Andrews: The following interview is being conducted with Dee Boersma 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 March eighth, 2007 at the University of Washington, in the Biology Department. And the interviewer is Mildred Andrews.

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

Boersma: Okay. In two minutes or less. Okay. I grew up in a family where there was a lot of discussion about things. So everybody kind of had a say. So my dad and mother both regarded everybody’s opinion. I was led to believe by both my parents that life should be fair, and that if, in fact, there were things that weren’t fair, if you would point them out, those could be rectified and taken care of.

It took me until certainly well into my college years when I really saw how unfair life was. I confronted my mother, particularly, about this, and she just said that she thought life was fair. It was not until well into her seventies that she said, “You know, you’re right. Life is not fair. But I prefer to think that it is. It’s just an easier way to live.”

And I said, “Boy, that would have saved me a whole lot of trouble and time if you had told me that years before.” But because of that, the things that I wanted to do, both my mom and dad encouraged me, and it didn’t matter what it was. So I really spent a lot of my growing up time collecting butterflies, catching turtles, climbing trees to look for bird nests, all of these things that certainly would be classified as being a tomboy. Both my parents encouraged it. And when I said, when I was about nine, I was going to be an entomologist, both of them said that was a fine thing to do.

My dad was a businessman. He owned a travel agency at one point in his life. He also sold trips, and had his own business, Boersma Tours, and sold trips, senior class trips in a five-state area. So this is when kids went to Washington, DC, or New York, on their senior class–

Andrews: Where was this?

Boersma: Michigan. I grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan. And I spent the summers at a cottage outside of Ann Arbor that my grandparents owned. So I spent a lot of time with my grandparents as well as my parents, particularly in the summertime. And I liked it there, because I could catch turtles and things like that. But that was like a non-negotiable. Because my dad said, when I wanted to work in high school, because most of my friends were working, my dad said, “You’ll have plenty of time to work. Your job
now is to learn. And if you want to go to summer school, you can go to summer school. But otherwise, you are to learn things. You’ll have lots of time to work.”

And he’s been absolutely correct, although at that time I wasn’t so sure about that. But it meant that in the summertime, we had a boat, we’d water ski. My dad, when we finally bought this boat, he bought this boat with my uncle, who was interested. And my dad said, “Well, this will be the second happiest day of your life.”

I said, “No, no. This is the first happiest!”

He said, “No, no, the second happiest day is the day you buy the boat. The first happiest day is when you sell the boat.”

Of course, at that point, I didn’t understand this. But when I was done with graduate school and we sold the boat, I said, “You’re right!” Because there’s just so much work and upkeep with a boat. So I learned about fixing boat motors, at least to some extent. Certainly trying to get batteries recharged. There were a lot of things like that. And we always did projects at the cottage. Building docks, I did that with my dad and other neighbors. My dad always had some sort of project going on. One time he decided that it would be nice if we had a beach at the cottage. There was no beach there. So he just got a truck that brought in a load of sand and dumped it in the backyard. And then in the end, we had the next door neighbors that were helping shovel the sand onto a plastic, in this case, tablecloth, and then taking it down a steep hill and dumping it on the beach. Now the beach only lasted a couple of years, but my dad was just always into projects like that.

And my mother was. She helped him independently in the business. But she also was a teacher, so she taught high school for a while when I was young in Ann Arbor at the University of Michigan High School there. And then when we moved from Michigan to Illinois, she helped my dad in the business. She was on the board of directors and those sorts of things. But then she ended up teaching at my high school. She was the speech and drama and English teacher. So both of them were well educated.

My dad went to law school at the University of Michigan but he dropped out to go into business, because he thought he could make more money that way. And I don’t think he really wanted to be a judge, and that’s what he felt the University of Michigan was training people to be judges. And my mother, as I say, always taught school. So that kind of sums it up, I guess.

Andrews: Good preparation for all you’ve been doing.

Boersma: Well, yes. And then when I think about it, when I was growing up, I remember the first injustice that I was upset about, was in first grade, when the boys could wear pants. Because in kindergarten you could, you could wear whatever you wanted. But in first grade, girls had to wear dresses or skirts, and the boys wore pants. And I remember in second grade, we had a couple of days where girls could wear jeans. And I remember I was just so excited about those days, and I couldn’t understand why we couldn’t have it all the time. And I did point that out, and my mom said, “Well, you can wear whatever you want on this day.” So I did get to wear my jeans a couple of days. And I remember not sleeping well the night before because I was so excited that I could wear whatever I wanted to wear to school, because it was much better, to have jeans to play on the
playground. You know, bars, things like that. So I do remember bringing that up and they kind of explained, “Oh, there are these rules, and you have to go by these rules.”

And it wasn’t really until college, with dorm hours, that I got into real views about these injustices. And I pointed that out to my grandparents, as well as my parents. My grandfather explained about *in loco parentis*, and how if the girls had to go to the dorms at eleven o’clock, the boys immediately went home. There was no reason for the boys to be out. And I pointed out to him, well, if you want the boys in, you should say that they have to go in at eleven o’clock, too, that this was unfair. And so I started working at the college to get rid of dorm hours. And by the time I was, I guess, a junior, dorm hours were going the way of that arcane system all over the country, and were being eliminated. But it took a while.

Andrews: Going the way of the dress codes.

Boersma: Yeah. All of that, in my college years. And then, of course, with the Vietnam War, I was absolutely furious about that, because I knew a lot of people that were against the war. The men could burn their draft cards, but the women didn’t have draft cards to burn. And I thought that that was fundamentally unfair. If, in fact, we believe that that war was wrong, I should have as much of a right to be able to protest that as the boys. And I just thought that that was fundamentally unfair. And so I just continued, I guess, throughout college, to try to rectify some of these injustices which I saw in terms of dorm hours, and then in terms of the war, what women could do, and as I said to everyone, “I don’t think anybody wants to go to this war, but that’s not the question. If, in fact, young people have to go, you shouldn’t discriminate based on sex.”

