oriented, you know. And I knew that I wanted to go to college. That was going to be my ticket out of poverty, I knew that. And watching my mom always work, I knew that I didn’t have a choice of not working, that working was going to be it for me. And Mama always kept emphasizing, you know, “Education is your ticket out.”

And I remember as a sophomore, I applied to UCLA. And I applied as Patricia, and I was declined. And then from somewhere out in the universe, something told me to apply again to UCLA, and I applied as Pat. And I was accepted. And that is one of those dings, “ah-ha”s that you reach in life. And I thought, hmm, that’s very interesting. So then we went on, and because I couldn’t afford to go to UCLA, I wound up going to Texas Woman’s University, which was a highly regarded school in physical education, which is what I wanted to be. And I’m really grateful for that experience, because there was a school where you got a chance to compete. You weren’t put down because you were a female. You had a chance for leadership. You had a chance to excel. At the time, athletics weren’t at the level of advancement that they are now, but you participated in sports and all that, so I really appreciated my college career.

And then, when I was a senior, I wasn’t too worried about a job. I just knew that I was going to get a job. And I went to the National Conference in P.E., and I met with some people from Phoenix, and I got hired. And then that afternoon, I was at another session, and I ran into this guy from Springfield, Oregon. And we just started talking. And I mean, it was like a match made in heaven. He had everything that I had ever wanted, and I had always wanted to go to Oregon ever since I was little. I always used to draw the trees and the snow. My art teacher would ask me and I’d say, “It’s about Oregon. I want to go see Oregon.” I had read about Lewis and Clark, and then, you know, I was reading in *Sports Illustrated* about the track teams from the U of O. And when this
man appeared, it was like, wow! And I told him, I said, “I can’t go. I’d love to go, but I

So he went and talked to the guy from Phoenix, and he got me out of that. And he

offered me a job right off the bat, you know. He said, “The only thing that I have to do is

get it approved by the school board on Monday.” And I thought, Oregon! I don’t know

anybody in Oregon.

So I didn’t tell my folks or anything until I had signed the contract. Because my

family wanted me to go back to college, I mean, back to New Mexico. And my mom,

unbeknownst to me, had been a real advocate for me. My father was my hero in many

ways in that he challenged me to always, excellence academically. But my mom was that

undying force of anchor support for me that I did not know about. Because, you know, I
didn’t like doing dishes, I didn’t like doing housework, I didn’t like cooking. You know,
I did it, but I didn’t like it. Like I said, I spent most of my time outside. And I did not find
out until many years later that it was my mother that had finally convinced my dad to let
me go to school in Texas. Because he had wanted me to go to school like fifty miles from
home. And she told him, “If you don’t, you’re going to lose your daughter.” So he had

finally relented and said it was okay. And that was one of the only two times I ever saw
my dad cry. One was when I left for college in Texas, and the second was the morning

that I left New Mexico for Oregon.

So you know, my mom was always there. She sacrificed so much for me to make

sure that I always had what I needed. My brothers went without and everything, but she
always would work extra to make sure that I had the clothes that I needed, or that I had
the extra five dollars that I might need to go do something else. She was just that support
system for me that I didn’t realize. You know, the overt things I did and I always

appreciated, but it was those underneath things that she always did. And I daresay that if
it weren’t for my mom’s sacrifice and my mom’s prayers, I would not have made it.

So I wound up in Oregon in 1965. I taught two years there. The guy that had hired

me was a real mentor for me. And I started coaching, and he wanted, that was when
coaching for girls’ sports was really starting. This was pre-Title IX. And I was a real
advocate for girls’ sports. And we got a girls’ team going, and my hockey teams, what
was considered then the state tournament, they were more like play days, really. Nothing
like what we’ll see tonight with Tennessee and Rutgers playing basketball for the
national championship on national TV. But it was the start. It was the start of girls’ (?)
And I had wonderful teams. I had incredible support from the parents, who were really
excited about their girls getting an opportunity to play.

And so I coached hockey, volleyball, basketball and tennis, all four of those
sports, for less than what the football coach got for just coaching football. And we did
quite well, and we had to, of course, fight for practice space. So being the little daredevil
that I was, I had my girls; I scheduled my girls for practice during Christmas break. And I
scheduled for the gym and stuff. And then lo and behold, as the time arose, I did this like
in September. And in December, early December, the athletic director came up to me and
said that we couldn’t have the gym.

And I said, “But yes we can. I’ve already scheduled it.”

And he said, “No. The boys are going to be practicing and everything.”

And I thought well, how do we overcome this? So luckily for me, one of my girls,
her father was a very prominent attorney there in Springfield. And so I talked with him,
and he said, “Let’s do this.” He said, “Why don’t you go out and have your practices, and have your girls practice outside. And I’ll have the newspaper there.”

So I said, “Okay.” [laughs] You know. Innocent as I was. And so we did that, and the pictures showed up in the paper. Well, one of the school board members got a hold of it, and so we got our practice space back, and we were able to practice in indoors.

So those were kind of some of the early struggles that really pointed out to me that things were different for girls than they were for boys. And salary was also another thing. And like I said, coaching four sports, making less than the football coach made for coaching one sport.

I taught in Oregon for two years, and then I had an opportunity to go into elementary P.E. in Tacoma. So I chose to come to Tacoma, and I taught there for ten years. And that was at the start of when issues around, the pro-choice issue came up on abortion, you know, ERA and everything started moving forward. And my activism increased considerably. And I was very active in Tacoma with the teachers’ union. And we pushed a lot for women’s issues. I became active in several groups.

One thing about me, because I feel like I belong to so many cultures, I’ve never put my energies totally into one or the other. I’ve kind of pretty much seen myself as the fulcrum in the middle. And then, you know, sending my energies out to support the full realm, the full realm of issues. And in the early mid ‘70s, I served on the NEA task force for Chicano education, in which we did a lot of work at the time, pushing for bilingual education, and pushing for issues that would support Chicanos in education. I was also on the NEA women’s leadership training program, which was a program designed to help women develop leadership skills that would increase their participation in the association and union work and the NEA and WEA, and locally.

And then I also here at WEA served on the legislative commission. And there we helped to push the House Bill 413, which was the women’s equity bill in education. And we did a lot of work in the areas of promoting human rights.

Then in 1976, I decided that it was time to come out of the closet, and so I did. And I remember so clearly, I was flying from Washington, DC, and I had a layover in Chicago. And I read the newspaper where the Gaylord decision, the Supreme Court in the State of Washington had ruled on the Gaylord decision, which was Jim Gaylord, who was a gay teacher in Tacoma, and they ruled that the district had the right to fire him. And he had never come out. You know, they just pushed him out of the closet. And so he had lost his job and the Supreme Court ruled against him. And so I thought, oh, boy. Here we go.

So I didn’t realize it at the time, because sometimes– coming out is such an individual process. And it was like for me, I loved teaching, but I didn’t realize that underneath there was a lot of fear I was going to lose my job. And I did not want to lose my job. It wasn’t so much for being the fact that I had come out of the closet. It was more an underlying fear that I would be accused of molesting a child. And that, I knew, I could never live with.

And so in March of ’77, I decided there was so much coming, there were so many opportunities out there, that I decided to leave teaching. And I did. I left teaching in March–

Andrews: Was that before or after you came out?
Benavidez: It was right in the process of it. And so I, and that’s how I wound up in Seattle. I moved to Seattle in May of that year. And that’s when the whole thing in ’77, you know, the whole thing with the International Women’s Year started, and wound up at that conference. And then that moved to Houston. And then from there, I was working at WEA for three years. And then went out on my own, and went back to teaching twelve years ago. And here I am today.

Andrews: That’s quite an odyssey.

Benavidez: It’s been an adventure, that’s for sure. [laughs]

Andrews: So let’s back up just a little bit and, what was it like to be a woman in this area’s Hispanic community, say, in the ‘70s?

Benavidez: Well, it was very different than what it is now. I remember my two years in Oregon, I did not run into a single Hispanic person. And it took me two years, I think it was in 1969, two years after I was in Tacoma that I ran into another Hispanic person here in the Northwest. And that was when I first started getting involved with the United Farm Workers, that’s when I found out about the United Farm Workers. And Cesar Chavez’ fight for the farm workers. That’s just the way it was. There weren’t that many Hispanic people up here that I, you know, ran into, because I was active professionally and stuff. And I was in Tacoma at the time.

And the way that I ran into some more Hispanic people was one night I got a call from home from this guy wanting to speak to a Barbara Benavidez. And I said, Barbara Benavidez? And she was a daughter of another person who was involved with one of the other Hispanic groups that lived in Tacoma. And that’s how I became, started meeting more people. And then through all the work with Affirmative Action, I worked on several Affirmative Action groups and stuff that pushed to push Affirmative Action plans, both in education and in the private sector. I started meeting more and more people that way. And in WEA, you know, started meeting people. And the executive director in Tacoma, at the Tacoma Union at that time, was also Hispanic. So he’s the one that got me going.

And I’ll never forget that, because I think it was in 1971, ’72, somewhere in there, the local union reps met at my building. So I was always curious about what was going on. And one afternoon I just walked in and sat down and watched what was going on. It was fascinating to me, because I’ve always been fascinated with government. So he came, and he said, “Are you Chicana?”

And I said, “No, I’m Spanish.” Because that’s how we had been conditioned in New Mexico.

So we started talking, and Frank says, “You know, you should get involved in the union.” And he said, “There’s a minority involvement program that NEA has.” And he said, “It’s coming up, and it’s in Missoula, Montana. Would you like to go?”

And so I said, “Yeah, I’d love to go.” So he made sure that I was funded to go. So that’s what started my activism in the union in the early ’70s was as a result of Frank’s tutelage.

And I went to Missoula, and I found out, and all of a sudden all these labels like racism and sexism and all this stuff started coming out. And it was like, wow! It opened
up a whole new world for me. It was like the onion got unpeeled, *whoom!* in one big (?). And it was just amazing. From that point on, life was never the same for me. And I just became a real activist and a real advocate. And it’s been that way ever since then. And I would say that my strategies are somewhat different now. But you know, that passion has never died. It’s still there. That fire is still there. I hope I’ve learned, and gained some wisdom from it. And I feel real confident that we have made an impact, we have made a difference.

Andrews: Okay. I’m going to ask you the same question about coming out.

Benavidez: Okay. As I mentioned, it was coming on that plane trip from DC, and you know, reading in Chicago about the Gaylord decision, and then deciding that I couldn’t stay quiet. And I left in March. And that spring, I went down to the legislature. And that was the first year that the gay rights bill was introduced.

Andrews: What year was that?

Benavidez: It was ’76 or ’77. I forget. One of those two years. I think it was ’77, because I was just in the process of that. Anyway, I remember Jeanette Williams, who was the president of the Seattle City Council at that time, spoke on behalf of that bill, and Charlie Brydon. And they also had Dave Kopay, who was a professional football player, he was the first professional athlete to come out.

And they all spoke on behalf of the bill. Of course, it went nowhere. But again, it planted the seed. And I think it’s been that issue that for me, other than the ERA, has shown the length of time that monumental change takes. You know, I think in my younger years, it was like, why can’t this happen now? Why can’t it happen right away? It’s just, it’s right, it doesn’t hurt people, you know. It’s for the good of people. And that issue, like I say, has really been the pivotal one that has shown me how long it takes.

You know, I remember in 1980, I believe it was, in fact, I still have the green T-shirt, where it says the last ERA walk and run that we had at Seward Park, you know, still trying, when we were trying to get those last three states to pass the ERA so it could get on the constitution. So I would say for me, the biggest loss of this lifetime, or regret, if I were to have a regret, would be that we still do not have the ERA as part of this country’s constitution. And the right for all people, you know, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender or age or whatever, that all people are not accorded the rights that this constitution stands for. That, to me, would be the regret that I would leave with. Other than that, you know, I think, you know, life’s been a great adventure. I can’t complain. [laughs]

And so with that, then, when I came to Seattle that spring, I started getting involved. And that year, in ’77, I served as the, you know, in Ellensburg, that was the big issue that just, you know, I thought it was going to create World War III in Ellensburg. And also in Houston. And in that year I was the keynote speaker for the women’s rights rally down in Waterfront Park. And you know, you just continue. We’d try to get these issues like through the unions, and, you know, everywhere you go. Always push for all of the issues that were important to me.
The one issue in the women’s portfolio that I would say gave me the most difficulty was pro-choice. And that was because, not so much because of religion, I was reared Catholic and everything but for me, just because I have such an appreciation for life. And that was a real struggle for me. But where it was very clear was that I did not believe that the government has a right to dictate a woman’s right to choose. And I had three cousins that had coat hanger type of abortions. And all three of them almost died. And that made the decision for me. You know, we’ve got to have the right to choose. And that’s why I supported women’s choice. But it was difficult. And all the rest of the women’s agenda seemed very natural, like a duck in water for me.

Andrews: Regarding the pro-choice issue, did you have conversations with conservative women that were opposed to it?

Benavidez: Yeah, I did. In fact, that’s how I met Kay Regan. On one of those, I think we were either on a panel or something together at the UW. And we were talking, and I was talking about it. And that was the part that I tried to get across to Kay, that while I might agree with her philosophically about life being very important and everything, it still did not mean that the government could dictate to women the choices that they could make.