And because I was president of the student senate, and because I was president of Associated Women Students at Central Michigan University, where I went to undergraduate college, then when I went off to go to Ohio State to go to graduate school, my grandfather, who had been president of Central Michigan University, was on the board of trustees at Eastern Michigan University. And we had all these conversations all the time. When I went down between my going off to graduate school and finishing undergraduate, we had a long discussion and he said, “I’ve been asked by Virginia Allen,” who was a chair of Nixon’s, Richard Nixon’s Task Force on Equal Rights and Responsibility, “for names of college presidents that should serve on Nixon’s Task Force on Equal Rights and Responsibilities.” And he said, “And you’ve been so involved in student government and all these leadership things. Do you have any suggestions of presidents?”

Whereupon my grandfather and I had a several-hour conversation about he didn’t need names of presidents of universities. If he was mad about students demonstrating about the war and about dorm hours, and *in loco parentis*, and all these things that we argued about all the time, that, in fact, the problem was that students weren’t represented. And that we should be represented on a task force that Nixon was going to put together on women’s rights and responsibilities. And I said, “It’s fine if you give them names of presidents of universities, but what I want you to tell them is that they need to have student representation. Because otherwise, they’re going to continue to see students in the streets about all of these issues, whether it’s the environment, war, or women’s rights. And this is fundamentally important to this generation.”
And my grandmother, who I later learned was really the power behind the throne, said, “Charles, you pay attention to your granddaughter.” And he did. And then we went to the cottage, and we were doing our normal things, fishing, and all of this sort of stuff. And I remember this phone call came in to the cottage. They asked for my grandfather, and my grandmother turned the phone over to my grandfather and said, “Charles, you pay attention to your granddaughter” again.

And my grandfather talked to Virginia Allen and gave her names of these college presidents and said, “I just want you to know, my granddaughter feels very strongly that there should be a student representative on this committee.” And they continued to talk about that for a while. And then he said, “Well, she’s actually here. And if you want to talk to her, then I’ll turn the phone over.”

And so I talked to Virginia Allen and said to her, you know, “I think you should have a representative on there, and there’s some easy ways to do that, because we have a National Association of Student Government, and that nationally elects people.” And I said, “If you really want a woman, we have an association—” I think it’s called, well, it was Associated Women Students, but it was the National Association of Women Students. I think it still had an “I” and I don’t remember why. International Association of Women Students, maybe, and they’d elected officers, and I knew some of those officers.

So I gave all of these names. Virginia Allen was very nice, collected all those names. And then she said, “Well, what about you?”

And I said, “Well, I don’t know if you could get a security clearance for me anyway.” I said, “I’ve been very active in student government and other sorts of things.” And I said, “I have—” and this is conservative Michigan, right, at that time— I said, “I have attended Students for a Democratic Society meetings. So I don’t know if I could get a security clearance.” I said, “I haven’t ever done anything illegal. But certainly I’m seen as a student activist, and I want to see change. So I would recommend these other people.” And so I gave her three or four names, and how to get a hold of them.

She said, “Well, if you don’t mind, I’ll look into you, as well.”

And I said, “Well, that would be fine.”

And then a few weeks later, she called back and said, “We would like to invite you to be on this Task Force on Women’s Rights and Responsibilities.”

And I said, “Well, I’m going off to graduate school. How much time is this going to take?”

She said, “Well, it’s only going to be like three months, and you would have to only come once a month to these meetings.”

And I said okay. I nearly had flunked out of graduate school, because I was taking statistics. So I went to Ohio State. And the first meetings, I think we had a meeting in July, and maybe August, I don’t remember exactly now.

Andrews: In Washington, DC?

Boersma: In Washington, DC. So they paid my expenses to go to Washington, DC. And it was extremely interesting and exciting, needless to say. And I was twenty-two. And everybody else on that task force was in their forties or fifties, in the middle part of their life. And it was really interesting for me. Because, again, I had nothing to lose. So Pat
Hutar was on that committee. But Virginia Allen was the chair. Elizabeth Athanasakis was on that committee.

Andrews: How do you spell that?

Boersma: Oh, man, I couldn’t— I don’t have it here, or maybe I do. I’ll look and see if I have the report from the task force.

Andrews: Can you say it again? Maybe I can—

Boersma: Athanasakis. It’s a Greek name. I mean, I could probably get all of the names, almost, by memory here. But Virginia Allen and Pat Hutar were certainly some of the most important people to me. I forget the name of the president at Vassar right now that was on it, but he was a wonderful fellow as well, and then there was a guy from the Bell System who was also really interesting. Anyway, they were all really interesting people. And the thing that was really good for me in the end is we interviewed a lot of people about what should be done. We recommended that of course the Equal Rights Amendment should be passed. And most of the recommendations from the task force, with that exception, have now become law in one way or another. Of course, the Equal Rights Amendment has not been passed, but we talked about equal work for equal pay, all of these sorts of issues. Equal pay for equal work. All of these issues.

But the one thing I do remember the most is when this Patt Hitt was her name. She was the director of HEW. So she was the highest woman—she was chair, at that point, of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. HEW, I think, is what the initials were at that point. Anyway, she came in to talk to the task force. And the thing I remember most about it is she talked about how, yes, women should have opportunities, etcetera, but that one of the problems was that they were really emotional. And once a month they got their period. And so that that was one of the reasons why she didn’t really feel that they should go into the military, and all these things.

And I was twenty-two and had nothing to lose, and said, “So, let me understand this. You’re a woman, and you have gotten your periods over the years. So does that mean that you’re irrational and you shouldn’t be head of a major agency like this?” Well, you could have heard a pin drop in there. And she really didn’t quite know how to answer that question. I said, “Well, my view is that people should be able to do what they want to do.” And I said, “I don’t want to be drafted. But if you’re going to draft people, you should draft both men and women. It’s not fair. And we need to have that—”

I mean, I don’t think we’d be in the war we’re in now, if we had a draft. Because as soon as you’re taking congressmen’s and senators’ sons and daughters, and the well educated and the privileged, we’re going to get a different view about which war is really important. And you’re not going to have a war where none of us, personally, are sacrificing, and just letting people that volunteer sacrifice their life. And I felt that way then, and still do.

So, anyway, I think that that really made her think in a different sort of way. And my colleagues on this came up to me afterwards and said, “That was really courageous of you.”
And I said, “No, I feel this way. But I mean, I don’t have anything to lose. It’s not like I’m going to get fired or something. I’m just in graduate school.”