As I’ve gotten older, I’ve thought about the issue even more. You know, what does it mean for life, what does it mean for choice. But if I had to still make the choice again today, I still would defend a woman’s right to choose, very strongly.

Andrews: By the time of the conference, did you have other major affiliations and networks besides the ones you’ve told me about? Women’s organizations?

Benavidez: You know, NOW, Women’s Political Caucus, you know, with the state teachers’ union, and locally, and nationally with that. With the Hispanic women, there were more informal networks than formal networks.

Andrews: Could you describe those informal networks with other Hispanic women?

Benavidez: Well, I think, you know, the reason, I’ve always thought that one of the reasons why those networks have stayed informal is the lack of visibility, for one. And Hispanic women have not only had -- the networks that were available were really dealing a lot with the issue of racism. So whether you’re Hispanic or African American or Asian American or American Indian, in working through those issues, we also had to work through the issue of sexism within those groups. And so for me, I found my effectiveness that it was greater in just galvanizing women to become involved, and to start standing up for themselves. You know, start speaking up for themselves. Pushing like through MALDEF, the Mexican-American Legal Defense Education Fund. That was the main one that I was involved with, plus helping the United Farm Workers. Those were the two major groups that I belonged to. And then working with other Hispanic women through those areas and pushing for education for Hispanic women. And, you know, Hispanic males as well.

At the time, I’ve always been fascinated with how politically the terminology changes, you know, from colored, black, African American, and Spanish, Hispanic,
Chicano, Latino, etcetera. And to me, those are all efforts of groups to self identify, and a sense of self empowerment. But like I said earlier, for me it’s never been enough to just push for one issue. For example, if I’m in a group supporting women’s sports like through the Women’s Sports Foundation, I am also looking at the impact of, like now, the impact of nutrition on Hispanic women, the participation of Hispanic women in physical activity, in sports. I’m looking at the opportunity that lesbians, how they’re put down often for being involved. I don’t think we see it as much anymore, and it’s been very interesting to see how that whole conditioning, you know, has changed, in terms of what does it mean for a girl to be involved in sports today. You know, talking with women who are very faith-based, working with that on how spirituality, you know, the different expressions of spirituality and how that happens. Those have all been issues that have been of great interest to me.

And if I’m at, let’s see, a group that’s talking about, right now, English language learners at school. You know, I focus not just on what is happening to the Hispanic English language learners, but what’s happening to our Asian-speaking students, you know, what is happening to a lot of the students that come, let’s say, from rural, poor communities, more so back East than in the South, and they come with a different language. And they’re put down for their language. So I try to pull the whole thing together. To me, everything is related. Everything is connected.

Andrews: So how did you become interested and involved in the Ellensburg conference?

Benavidez: Well, you know me. You jump in the water, you just start swimming. [laughs] What do I remember? That was such an important part. That was like the pinnacle. The Ellensburg conference was like the pinnacle. It’s like the crest in the wave, if you will, of everything that had been happening here in Washington around women’s issues. To be honest, I went to Ellensburg thinking it was going to be just a really nice conference, and everything was going to work out. And we get there, and here’s all of these buses. And all of these women in blue. [laughs] And it was like, oh my God! I think it was blue.

Andrews: Blue and white?

Benavidez: And I thought, what is this? And it’s like a wildfire started spreading about what was going on. And it was just the most amazing two or three days. And to this minute, I have always said if the angels had not sent Judith Lonnquist to this planet, women’s issues would have taken a big, big defeat as a result of Ellensburg. It was Judith’s just leadership, her determination, her skill at being able to facilitate that agenda in those days that I think saved things. I’ve always said that Judith is probably one of the most unsung, how do you say it, one of the most unrecognized people, even though she has received recognition, in terms of her contributions to women’s issues in this thing. And I was thinking on the way up here this morning that Judith just hung in there and just kept going. And just her ability to not only keep her agenda moving from the chair, but just the network that she was able to work with so many people, of how we were able to work the issues out on the floor, and keep things going.
And I think it was the issue on lesbian rights, that was like a war. Oh, that debate was like a war! Even more than the pro-choice issue, and that was like a war, too. The whole thing was like a war. But just the intensity of energy that that issue commanded. And at the end, I remember Judith just stepping off the podium for a little bit, and she had tears coming from her eyes. Just, you know, the impact that that discussion had had on everybody.

And for me, Ellensburg was a pivotal point because it, number one, showed the ability of women to come together. And even though there were, like I said, there were some of us who were still maybe on the borderline on the pro-choice issue, of being able to give and take, to organize, to articulate the issues that were important. And everybody’s contributions coming together. You know, the way that we selected the delegation. We knew that we had to go as a, you know, as a slate of candidates if we were going to survive. Otherwise, we would have lost it.

Andrews: This is selecting a delegation?

Benavidez: Going to the national conference in Houston, uh huh. But it was just an amazing, amazing weekend. I mean, I can still see, I can still feel the energy and just seeing Judith up there on the podium and carrying us through. It was just powerful. And the thing that Judith did I think was so wow was her ability to pull together people. And keep them focused on what needed to be done. You know, it’s pretty powerful.

Andrews: How did the Hispanic Caucus organize?

Benavidez: To be honest with you, at that conference, I wasn’t involved so much with any one group. It was like Judith had me going out, touching base with all the groups. So the inner workings of how the Hispanic Caucus organized, I can’t really speak. All I know is I was there at part of the meetings, and other meetings I wasn’t. But just the ones that were there, really, oh, what’s her name? (?) was the one that was really instrumental. And Lucero. Oh, what’s Lucero’s first name? Esther. Esther Lucero, were two of the women that were very involved with organizing the Hispanic Caucus. And I’ve lost track of most of them. Lily Aguil, the last I talked to her, she was working on the regional transit.

Andrews: I haven’t been able to find her.

Benavidez: And she was living in (?), but I don’t know where she is now. And I don’t know if Esther is still in town. She was with Catholic Services, with the archdiocese. But I’ve heard rumors that she had gone back to New Mexico. And those were the two, the mother-daughter team, oh, it will come back to me. The mother was from the valley, and the daughter was in Olympia. She worked with us. You go through so many names, and you know, when you don’t have contact with them for several years, as I get older, I don’t remember their names. They were the other ones. Those were the foremost people that were involved with the Hispanic Caucus. Oh, what was her name? If I saw the picture—
Benavidez: But, so I did that. And then I worked a lot with Kathy, who was the, with the YMCA up here at the university. What was Kathy’s last name? With the lesbian issue.

Andrews: Kathy Boyle?

Benavidez: Boyle, yes.