But it certainly was an eye-opening experience for me, because when I got back to Ohio State at one point, I was asked one of my general exam questions, why I thought a white Protestant female could do science. And I said to my advisor, “Do I have to answer this question?”

And he said, “Yeah, you do.”

And I said, “Well, we better get him off my committee.” [laughs] Soon after that. But I did answer that in a general exam question. I mean, I just couldn’t believe that anybody would have the nerve to ask this. And he was the department chair, Tony Peterle.

And at one point, I came into his office, I can’t remember now, but to talk to him about something. And he said, “I understand you’re one of those women’s libbers. So I’m not going to stand for you.”

And I said, “Do you stand for your male colleagues?”

And he said, “Yes.”

I said, “Then you’ll stand for me.” And I got out of there, and then I went to my advisor again, and I said, “Oh my, Paul, you’ve got to do something about this. Because I just can’t deal with this sort of thing.” I ended up having a long conversation with Tony Peterle.

Boersma: when he was department chair. We were walking to a seminar, and he said, “I think that we should pay male graduate students more than female graduate students.”

And I said, “Why?”

He said, “Well, many of the men are married and they have children.”

And I said, “Well, that’s fine.” I said, “I’m not against discriminating based on marital status or number of children. But I am against discriminating based on sex.” And I said, “So if you want to change the rules so that graduate students that are married or they have children get more money, that’s one thing. But to discriminate based on males and females, that’s wrong.” And so we had a long discussion about this.

And it wasn’t until probably fifteen years later that I was invited to go back to Ohio State to give a talk, which I did. And on my docket of people to visit was Tony Peterle. And I thought Jesus, why would this man want to see me? But I went. And I got in, and he said, “You know, we’re going to have to hire a woman, or a black, or a minority faculty member. What do you think about that?”

And I said, “Well, Tony, I think it’s about time.”

And he said, “You know, I’ve been thinking about retiring.”

And I said, “I think that’s a good idea.”

And so we discussed that, just about like you and I are. And then he said, “You know, I’m going to send you your general exams.” He said, “You probably didn’t know how much you knew, but you knew a lot more than probably what you think.” And here, he did. He sent them a couple of weeks later. But I thought, isn’t that amazing? I thought of our interactions as fairly difficult, to say the least, because we held such different viewpoints. But he had held my general exams for that long, and clearly wanted to see me again to talk about some of these things.
But anyway, I found graduate school really difficult for those first three months, because I was traveling. It turns out that we had a couple of meetings a month. And I was missing statistics and genetics, and all these courses that really you should be there regularly. So I nearly flunked out. And then spring quarter, of course, we had the shooting at Kent State, and the National Guard at Ohio State, and they closed the university down. And after all of those experiences, I tried to stay a little more focused on biology and my dissertation and stuff. But when I came out here in 1974, I had just gone, again, as an advisor to the US delegation to a UN conference.

Well, let’s see, I should back up a little before. Before, right before I graduated with my PhD, I was asked by Pat Hutar, who was then appointed by, I guess it must have still been Nixon, to be the UN representative to the Status of Women Commission. And she asked me if I would come and be an advisor to the US delegation for the Status of Women Commission. And I said yes, because I was just finishing up my dissertation. She said, “Okay, you’re going to have to come and live in New York for a month, because we’re going to be meeting at the UN.”

And that was an incredible experience. So I did. We were living in the Beckman Hotel. So I spent a lot of time with Pat Hutar, and going to meetings and things like that. The Russian delegation, I remember that, because I was still like twenty-six, I guess, and certainly hadn’t been exposed to caviar and vodka. And I remember we went over there, and they kept feeding me caviar and vodka. [laughs] That was an interesting evening, to say the least. [laughs] Because I kept thinking, because it was kind of scary to be at the Russian embassy, frankly. I mean, it was so locked up in New York. I kept thinking gee, what if you disappeared back here? How would anybody know? How would you get out? But I found those experiences really interesting.

And then, after the UN commission, then I went to Romania. Again, as an advisor to the UN delegation on population growth. I think it was just population growth, but I could look it up in my vita, it would say. But again, Betty Friedan went to those meetings in Romania as an non-governmental organization. Lots of the people that I had met before, testifying on the Equal Rights Commission, like Gloria Steinem, whom I had met when I testified on the Equal Rights Amendment with Virginia Allen. So a lot of those people were running through my life. And then I went to the population conference.

And then I came back and started a real job with the University of Washington, as an assistant professor. And I was asked by Virginia Allen, Pat Hutar, and other people, if I would help put together this conference that was going to lead up to the Houston, to the International Women’s Year Conference in Houston. And I said okay. So that’s how I got appointed as one of the organizers of this conference.

And so when I got here, then, I wanted to make sure that this was successful. So there were a lot of people that met at the public library to start thinking about how we were going to do this. So I took it upon myself, in part, to try to figure out how we could make a bigger impact. So that’s, in part, why we wrote this grant to CETA, which were, they were giving out money, particularly for hardcore unemployed people. You had to not have had a job for more than a year. And the idea was that you would give them training, and make them more likely to get into the workforce.

So as part of that grant, I said that we would train these people. And some of this would be partly writing a paper, which we did, and partly trying to find people to help write a report on this conference. Because I thought that there really needed to be some
sort of written record. And so then I hired four women to help with this. And then I
continued to try to drag people into the steering committee in one way or another that
would help, and including bringing my mother out for the conference.

I talked to her about this interview. She just turned eighty-six, I talked to her last
week when I was out for her birthday. She said, “You know, I often wonder what
happened to some of those Mormon women that stood up against the church.” She said,
“That must have been tremendously difficult, and I just wonder how it changed the rest of
their lives.”

Andrews: What’s your mother’s name?

Boersma: Vivian. Vivian Boersma. And she’d love to talk to anybody about this.

Andrews: Does she live here?

Boersma: No, she lives, I can give you her number, she lives in North Carolina now, in a
retirement community there. But she, I told her, “I’m going to really need your help.
You’ve got to come out for this.” And so she did. So she spent about a week here.

And she said, “I just remember running all over.” And she did. I mean, she was
helping get materials to the Mormons. Because of course the size of the conference
doubled overnight because of the Mormons.