Andrews: She’s changed her name to Una Boyle.

Benavidez: Oh, okay. And she was very involved with the Lesbian Caucus. And there’s another woman that I think deserves a lot of credit. Well, two women, really. And one was Clara Fraser. You know we cannot speak of anything related to the women’s movement without talking about Clara. Particularly with her work with women in the trades, and working-class women. She was such an ardent, ardent advocate for that. And her whole plight and her whole journey, fighting Seattle City Light for women workers was just amazing.

And even after she won her case, I remember doing a consulting job on preventing race and sex harassment for City Light in the ‘80s. And I was appalled by what I had to endure. I remember walking into workshops, and the men just sitting there with their arms crossed and sitting in the back of the room, you know. And the women sharing with me the experiences that they had. How they endured that and survived is just a real testament and a tribute to their courage and determination. And Clara was, you know, the leader in all that.

I remember one workshop that I did up at the Skagit. And this, again, shows how women are sometimes each other’s worst enemies. There was a woman that came into the workshop wearing a cap, and the cap said SHIT, Sexual Harassment In-house Training. And I talked to her about it privately. I chose not to respond to it. And I talked to her privately and I told her it was inappropriate and everything. And she was very adamant that she was going to keep wearing it.

And so, you know, that was just another case where some women in these environments are so afraid of speaking out that they will go in with the perpetrator just to survive. That was the point I tried to make in my report. That the conditions were such that women did not feel safe. Not only for the open exploitation, but the subtle exploitations that they felt that they could not be themselves. And you know, Clara’s fight against City Light I think made a big, big difference in that arena.

And another woman that I think was important, she was part of the Socialist Party, and that was Rita Shaw. And Rita was always, both of them, were great organizers -- real advocates for the full portfolio of women’s agenda, and very hard workers in their unions. And I haven’t seen Rita in a long, long time. I had heard that she had not been well. Clara passed in the mid-’90s, I believe.

And she started Radical Women. Even though there always seemed to be a friction, if you will, between the women in the more traditional organizations and the women on the fringe organizations, their contributions are so vital to the women’s portfolio. And I think they have to be recognized. And for me, I’ve always been able to go in and out, you know. That’s just who I am. I like to include people, and I believe that
Andrews: That’s well put. It’s very important. Tell me about your election as a delegate to Houston.

Benavidez: Okay. Well, as I shared earlier, as part of the organizing that went on, it became very clear that if we didn’t have a slate of candidates, and everybody back the entire slate, then we ran the risk of losing the majority of candidates, because they outnumbered us. I mean, I disagreed to my dying breath with those women, as I did, one thing I do have to give them credit for is that they did one heck of a job organizing to get there. Now they were organized by men. They were paraded around, herded around by the men who were in charge. But nonetheless, that organizing effort has to be acknowledged and so, you know, when it came to developing the selection of the slate, there was real big discussions, and people talked.

And so I happened to be selected because, at least this is my perception, anyway, because I was Hispanic, I was in education. I was openly out, openly lesbian. You know, boom, boom, boom, boom. So I represented many hats. So I was elected as one of the two openly gay lesbian candidates or representatives, if you will, on the delegation. And we won. Like I said, with Judith’s efforts, and a lot of the efforts of a lot of the other women behind the scenes, Judith was the most visible one. We were able to get our slate selected.

Andrews: And then what was it like to go to Houston?

Benavidez: Exciting! Oh, it was so wonderful! I remember we walked into the Hyatt, you know, we’re going up the elevator, and there is Bella Abzug, right in the same elevator! And it was like, wow! You know, there she was with a hat and everything. She was so full of life. And we go, “Bella!” [laughs] And it was just a marvelous experience.

And she goes, “Washington!” And it was just a marvelous experience.

And then I participated in the run that we had from there to the convention center, carrying the torch. And that was fun. I was probably about fifty yards behind Billie Jean King. And that was exciting, because I had had the opportunity to meet her at a US Open women’s golf tournament in New York a couple of years before that. And of course, she was my heroine. And I remember in 1973, when our women’s consciousness raising group used to meet at my house every week. And we watched her play that idiot that he was, I forget his name now.

Andrews: Bobby Riggs?

Benavidez: Bobby Riggs, yeah. I still have my Billie Jean King racket, that’s what I still play tennis with. My wooden racket, I still play with it. It’s still in great shape. When I play tennis, I always use my Billie Jean King racket. But here again, she was another one who took so many chances, and really promoted athletic opportunities for girls and for women. And it was fun meeting her. It’s fun to get to meet these people. Not so much that, you know, they’re way up. Sometimes we make them appear like they’re bigger
than life. And at that time, you know, it does appear that way. But as you sit down and you talk with them, they’re no different than you or I.

And that’s one of the things I try to tell my girls now. I say, “You have the opportunity to make a difference. You have everything it takes to be successful.” And I always tell my girls, “The only difference between success and failure is that success, you keep getting up, small steps, every time you fall, you get back up again.” And that’s the thing that I try to get across to my kids. Whether they be females, or whether they be my Spanish-speaking kids, or whether English language learning kids, or all kids. Is that we each have the capacity to make a difference.

And you know, I look back on my life, and my going through school and everything, I was very blessed with, I believe I had great teachers that always supported me. My brothers weren’t as fortunate. They were pushed out, what I call pushed out. They didn’t drop out; they were pushed out. So I always focus on giving kids as much encouragement as they need, and helping them to do the best that they absolutely can. And like my Spanish speaking kids, I tell them, “You learn English better than the monolingual kids, but never forget your native language.” I say, “Because you have the power to be so much more effective with two languages.” And I always tell my kids, “Remember your native language. And learn to speak the English language as well or better than anyone else.”

And I have a young female, she’s not in our district anymore, but she came to us in third grade, and they didn’t speak any English. And I told them, “I didn’t speak any English, either.” I always tell my kids that. When they come in and say they don’t understand, I say, “No, no, don’t use that as an excuse.” I say, “I didn’t speak English, either, when I started school.” I said, “But I got the support,” etcetera. And that’s what I tell the parents. “You’ve got to support your children.”

So I have my Yalina. And she came in third grade, she didn’t speak English. They lived all the way out in Roy. And, you know, they couldn’t participate in after school activities or whatever. So I personally took it upon myself, and I talked to, went out to Roy and talked to the parents. I told them, I said, “If I have your permission, I’ll bring your daughter home after practice.” So after practices, I would take the kids home and come back. Which took another hour, hour-and-a-half, for me. But that kid had the desire. And both of them just participated. I have a special, it’s a very unique performing group. They’re the kids that really excel, and they go out to other schools and perform gymnastics and rope skipping. We’re a demonstration team for the American Heart Association. They just love it. And it’s like the thing to be in at my school.