Andrews: You’ve anticipated almost all of my questions so far. [both laugh] This is
great. But just getting back to starting the conference, I did want to say that the report that
you’ve been talking about is The Story of Ellensburg, just for the record. Okay, we kind
of jumped into the Ellensburg conference right now, and I think we’ll just go with the
flow. I’d like to have you talk a little bit more about your role in organizing the
conference, and then have you say more about the logistics of getting there, staying there,
what it was like

Boersma: Well, I guess my view was that we needed to really get ready for this
International Women’s Conference. That there were fundamental inequities that still now
exist, but many of them, I mean, it’s changed so much in my lifetime. You have to realize
that when I was going to graduate school in Ohio, they still had restrictions on what
women could lift. You could not lift more than, as I recall, twenty pounds. And I
remember my first year in graduate school, because I was on Nixon’s task force, I went
and applied, just to kind of see, about a job at MacDonald’s. And basically they said, no,
because there were only men in the back, and I wanted to know why. And basically it
was because they had French fry bags that weighed more than twenty pounds, and
women couldn’t lift those French fry bags.

It was just, again, amazing to me that we could have laws like that. A woman
could have twins that would weigh much more than that, and they were lugging them
around all the time, and yet we were discriminating based on fast food, low paying jobs
anyway, based on how much you could lift. It just seemed ludicrous to me. And all of
these things. I’m still outraged. And I said I’d finally feel like we’ve accomplished
something when mediocre women can get to the same place that mediocre men can. And
we’re not there yet. And I don’t think we’re going to be there in my lifetime, or maybe several lifetimes. I mean, it’s certainly getting better. But it’s now more suppressed, I guess.

My sense is, and this is what I’ve often said to my colleagues here, when we hire people, the real problem in the difference in hiring between men and women is we need even more than Affirmative Action because when you look at these men, they see a rising star. What they’re really looking at, and I think the best comparison I know, is to think about stocks. Stocks that don’t have earnings, people always think if they buy those stocks that don’t have earnings, when they’re going to get earnings, they’re going to make a million. These are going to be incredible. Because they think the earnings are going to be high. Now of course that’s almost never the way that it is, I mean, occasionally, okay, you can pick a winner, but most of the time it’s not. But stocks that have earnings, you know what those earnings are.

And my sense is when we compare men and women, we usually look at men and think, what is their potential? And we imagine what that potential is. And with women, we look at, what have they accomplished? And if you’re going to look at what is somebody’s potential likely to be, or what is their potential, compared to somebody, what have they actually done, the potential is almost always going to win. And women are at a distinct disadvantage because we look at that.

And now things have changed. I remember on the task force years ago, they told this joke to us on the task force. There was a woman who came in, she was severely injured in an accident. And the attending physician came in and said, “Oh my God, my son! How could that be?” And people didn’t say, “Oh, the physician is his mother.” I mean, they went to elaborate things, that, the physician was a priest, that’s why they would say that. But it didn’t occur to them that the attending doctor could be a woman. Now of course, we would get that now. So that tells me a lot has changed in the last forty years. Incredible. Not enough, but it’s incredible.

But I tell my women graduate students, “It’s never going to be fair. It’s never going to be equal. You’re always going to have to be better. You’re going to still have to work harder.”

And now the studies are coming out that if you look at women in fairly high positions, executive positions, and you ask them, “What do you think is most important, luck or hard work?” The women say luck. The men say hard work. But the point is, the women have learned that even with the hard work, it’s not enough. They have to have luck to be able to succeed. And that, I think, is our fundamental problem. So we still don’t have equal pay for equal work. And we don’t have equal regard for the work that is done. And we’ve shown that over and over again.

And there are all those studies where they, one of best ones I like was in high school where they asked, self-reporting by students to say how smart did they think they were. Far above average, above average, average, below average, they did it with boys and girls. If you look at high school, seniors in high school, the curves are almost identical. Some of them report that they’re extremely bright, most of them say that they’re kind of average, and some of them say well, yeah, they’re dumb as stones. But it’s a pretty equal curve. By the time they’re in college and they’re seniors in college, none of the girls are recording that they are far above average.
So what happens in college to girls is they learn that they’re dumber, and the boys think they’re smarter. And then if you look at graduate school, you can look at, and people have done this, controlled for grade point average, and they’re exactly the same grade point average. So they got the same thing about how smart they are. You ask the boys, they think they’re doing great. And the girls are really worried that they’re not doing very well, they’re just not up to this task, even though the external measure is identical.

So there’s real differences that, I think, between Y chromosomes and X chromosomes in general. I mean, certainly we see that in our prisons and everywhere else. Males think that they’re smarter, even when they’re not. They’re certainly, in general, better risk takers. Yeah, the curves overlap, but there’s enough difference, still, between males and females that females are at a disadvantage all the way around.

So anyway, to make a long story short for me, I came through all of this. And I realized with Ellensburg that I wanted to do what I could, but that I find this depressing and frustrating and that I’d tilted at enough windmills in my life, and that I just really wanted to go on and live my life, because you only got one. And I just couldn’t see spending my whole life trying to rectify these fundamental wrongs, and failing at them, you know, to some extent. Yeah, I’d make a little progress, but I couldn’t see that I could really change it. And I decided I really, I did like my life.

So I’ve spent my life working outdoors on critters, where I’ve got an egalitarian society. So I spent the last twenty-three years, in particular, at Punta Tombo in Argentina, the largest Magellanic penguin colony in the world. Both males and females defend their nest. The females do lay the eggs. The males do a little more of the nest defense than the females, but both of them sit on the eggs, both of them feed the chicks. And it’s quite equal, in terms of their investment in the offspring, and I find that quite rewarding. [both laugh]

[People come into the conference room for a meeting. Andrews and Boersma turn off the recorder and move to Boersma’s office to continue the interview.]

[End Track One. Begin Track Two.]

Boersma: Okay. So you asked about Ellensburg.

We knew that we had a lot of people that had pre-registered. And part of the organization, or organizing, that I did, was here at the university, and also, because I was in the Institute for Environmental Studies as well, in zoology, at that point. So I organized with a lot of the environmental community. So Polly Dyer, for example, a well-known environmentalist. Vim Wright, who, unfortunately, is dead, was the assistant director of the Institute for Environmental Studies, and a long time environmental activist. And so many of these issues, women’s issues, are really environmental issues in a lot of ways as well. And so they helped me organize the environmental community to come. So Judy Turpin, I believe, went to that. As I recall, she was at that meeting, too, years ago. And of course, Lois North, she was on the organizing committee with me. That’s where I met Lois North the first time. And oh, what’s that woman’s name? I can’t remember her first name. Ward is her last name.
Andrews: Marilyn.

Boersma: Marilyn Ward. Thank you. See what I mean? We’re going back thirty-something years here. [laughs] So it’s, yeah, it’s hard, and I don’t stay in touch much with the community, because as I said, I decided that I just found this too depressing and upsetting for me. So I thought I’ve spent one lifetime in this, and now I’ll just go on to do other things. And it was clear to me, too, because of tenure, that I really had to concentrate on my career, and not on this. This had to go more to the side.

So that was the one paper that I gave you on looking at praise in the classroom, and do women students go, or men students go to visit women professors more than men professors. And I was interested in that, because there was always a line outside my door. And I was convinced that one of the reasons that women probably were unlikely to get tenure as frequently as men is because they ended up spending so much more time visiting with their students and helping them. Because of course if in fact men have more status, you would expect that students would be more unlikely, more reluctant, to go and talk to their male professors than they would females, because they had lower status, and consequently would be more accessible.

Well it turns out, fortunately, I was wrong. It was mentors. If it was your field, you’re more likely to visit them if that was the field that you were interested in, regardless of what the sex of the professor was. But that was an interesting study. That’s why I was interested in that in relationship to women’s rights.

But in Ellensburg we had, I think about maybe it was, I don’t remember what the final count was in Ellensburg. Do you remember? I mean, did we have four thousand people there? I think it was about four.

Andrews: About 4500.

Boersma: Okay. Because I thought we had pre-registered about two thousand. And when we started to see that these Mormons were organizing and coming, then again, I went back to people that I knew and said, “You know, this is really important.” And that’s when I asked students. I said, “You know, if you’re interested in being involved in history, you’ve got to go to this conference.”

And so Maura O’Neill, who’s now my student that has come back for a PhD, went to that Ellensburg conference. And she’d know other students that went. But they drove over. Estella Leopold, also, she’s Aldo Leopold’s daughter. So a very strong environmentalist, a member of the National Academy of Science, a professor of biology here, now retired, but she went, too. And so, Helen Remick, who was director of Affirmative Action [at the University of Washington], I pulled her in to help organize with us. In fact, Helen and I wrote the grant to get the money to do the report and to do the study. Helen and I collaborated on all of those projects. I housed them in the Institute for Environmental Studies, because Helen was an administrator. But you know, so I administrated it. But Helen and I were very involved. Yes. Wrote the report and to house the people that did the research for the paper that was published, was it in Sex Roles? I can’t even remember the name of the journal now. It’s amazing how much you forget in thirty years. [laughs]
Boersma: *Sex Roles.* So Helen and I did, yeah, that’s the name of the journal. And the funny thing is, years later, I got a letter from some student saying, “This is the seminal paper in this area, and so well known and well cited.” It goes on and on and on. “And could you tell us more about this?”

And I said, “You know, this is twenty years, and this is everything I know. [laughs] I’m not in that area anymore.”

But so this was an interesting experience to see that we knew that we were going to get over two thousand people, but there were going to be a lot more because of the Mormons. And so we started organizing. That’s when I called my mother, in part. I said, “You know, we’re going to have a lot of people that are going to show up, and we’re going to need help. So if you can come out, that would be really great. And I think you’d enjoy it, and I’d like you to meet some of these people.” So she came out, and as I recall, we might have driven even over in the car with Lois North. I don’t remember. But a number of us carpooled, anyway.

And it was really intense. I remember sending my mom a lot. Because we had stuff that we had to get over to the Mormons so that they’d have their packets and all that sort of stuff. So my mom did a lot of that sort of work, as all of us did. And she was perfect, because again, she was the right age. She could work well with those Mormons, and she did. And so it was an interesting experience, to say the least. But I think none of us will forget that lone Mormon dissenting, with all the Mormons sitting around, and that poor woman standing up, saying that she thought the Equal Rights Amendment should be passed.

Andrews: This was one Mormon woman?

Boersma: There were a couple of them in the end. But, yes. They stood up in these blocks. Because the Mormons, they came with men that orchestrated with them, that told them what to do and what to vote, and all of that sort of stuff. So it was amazing.

Andrews: Mormon men?

Boersma: Mormon men, yes. Quite a few of the Mormon men. But I mean, still, it was overwhelming, it was women. But the Mormon men came and controlled these blocks, so they basically told the women how they were going to vote and what they were going to do. And it didn’t come out quite the way that they thought. But still, it had a huge effect, having all those Mormons there.

Andrews: Did you hear any of the conversations between the men and the Mormon women.

Boersma: No. I personally don’t remember any of those. I just remember there was so much going on. It was one of the first times where you saw women organizing around issues of color and job discrimination, of equal rights, equal pay. It was all there.
Certainly gay rights. I mean, that was one of the first places that it was discussed at all. It was really diverse. And then, of course, church, because of the Mormons. And you know how important these cultural factors are in women’s lives. Health care. I mean, gee, what are you going to do about aging populations? Most women are more likely to be in poverty, and children are more likely to be in poverty. How are we going to deal with education? Particularly women that have gotten divorced, and now don’t have access to alimony. Because it was right at the time when alimony was being dropped out, really quite rapidly.

So I just remember a plethora of issues. I’m not sure how all of them were going to be resolved, but at least setting a good stage for people to go to Houston and demand that we have equal rights, and that women should have control over their reproduction. I mean, Pam Roach yesterday said that, “Make no mistake. If we teach sex education, and not just abstinence,” or something like that, “that this is the liberal left agenda.” And of course, my view of Pam Roach’s speech last night on that popular channel, channel 27, or whatever it is, is that anybody that’s trying to withhold information on sex education from teenagers, is really trying to hijack their lives. I mean, people should have, we should not foster ignorance. We should foster intelligent decision making. And people like Pam Roach, in my view, are fostering ignorance because it fits their agenda, and that ruins people’s lives. And I think it’s really unfortunate. [ed. Pam Roach is a Mormon, who attended the IWY Conference, and who now serves in the Washington State Senate.]