So she became involved. And she continued. And just with that encouragement, and pulling out that inner drive that she has, she’s now a senior this year, and she received like a Gates Foundation achiever scholarship to go to college. And so right now we’re working with her in terms of applying to the different universities.

And she’s just been a real success story, because her commitment and her desire to succeed has been so strong. And she’s just an amazing young woman. I’m so proud of her. I told her, “Now it’s your turn.” I said, “When you get out, it’s your turn to help others.” And she’s the oldest of four girls in her family. And she serves as a real role model for her sisters and her mother. And her mother has now committed to start going to English language, learn English language development classes so she can learn English.
So that’s what I tell my kids. It’s not that you need to make things so big. One person. If you help one person make a difference in their life, that, to me, is success. And that’s what I’ve always gone for. My dad used to call me a dandelion. He said, “You’re like a dandelion. No matter how many times they cut you down, you keep coming back.”

I said, “Dandelions are pretty.”

And he says, “Yes, they are.” He says, that’s the whole thing; you have to have the strength and perseverance of a dandelion.

Andrews: Beautiful. You were a member of the gay national task force, I understand.

Benavidez: No.

Andrews: You weren’t?

Benavidez: No.

Andrews: Oh, I thought I found that. I must have been misinformed. I think it was Rita Brogan who said I should ask you about your arrest after the conference.

Benavidez: [laughs] Oh.

Andrews: And this is after Houston.

Benavidez: This was a very interesting, very profound experience for me. Like I said earlier, I’ve always been a person who believed in the process, in the system, playing by the rules - challenging them, certainly. And always willing to take the steps to challenge.

Like I remember, when I was little – I’m digressing a bit here, and then remind me to come back to the question – we lived out in the country, and my cousins lived in town. It was a real small town of about five thousand people. But there was a very definite line, it was called the overpass. And once you went on the south side of the overpass, that was where all the poor people lived. It was the barrio. And all the black children lived there. And there was a park across the street from where my cousins lived, and we used to always play. And there were some kids. And there was this little boy, his name was Marvin Meadows. And Marvin and I, for whatever reason, we were like kindred spirits. We played together, and had such a good time.

And when it came time to go to school, I didn’t, because we got bused in, so we went to another school. And I never understood why the kids, the African American kids, weren’t in school with us. And it wasn’t until, I remember very clearly Brown vs. Topeka, when that came through. And the black kids were then able to come to school with us. And that was, I think, in 1954, or something like that. And I was either in third of fourth grade. And I remember because I was so excited because Marvin was able to come, to go to the same school that I was. And we were great friends all the way from the rest of elementary school clear up to the time that we graduated. And I remember very clearly then that society treated people differently on the basis of race.

And I remember again in college, in college there was only one black student my whole four years there. And this was at Texas Woman’s University. And they ran her out.
You know, the dean of school was (?), she was this fuddy duddy lady from Alabama. Very racist. Of course, I didn’t know that it was racist then. Like I said earlier, I didn’t have those words, those labels that I was aware of. But I knew that it was unfair and it was unjust, and I spoke out against it. I’ve always had something within me that has intuited injustice, intuited unfairness, and it’s like I’ve always been propelled to push forward toward that. Those were things, like I said, that made real pivotal points for me in my life. And that thing with Marvin being able to go to school with us, and Isaac, was really important to me.

And the question was about being arrested. [laughs] The conference had ended. And we ended way late. And of course we went out and partied, and we felt really good, because I had spoken on the floor at the national conference. And you know, for me, I was so, so appreciative, and felt so proud of being in the same, because there on the dais was—

Andrews: What did you speak about?

Benavidez: I spoke about pulling the full issue together. You know, I spoke like we had passed the agenda for the ERA, I spoke that we had passed the agenda for pro-choice. I spoke that we had passed the agenda for all racial and minority women. But I said, “The agenda is incomplete for me.” And so I spoke out to support the gay rights plank. The lesbian and gay rights plank. And that’s what put me up, you know, a week later I was in the picture in *Time* magazine, but it was when I was speaking on that issue. And I spoke about the importance of supporting each other’s issues, and really coalescing and being together in the interconnectedness of it all. And it was a very proud moment in my life.

The, you know, the thing of seeing Barbara Jordan, who is one of the women I’ve always used as one of the people I’ve respected, and such an inspiration, and I wish she would have been the first woman president. Betty Ford, I’ve always been so respectful of Betty Ford for her candidness and just her “upfrontness.” And Lucy Baines Johnson, and Bella Abzug, and Ann Richards, and you know, Judith, and all that group of women. And then just the women who just go about their lives. And I think that was what impressed me so much about our delegation was that our delegation was a delegation of just women, you know, in day-to-day life, making a difference in whatever field we were in. Whether it’s education, social justice, architecture, whatever. Just day-to-day women making an impact, that’s what I remember about our delegation. And how we all worked together.

And so at the end of the conference, we were celebrating. And then I had, we had tickets to go to Albuquerque to spend the Thanksgiving vacation with my family in Albuquerque. So we had taken like lots of suitcases. We had our wardrobe for Houston, and then our wardrobe for Albuquerque, because Albuquerque is cold at that time. So we got to the airport, and my partner and I at the time, my partner at the time and I, got to the airport, and we were waiting there. And I hadn’t paid any attention, but I still had on all of my buttons from the conference. And the airport was busy and everything. And this, I’ll never forget this girl, I call them Texas cowgirls, Southern belles, blond with big bouffant hair. [laughs] And she started giving me a hard time. And I said, “Well, may I speak with your supervisor?” That was all I said. Because I’d been traveling all over the country, and I know how to conduct myself.
And next thing I know, this guy comes up (?) and he says, “You’re under arrest. Put your hands behind your back.”
I said, “What?!”
He said, “You’re under arrest.”
I said, “What for?”
He says, “For threatening to blow up the airport.”
And I couldn’t believe it! So they hauled me off, and my partner’s left there with all the luggage and everything. And luckily for us, we had a friend from Tacoma who worked at Reman Hall that was with us. And she was planning on flying to San Francisco. So I said, “Call Judith.”

Andrews: This is another Judith.

Benavidez: No, Judith Lonnquist. I said, “Call Judith.” Cause I had recently started working for WEA [Washington Education Association]. I thought oh my God, that’s all I need is to lose my job and all this stuff, because I had never been in trouble. I’d been a real advocate, but had never been in trouble.

So they haul me off to Humble, Texas, in this car. And there’s these two lecherous, ooh, yucky looking old men. And I thought, you know the traditional stereotype that we have about dirty old men? They fit it to a “T.” And they were so mean! They said, “You say one more word, and you will not get out of jail forever.”