And that’s what Mormons came to do, too, to try to hold their political agenda. But it was so interesting to see the men controlling the women, and at least a few of these women, in spite of the church and basically the sanctions that would come upon them still having the courage to stand up and say they saw the world differently. That was incredible.

Andrews: You don’t happen to recall any of their names, do you?

Boersma: No. No. Please, Mildred, thirty years! You’ve got to give me a break! [laughs]

Andrews: Did you go to Houston?

Boersma: No. No. I didn’t go to Houston.

Andrews: Do you remember the election process at Ellensburg?

Boersma: No.

Andrews: It was pretty thorny, too.

Boersma: I imagine. I mean, I just remember it was difficult. But again, I wanted to see good people be elected, but this was not my water to carry. I kind of felt like I’d done what I could do, and now I had to move on. So I used that as kind of a good turning point. You know, it was like a way to put all of the women’s stuff that I’d been involved in for longer than a decade together. And that’s why I got so involved in this, because I saw this was a way to pull it together, and then to have it move on on its own. And then I wouldn’t
have to feel responsible for it. But I certainly did before that, because of you know, the
task force report, and then being involved in the UN. I had such incredible opportunities,
I needed to be able to put that back into some change for women. So this seemed like a
good place where I could, others could come in and pick up the banner. And a lot of
people did.

Andrews: Did the conference influence your perceptions of women’s role in society?

Boersma: No. [laughs] It was pretty well formed before that.

Andrews: In your opinion, what were some of the positive or negative outcomes?

Boersma: Well, I think the positive outcomes were really the educational value. Lots of
people that were not particularly interested in women’s rights, including many of the
environmental people, because that was dominated by women. I remember Vim Wright
saying, “You know, we’ve got so much to do with the environment. Why this conference
in Ellensburg on women?” And we discussed it, and before long, she saw this as
fundamental to the environmental movement, as well.

So I guess I thought in a lot of ways, this was the beginning of the environmental
movement broadening into the women’s movement, too. Because, of course, children and
women are the ones that are going to mostly live in poverty. They’re going to be living in
the most polluted places. They need clean air and clean water more than anything else.
And many of them, most, a lot of the activists in the environmental movement had
been women where their house was next to a toxic dumpsite, like the one in Niagara
Falls. Or a nuclear site, like some of the ones in Bechtel in Michigan. And a lot of those
women got radicalized, because their children were sick, and they were worried about
their health. And so I felt that Ellensburg brought together a lot of women that shared
common concerns about their ability to raise their children in clean and healthy
environments, and what kind of education and health care would be available.

And this, I mean, it’s not that it’s not of interest to men, but it’s a lot easier for
them than it is for women. And then with the alimony and divorce rates going up, the
burden was falling much more disproportional on women. And so, I guess I saw
Ellensburg as an incredible opportunity to pull some of those things together, and it was
wonderful to see women talking about these issues and recognizing how much
government had failed us.

Andrews: Did you see large negatives as outcomes?

Boersma: Well, I guess it was discouraging to me to see the Mormons come in such
force to try to defend what now we think of as the Christian right agenda. And of course,
from that has come the Prayer [Promise] Keepers, the men’s organization. I think it’s
unfortunate that the Christian right, instead of being stewards of family and of the
environment, have come to be such, in my view, the antithesis of this. Faith is one way of
knowing, but it is only one way. And we are losing our rational society. And I believe
strongly that we need rational decision making, and that you cannot have decisions made
based on faith
We’re in this war, in large part, I believe, because we don’t know the cost of war. We have to have faith in our leaders. And I want rational decision making. And I don’t see it. I see that we’re moving further and further away from it. And Ellensburg was, for me, the first tip of the iceberg to see that churches could control people’s thinking, and that it could be brainwashing, and that rational thought would not be valued. That, I found frightening. And I think that that’s just gotten worse over the last thirty years. And so even though we talk tolerance, and as my mother keeps saying, “Well, it’s different where you live.” [laughs] And she’s right. It’s much better out here than I think most of the rest of the country, but we need to go back to the importance of scientific based decisions, and looking at alternatives, and using rational logic, and not just faith.

Andrews: Going back to what your mother just said, why is it better out here than in other parts of the country?

Boersma: I think that she feels that (a), this is much more liberal; and (b), although my mom is certainly a person of faith, there’s no doubt that she wishes I would be more of a person of faith. Because the church is important to her on some level, and I’ve just seen the church as I’ve often said, that I see missionaries as going to do good, and staying to do better. So I do not see, in most places that I’ve looked, I don’t see positive effects of the church. So that’s made me feel differently about it. And certainly the Mormons, that made me feel really differently about it. That a few men could control that number of women. That was frightening to me.

Andrews: You talked some about this, but how have women’s lives changed since the conferences?

Boersma: Well, I guess, again, I think that, going back to my mother, it’s different out here. I’m sitting with you today, you’re certainly much more dressed up than I am. I’m on sabbatical this year, but I’m in my sweater and blue jeans. And years ago, in high school, my mother said–

Andrews: For the record, I’m wearing pants, too.

Boersma: Yes. But you’re still more dressed up. You have nice shoes on. You’ve just got running shoes, see? You’ve got better shoes on. My mother, in high school, always said, “You know, when you grow up, you’re going to have to give up your jeans and your tennis shoes.” And she has now acknowledged that I don’t have to. [laughs] But those sorts of changes are certainly more on the West Coast. I mean, if you go to New York, and when I do go to New York, I do dress to go to my meetings. But here, it’s much more informal. And as long as you’re neat and tidy, I think we accept almost anybody, as long as they’re neat and tidy. We don’t care what they wear. So clothes do not make the person, as much, I think, on the West Coast still as on the East Coast.

And I think that in general, the West Coast tends to be a little more tolerant, and we’re behind in terms of development. And one of the best things, to me, about moving to Seattle, was it felt like we were like twenty years behind what’s happening in the rest of the country. We’ve fast caught up. But to think of Seattle in 1969 having only one high
rise, the Smith Tower, which at one point was the largest skyscraper on the west coast. And now look at where we’re at. But it’s still not as bad as New York or Boston or Columbus, Ohio, or, you know, almost any of these other cities. We were just lucky. We got to start later, so it’s taken us a little longer to catch up, and I wish we hadn’t caught up, frankly. [laughs]

Andrews: Regarding issues that were considered at Ellensburg, how do you feel that they’ve progressed? Have they been resolved? Or are they still being debated?

Boersma: Well, I still think they’re being debated. I think it’s come a long way. I don’t think we’d have people question equal pay for equal work now. I don’t, well, maybe still in the South, maybe. I don’t know, because I don’t live in the South. But I’ve interviewed for jobs and I considered an endowed chair, at one point, at Duke. And I went back, it was only a few years ago, but you know, when all you can get is Christian radio, that does give you pause. So we are a different part of the country. You know, I live for National Public Radio. I don’t know what I’d do without National Public Radio. But there are lots of places in the country where that’s not true.

So, yes, there have been, certainly, changes. Some of them are superficial like dress. Some of them are fundamental like in general, equal pay for equal work. But women are still not making as much on the dollar as the men are, so we haven’t succeeded there. We just heard, what, today, Walgreen’s is in a class action suit. The blacks are suing them because of race discrimination. Looks like a pretty good pattern of discrimination. I think Wal-Mart, I mean, it’s been classic in terms of not paying people health benefits and things like that. These low income jobs in the service sector, women are much more likely to get those jobs than men. We see women with better education, and they’re still not making as much as men. Okay, I understand if you’re going to dig ditches, that takes a lot of physical activity. But most of the things that we’re asking women to do with their brains, they’re not any different from the men.

But you’ve got different networks. And the men’s networks, men are really good at using their networks to get ahead. It’s been shown over and over again that women use their networks more for social purposes, for emotional support, and things like that. So we just haven’t made as much progress. As I say, I mean, I’m waiting to, take Hillary Clinton, I mean, there’s somebody that is well qualified. And even women are not sure that they would vote for her. And they’re lobbying her about her vote for the war, saying, you know, you should say that you were wrong and apologize for that vote. And she keeps coming out and saying that we were misled, you know, “I voted on what the information was, that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.”

I mean, why don’t we hold Bush accountable for his mission accomplished, where he was in his little flight suit? Now, you know what, we’re 3,000 more people dead after that. I mean, mission accomplished? I mean, come on, give me a break here. And yet, nobody’s cutting any slack for Hillary, and we didn’t for Ferraro, when she ran for vice president. I would have loved to see Pat Schroeder run for president. And yet, because she cried, we didn’t see her as a viable candidate. I mean, she’s one of the smartest people in the world.

And then we’ve got the woman that’s just appointed president of Harvard, who says, “I’m president of Harvard. I don’t want to be seen as a woman president of
Harvard.” I want her to be seen as a woman president of Harvard, and yet when she describes growing up and having her mother basically kind of partly tell her stuff that she probably couldn’t do. She did it in spite of it. But I mean, my point on all of this is that we really do need to have equal opportunities for men and women, and let people excel at whatever their talents might be.

And I think that we facilitate men in general, and hinder women. And we’ve gotten away from some of those barriers. At least now you and I are in pants, and we can go almost anywhere in pants. I mean, even to most, even, I mean—

Andrews: even to the Oscars?

Boersma: Yeah. The Oscars this year, Ellen Degeneres wore her tux. [laughs] We have come a long way in thirty years. It’s just that we still have a long way to go. And I don’t think it’s going to, the last push, I just don’t see that that’s going to happen easily, and not without incredible pushing. I think it’s getting worse. I don’t see women, I think the glass ceiling is getting stronger. Not very many women are CEOs. That’s partly because if you look at most CEOs, they do look like white men. And even in terms of tenure, women are doing much better at universities, but at the full professor level, they’re still predominantly white men. And those that aren’t, look like white men. I mean, you know, my record looks like a white male’s record.

And all of us would like to have wives. That really facilitates. And now men are having more trouble, because the women are working. And so we have to create a better society where we can balance our personal lives with our professional lives. And that’s very difficult. It’s always been a very difficult balance, but it’s been a lot easier for men than it has been for women, because they can at least find wives. Wives are expensive, but they’re very difficult to find. [laughs]

Andrews: I’d like to conclude with having you talk a little bit about your own professional career, and other ways that the women’s movement might have affected that.

Boersma: Well, I’m now the Wadsworth Endowed Chair in conservation science. So I think by most any standard, I’ve been successful in the academic community. I’ve published my papers, I’ve fledged students. I guess there are a couple of things I didn’t expect. One is I didn’t really expect to raise children. I didn’t want to have children. I’m much more interested in, first of all, I believe that there are two fundamental environmental problems that nobody wants to talk about. One is consumption, the other is population. And nobody wants to talk about reducing either one of those, and yet they’re fundamental, and they have to be reduced. So I just feel like that was the right thing to do. I mean, the world has too many people, and I didn’t need to have any.

What I didn’t really count on is raising kids, and yet I feel like that’s what I do all the time. Because having graduate students is like having kids, except that you’re in the process of fledging them all the time. You know, sending them out on their own, and making them strong adults to go on and change their world. And I just didn’t expect that really having students would be such a parenting role, in a way. So that’s been a surprise to me in terms of my career.
The second thing is, everybody told me that when I finally grew up, that I’d get out of field biology. And it turns out, that just winds my clock. I love to be outside. You know, computers are just not exciting to me, or sitting in an office near a phone. As one of my mentors once said to me, “You don’t have to check all those penguin nests yourself. You could send your students.”

I said, “But I wouldn’t really know what’s going on. And I really want to know.” And I just get a kick out of being outside and being in nature. I mean, that’s certainly my solace and it just is very rewarding. And fortunately, I’ve been blessed with being able to do that, and be blessed with a partner that likes to do that as well. So it’s been fun, traveling around the world.