And I just didn’t say a word. And I thought, you know, I had my hands behind my back and I was in this police car. And do you remember the case, I think it was in one of the Carolinas, the woman that had killed the officer in jail because he had tried to rape her? I remembered that. And I thought, if these guys try to do anything like that to me, I will die before that happens. I just knew that. But I was still scared. So you’ve got these two very contrasting feelings going on.

So we get to the jail in Humble. Now, Humble is a very small town right outside of Houston. But the airport is in that county, so that’s where they took me.

So we get to the jail, and this guy starts to then take me in. And they release me from the handcuffs. And luckily for me, I had met an attorney from Houston that spring when I had been there for another conference. And I had given that name to my partner and the telephone number, and told her to contact her. So they had contacted her. But anyway, they read me their rights, and they told me that I had one phone call. And I thought, I can’t call Judith, because that’s going to be it. So I thought, I better call my brother and let him know.

So I called my brother. And I felt so humiliated, I remember, having to tell my brother that I had been arrested, because their sister never did anything. The boys,yes. They’d been arrested for several things, speeding and all that stuff, but their sister never had. They held me in such, I was like the could-do-no-wrong type person. And I remember feeling so humiliated. And I remember talking to him in Spanish. And if looks could have killed, I would have been dead. Because that officer (?), he was just ready. And he said, “You’ve got one minute.” And that was all he gave me.

So my brother said, I let him know that I wouldn’t be making it. And he said, “Keep me posted.”
So anyway, Marilyn, my partner at that time, she would have made the best detective. She got a hold of Midge Costanza, who was President Carter’s advisor for women’s affairs. And between Midge and the attorney friend that I had met in Houston that spring, they got it to where they were able to get me out. And she told me, she says, “Just plead nolo contendere and just get out of there and not have to pay like a two hundred dollar fine or something like that.”

So that was my experience of being arrested. We were never able to get a hold of Judith, as I recall. Anyway, word got back to Seattle from several people. Anyway, after they release me, we’re out there in this—

Andrews: How long were you there?

Benavidez: Probably about two, two-and-a-half hours. It wasn’t long. Maybe three. And the thing that convinced them, even though the attorney and Midge had called, that convinced them, was that my friend who went with my partner, had her badge from working at Reman Hall. And they, that’s when they started relenting a little bit. And they decided to let me go.

But then we got released, we were left out in the street. Nowhere to go. Where do you go in this small redneck place? And so here comes this pickup. And I said, “I’m going to hitch a ride.” So the guy pulls over, and in the back of his pickup is nothing but chickens. [laughs]

And so he said, “What do you ladies need?”

And I said, “What would you charge us to take us to the airport?”

And he says, “Well, ma’am, that’s about like twenty miles.”

I said, “I don’t care how far it is.” I said, “What would you charge us to get us to the airport?”

He said, (?)

I said, “Well, we need to get to the airport, because I have to get to Albuquerque.”

So he looks at all these suitcases and everything, here’s this (?). And he said, “Well,” he says, “I don’t have any room in the front as you can see. But you’re welcome to ride in the back with the chickens.” [laughter]

So I said, “Whatever it takes. Just get me out of here.” So the three of us pile in the back of this pickup filled with the chicken coop. And he took us back to the airport, and we were able to get out of there. But we couldn’t go to Albuquerque then, because there were no more planes, so we wound up going to San Francisco for the weekend. But that was my experience of after the conference in Houston. And then the following week, when the article about the women’s conference came out in Time magazine, and people kept bringing me copies of the article and everything. I just got a copy and signed it and sent it to him. [laughs] Never heard anything else from him.

Andrews: You are quoted in an article in, do you remember Pandora?

Benavidez: Mm hmm.

Andrews: The Washington women’s newspaper?
Andrews: This is after Houston. And it talks about you as a teacher, and member of NOW, and co-chair of Seattle-based Friends of Equal Rights. Working in the Hispanic Caucus. And the caucus saw to it that migrant farm working women are provided adequate housing, and bilingual and bicultural social services. And, let’s see, you said that the Hispanic Caucus really represented the diversity within the Hispanic community. And this is where I picked up the idea that you were on the gay national task force, but you said you weren’t. Let’s see. Here’s a quote, you spoke on the floor about sexual preference, as you said. You said, “This is the decade of women. And what better way to enter the decade than with gay rights?”

And then this part is interesting. I’d love to have you comment on it. You said the most important and emotional moment for you is when you saw that your Hispanic sisters voted for gay rights.

Benavidez: Mm hmm. Yeah, that was really profound for me, because, you know, culturally, religion is very, very significant in Hispanic culture. And many people are very conservative and have very traditional ways of looking at issues socially. And they, I would say as much stigma as there has been in the community at large, that we have had to overcome regarding sexual orientation, it has been magnified in the communities of color. So when I saw their support in this issue, it said to me that, you know, at least with those particular women that represented, there was a ray of hope, a ray of connectedness amongst all of us. And that was why it was so significant. And still is.

Andrews: So in your opinion, what were some of the positive and negative outcomes of the conference?

Benavidez: Again, as I shared earlier, I think that the positiveness of it was that it brought to the forefront the full portfolio of issues affecting women. Whether it would be on the basis of race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class, working status, you know, women and credit, whatever. It put it out in the forefront. And it gave us a foundation from which to build. Rather than giving us a foundation, it solidified the foundation that had been building. I think that would have put it better. Seeing women from all over the country, and seeing the commonality that whether you’re from Washington, or down in the South, or Northeast, the Southwest, or places like California, that the issues affect women everywhere.

And for me, the down part of Houston was that from that point on, it seemed like, that was reaching the pinnacle. And from that point on, we started losing momentum. I don’t know why, but it seemed to me that it was that way. And the fact that we weren’t able to get the ERA passed was just a very significant defeat.

But I think also that from that point, women felt empowered, that I felt women have possibly been making more impact on an individual basis than, let’s say, an organization, large-scale basis. Even though that still is happening, I don’t think it has had the same impact. I think women on their own remember, the women that were there remember, and have continued to go on.
The sad part for me is that young girls today, and I don’t know if this is true of all movements, but the young girls today aren’t even aware of what happened. Aren’t aware of the price that was paid. You know, they take so much for granted, like their own credit, just being able to vote, for many of them, that they don’t even appreciate. Like I watch the girl athletes now, and it’s like they just take it for granted. And this is good, because they should be able to say this is part of what is available to me. That part is good; I support that. But the part that I still feel sad about is that they are not aware of what it took to be able to have that opportunity today. And so those, to me, were some of the down sides. I think we lost some of the momentum. It needs to be re-jacked up again. I have a sense that it is, but it’s being done differently. I don’t know.

For a lot of women, I don’t think I’m myself much different from other women. I think a lot of us started focusing more internally. I know the decades of the ’80s and the early ‘90s, for me, I went more into who am I, what does this really mean -- seeking that essence, almost like searching for our souls, if you will. What was the name of that book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. I think for women, it was women’s search for meaning in a different way. And utilizing spirituality as a source to get us there. And seeing that, but I think now with the possibility of having a female become president of this country, you know, it says those steps are possible because of the work that was done. You know, our steps were possible because of the work that Susan B. Anthony and Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman and all of those did. And that’s what I keep telling people, you know. No matter how small the step, make sure you put one foot in the other and keep on going. Because it does take time. Like I mentioned earlier, it does take time. And some of this may not happen in our lifetime. But it doesn’t make it any less relevant.

Andrews: You’ve already touched on some of this. What kind of follow up activities did you participate in, both short and long term?

Benavidez: Well, I’ve always continued to speak out on issues. I still stay active politically, you know, contacting the legislature. I think if anything has changed for me in terms of my advocacy, it’s that I put on more responsibility to myself to model that which I believe, and to be there for young people. I don’t belong to too many organizations anymore, because I hate meetings. And I’d rather be out there in the trenches, even if it is like with my Yalina, you know, making sure that she has the opportunity. You know, taking that kid home. Going and being with a person, a woman that’s disabled, and can’t get around. Giving them a ride to go somewhere. Being there for a person who is dying. Those are the efforts that I put more of my focus on now, rather than on the big, gargantuan changes.

Andrews: Smaller steps.

Benavidez: Mm hmm. And that, I get great meaning from that. Great satisfaction. Recently, I’ve always been an animal lover. And recently I took my friend’s little dog, his little dachshund, and took him through hospice. And just was with him as he was dying. So that’s what, I’m getting ready to retire probably in the next two or three years, and that’s where I want to put a lot of my work is in working with hospice for animals, and hospice with young kids. I’ve always been, no matter where life has taken me and all the
many things I have done, whether it be small business owner, or in politics, or in organizational activism, my commitment has always been to little kids. Young people. And that’s where I get my joy, and that’s where I get my sustenance. They keep me young. They keep me (?) It’s like walking into the gym every morning, it’s like magic time for me. When people say, (?), I tell them, “Listen, if I can do this at sixty-four, you guys can certainly do it.” I say, “Come on, keep up with Grandma!” [laughs]

And they go, “Miss B, you’re older than my grandmother!”

You know, I’ve been teaching, I think I’m almost always a good teacher. And I could say better than that, I was always an outstanding teacher. But when I went back to teaching this time around, I think I went back, and that’s the real significance and the real benefit of having been involved in the movements, the civil rights social movements, is that I got that sustenance. I’d learned, I’d got the skills. And I went back to teaching with a greater sense of compassion for the plight of humanity.

Andrews: You mean in your fifties when you went back.

Benavidez: Uh huh. I think I was what, fifty-two or fifty-three. So I had that like close to twenty-year separation. But I remember when I had my business here in Seattle–

Andrews: What was that?

Benavidez: I just did consulting with small companies and government agencies and human resource management and special events management. Like I organized the first AIDS Walk here in Seattle. And that’s one of my three, top three achievements that I consider in my life. And just seeing that whole effort come together was just incredible. Then I did another, I organized another AIDS Walk when I lived down in California, that involved seven or nine counties. And it was fun, but it didn’t have the same level of richness that the one here in Seattle did, the very first one that we did. And you know, it set the base for being able to have a resource to finding ways to raise money to fight HIV/AIDS. It was an incredible, incredible experience to see how– I’ve always said Seattle is such a compassionate city, and it really expressed that in supporting that first AIDS Walk, and making it happen over and over. Just like everything else, you have your waves and your crests, and the wave falls. So we don’t have the same level of attention paid to HIV/AIDS, but it’s still every bit as much an issue, particularly with women in like Africa and other communities.

So that’s an area that I’ve continued to support, even though on a smaller scale. I always talk with kids about it. And right now I’m trying to work with a committee. One of my little third grade girls wrote in their story at Christmastime, they were asked what would they like for the world, what would they do in order to make the world a better place to live. And she said that if she were in charge, how she would make the world a better place to live would be to eliminate AIDS in children in Africa. So I was talking to her, and she’s very compassionate. She’s a very bright girl. And so we’re working together to see if we can have her develop, help her organize and develop a small walk. And the money that gets raised goes to help fight HIV/AIDS. And just show her, you know, once again, that small steps is what makes impact.
And so that’s how I like to spend my time. Just working with kids, and being around animals, and enjoying nature. Like when I finish here, I’m going to go down to the arboretum and walk through Foster Island and walk through the arboretum.

Andrews: Wonderful. From your perspective, how have women’s lives changed since the conferences? And how have they stayed the same?

Benavidez: Well, I pondered on this question a lot, because on the surface, it appears that they have changed greatly, and they have. Women certainly have more opportunity in careers than they used to have. Women are certainly making more money than they have. Like I said, everything looks like it’s hunky dory. But once you look underneath that surface, however, you stop to see how many women and children are without health insurance, how many families are what I call working hard and not even being able to afford insurance and barely the necessities in life. And these numbers are increasing. When I stop to see that the achievement gap between, you know, children of racial and ethnic minorities, people of color, is different from children of the majority culture, I have to question, have we really made any advances? When I go to New Mexico and I’m in the pueblos of the Indian community down there, and I see the level of poverty. I go to L.A. and I see the level of poverty there. I go to Houston or Dallas, and it’s like, it’s there, the level of homelessness. The whole situation is, you know, not as rosy as we would like to think it is.

Right now, I’m really concerned with the whole issue of what’s happened in Texas – although I understand the governor has stepped back a bit – on forcing young women to take the vaccination, you know, the whole issue of uterine cancer. Those are women’s issues. And we have to stand, stand in support and in protection of our young females. You know, it’s once again that freedom and that right to choose.

You know, we have the whole issue on immigration. And that’s a very, very complex issue. It doesn’t have simple answers. But when I looked at the fact that young people who were born in this country, that their parents don’t have all the necessary papers, etcetera, they’re still in school but they can’t apply to financial aid to continue going on to education. You know, those are issues that are still out there. And so to me, there will always be issues that are in need of being addressed, in need of being advocated for, and solutions found for. And so that is the hope that I live with, that there will continue to be people in all aspects of government, in all levels of organizational advocacy, that continue to push for these issues.