So this year, my sixtieth birthday, we went to the East Antarctic, to Mawson’s hut, the guy that discovered the south magnetic pole. There’s probably been less than five hundred people. Very few people have ever gotten there. But I can’t complain. If I die tomorrow, I’ve had a great life. And I’m really blessed with what I really wanted in life, which is to be able to enjoy nature. I’m not sure in another few generations if there will be any nature left. And I’ve been lucky to live in the Galapagos for a year. And I’ve spent all this time in Argentina and other places, and have a wonderful supportive circle of friends and colleagues that I work with. So I can’t complain.

Andrews: That’s fabulous.

Boersma: No, I really, in that sense, I just really enjoyed my life. At one point I thought I’d be a president of a university. But I’ve fortunately had good mentoring, and every time that I’ve gotten to that junction to go more into administration, I’ve stepped out. I’m just not done traveling yet. I just really, I enjoy that still. And I recognize that at some point, I won’t want to travel as much as I am now. But it hasn’t happened yet.

Andrews: I hope it won’t for a long time.

Boersma: [laughs] Me, too.

Andrews: In summary, is there anything else that you’d like to add?

Boersma: About Ellensburg or anything. No, I guess I should tell you one thing. There are other historical records, not on Ellensburg. But Angela Ginorio did a women in science project. You may find that of interest or of use, because she interviewed a lot of women here at the university.

[End Track Two. Begin Track Three.]

Boersma: I’ve told you about Helen Remick, I’ve told you about Maura O’Neill, the student that went, because I really do think that, she’s an independent entrepreneur and started a number of businesses and now is coming back to the university and doing a PhD with me. So some of these things come full circle. And hers is an independent PhD, and she’s very much interested in women’s issues all the way across the board, particularly
why they’re so absent from business. So she’d be a good one [to interview], and she’ll remember a lot.

Boersma: Maura was at the conference. Yep. She certainly was. And so she’s one of the few, she went as an undergraduate.

Andrews: She must have been quite young.

Boersma: Yes. That’s why I think you should interview her, because she was an undergraduate at the time.

Andrews: She’d have a different perspective.

Boersma: I think so. Okay, how about Estella Leopold? She was at the conference, too. Estella Leopold’s dad is Aldo Leopold. She has just been very big in the environmental movement. And she and Vim Wright were just really fundamental at moving many of these environmental issues along. And now, unfortunately, as I said, Vim passed away. But Estella went to that conference with Vim and helped organize a lot of this. And so she may, I don’t know, remember parts of this that I haven’t told you.

The last thing that I’ll say is that the women’s rights movement still has a long way to go, but one of the things that I didn’t realize— I did, but I didn’t see it, it’s so fundamental, I think, because I’m a white woman. But now I see these civil rights issues as fundamental to the women’s rights movement as any of the other ones. Whether it’s sexual orientation or gender, transgender, and all of those sorts of issues. I didn’t really see those, and I don’t particularly know why for me, personally, because I am gay. But I didn’t see those as fundamental civil rights. I mean, I’ve always seen women’s issues as fundamental civil rights, because how can you discriminate on gender? But I can see how you can discriminate on religion. And it didn’t bother me, I didn’t think it was fair about sexual orientation, but I felt that there were choices.

You make choices in your life about what your career’s going to be, or what your job is going to be, and then you live with some of those choices, which is probably in part why I decided not to move more into politics. I mean now, it’s easy to move into politics. But it looked to me like that would be tough. And a university community was a good place, I think, for most of us to be that were interested in ideas, because we trade on ideas. We don’t trade, at least not very much, on how you look, or what religion you are, or what your ideas are, unless you can’t find funding for your ideas. Then we worry about that. But other than that, it seems like it’s a little, it’s a little better place, and particularly for women, because we can still be isolated. Women are still poorly represented here.

And unfortunately, I think one of the reasons is because I think it’s more difficult to find colleagues that will play in the sandbox with you, although now it’s getting better. Biology is about half-and-half. But for a long time, you just didn’t find women in the sciences. I was lucky, because by being in the Institute for Environmental Studies, I had colleagues like Estella Leopold, and Vim Wright, and Gordon Orians, and Bob Paine, who were really important mentors to me in helping me along. So even though there was strong discrimination still in zoology, because I got to spend part of the time out, that made it much more, I think, much easier to continue on.
And Gordon was such a good mentor. He was director of the Institute for Environmental Studies. He’s a member of the National Academy of Science, and is a professor emeritus of zoology and biology. And I still see a lot of Gordon. But he was always fostering those ideas. And all of them were so good about saying, “Are you sure you want to go into academic administration?”

And so by the time I had all those opportunities, I found out I really liked penguins. It’s not that I’m not doing some of that, because the other thing that’s grown out of this lab, because I’m still fundamentally interested in our world, and equality. But now I’ve really just shifted my focus to wildlife. I mean, I’d like to see penguins around for several generations. So we’re running a magazine out of the University of Washington, and it started in my lab. It’s still, it’s here, I’ll give you a copy of it. It’s called The Conservation Magazine. And we’re trying to be the Harvard Business Review for conservation. And now we have about 8,000 people that are subscribers, and it continues to grow. And we talk about it as good writing and good ideas. But we figure if we can make the conservation movement smarter, then we can get more change.

Unfortunately, with the women’s movement, I don’t think it helps to make things smarter. And maybe it won’t be with the conservation movement, either. I don’t know. But I keep thinking, again, if we can get more back to rational thought. Certainly to me that’s now fundamental about the civil rights movement for gay people. It doesn’t make any sense not to try to foster people caring about each other, because it keeps them off the public dole. So why Republicans would be against that is still totally beyond me. I mean, anything that we can do to get more people to care about other people, and to be able to take on this responsibility. Whether it’s caring for your aged parent, caring for people that have disabilities that you may have become close to. I just don’t get it.

And so again, this is one of those things where, that’s not my deal, but I see these same sorts of problems. And the same thing, for me, is true with penguins. If we don’t care about penguins, we’re not going to have them. So somebody’s got to help be stewards for these things. And in general, I think that women have been better stewards than men. So I want to open it up so we can give more women, as well as men who care, those sorts of opportunities to change the world, because we really need it desperately. Otherwise, I fear five or six, seven, ten generations. I don’t want to look like Asia. And I think that that’s where we’re headed. And that’s not what I want in my world.

Andrews: Thank you so very much. You’re such an inspiration.

Boersma: Well, thank you. It’s been my pleasure.

[End interview.]