You know I was, this past weekend, we just had our rep assembly for WEA. And we were still fighting, not fighting in the same way that we did, but we were still having to articulate the issue around Affirmative Action. Because there were locals – and they have a point, and I understand their point – there were locals that are still saying that the Affirmative Action goal should be placed on the population locally instead of statewide, in terms of representation of minorities to the rep assembly. And we started fighting the issues in the ‘70s of getting goals, etcetera, set for minorities and women to be involved and represented. And there are people still now that are advocating for the opposite. And here it’s been, what, almost forty years?

And so that’s why I say we have to stay vigilant. We have to continue pressing forth, and not being afraid to speak up. With regard to the issue surrounding gays and
lesbians, the big issue has been the opportunity for marriage. And for me, even more important than that is guaranteeing gays and lesbians the right for all the benefits and civil rights that are accorded to everyone else. And whether people choose to marry or not to marry, to me, is a secondary issue. But they should have the right if they wanted to. But certainly, the civil rights.

And, you know, one of the things that really concerns me right now is with older people, is the whole issue of prescriptions, medical prescriptions. And women, once again, (?) because women are living longer. Everybody is, but women in particular. And I was astounded. I have a friend who is disabled, and she has the severe disability, several diagnoses. And the cost of the medications. Was she not on Medicare or Medicaid, there’s no way that she could even get, one medication alone is like fifteen hundred dollars for a month’s supply of medication. Like she has about ten or twelve of these. Can you imagine having to pay fifteen thousand dollars a month for medication? If you’re on HIV/AIDS and all the medication for that? It’s atrocious! Absolutely inhumane, as far as I’m concerned.

And yet, you know, the government does not take into account with this administration, the impact that it has on these people. And they’re continuing to look for ways to cut and cut. And I’m going, well where are you going to cut? She gets a sustenance of five hundred dollars a month. Legislators spend more than that on a lunch! It’s outrageous. Absolutely outrageous. These are the things that some people don’t even pay attention to.

And I think that’s the thing that has impacted me the most in the last twenty years is how insulated we live our lives. And we’re not aware, and that’s why I’m always glad I can go participate in more than one community, because there are so many issues out there that affect all of us. You know, one of the reasons I don’t retire right now is I fear for the cost of healthcare,because I’m not eligible yet for Medicare. And who knows if it’s going to be there when I get there? [laughs] And you know, the cost of insurance, you know, eight or nine hundred dollars a month, or more? That’s more than I had for a house payment and car payment combined when I bought my first house. How are people going to make it? They can’t. And so you’re going to see these gaps increasing. It says to me, we have to keep pushing. We have to keep pushing.

And so now, I don’t think that you know, there’s like Hispanic movement or the black movement or the women’s movement, it’s a movement for humanity. It is a movement to bring humanity together. And there’s hope. Because you see people like the Oprah Winfreys of the world, like this woman who makes little quilts for children -- two very different economic points of view, but still doing what they can to help humanity. And that, to me, is the focus that we have to put our emphasis on -- putting our skills, our talents, our energy, in whatever way we choose, however small it might be, but doing it to make a difference for humanity. Whether it’s global warning, healthcare, prisons, whatever, or economic security for people, whatever it is, pushing forth, and just continuing to plant those seeds. because it is the future of our children that is at stake. You know, the future of us as a humanity is at stake.

I was watching on TV last night, this one island down by Australia that could be going down, and could be like the first part of the planet that goes down and is eliminated as a result of global warming. And I thought, wow, that’s how close it is. That’s how imminent it is. And we have leaders in this country that still deny that global warming
exists. You know, it’s just mind boggling. Totally mind boggling. But we’ll keep going forward.

Andrews: I just have one last question, but I think we’ve already addressed most of it. The specific issues that concerned you during the Ellensburg conference. How have they been resolved? Or are they still being debated?

Benavidez: To me, they’re all being debated, maybe not as overtly as they were then, but certainly pro-choice. We’re still running the risk of losing that, depending upon what the supreme court does. And then the way other people are bringing in, introducing legislation. Like there was recently legislation in one of the Carolinas, I believe, that impacted that issue. The fact that we didn’t get the ERA. Here in the state of Washington, we have it, but the three states that didn’t. I mean, nationally we don’t have it, so that continues to be one of the reasons why women’s issues are often diffused and not considered. Because, hey, it’s not part of the constitution. We don’t have to worry about it. So overall, I would say all of the issues are still present. They’ve been marginalized in some ways, but we’ve made advances in others. But let us not take for granted that they will always be there.

Andrews: In summary, is there anything else that you’d like to add that we haven’t touched on?

Benavidez: That’s a very profound question. [laughter]

Andrews: It’s a very profound discussion.

Benavidez: I would say that for me, I’m still hopeful. I am still optimistic that the condition for humanity will improve. And in that there are people out there every day working to make that contribution. And so many of the contributions are gone unrecognized. And that the journey, for me, has been a journey of adventure. It’s been a journey of fulfillment. It’s been one of empowerment for me. And I would say that through it all, the thing that has been very steadfast in this journey has been that I had grandparents that cared. That I had my grandmother as an incredible spiritual mentor, that gave me roots from which to build and to live my life by, as a little kid. My mother who, you know, protected me, sacrificed for me, supported me, in ways, you know. She was just a lady that lived her life serving her family. And just that whole, whole piece about family. And we need to get family back. The fabric of family has broken down. And the women, the feminist movement has been blamed for that in many ways. Unfairly. Because they’re not, the issues which we espouse are not mutually exclusive of support for the family. They are in support of the family, to make the family better. And I think for me, the thing that has destroyed the structure of the family has been all of these regressive priorities that we have, such as war, and such big expenditures on military systems that we never even used that can be better enhanced in helping to support the human condition, the human family.

That’s the thing, for me, is I’m so grateful that I, for one, had that opportunity. That I had an opportunity to be able to have wonderful teachers who believed in me and
encouraged me. And that there’s always been, no matter what I have ever faced in life, there has always been someone there to support me. You know, the universe, angels, whatever one wants to call it. God. That faith that things will always work out has been my guiding light. And I fully believe that. So that, for me, is the journey. And sometimes, like when I was sitting in hospice with my brother, several years ago, I was just sitting there pondering that we come into this life and we leave this life, and it’s such a short period of time. And yet how illusory time is. You know, it seems like forever, and yet it seems like so little. And that’s the mystery, the joy of the mystery for me. And that feeling is what continues to carry me, no matter where life takes me. And I always feel like I’ll land on my feet and I’ll be able to get back up again.

Andrews:   Well, it’s been a joy to interview you.

Benavidez:   Thank you. It’s been a joy being with you.

Andrews:  I’m grateful for your insights into the conferences, the women’s movement, and also the philosophical truths that you expressed.

Benavidez:   Yeah, it’s been fun.

[End Interview.]