Andrews: The following interview is being conducted with Tina Cohen, 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 February 7, at Tina’s home in Olympia. And the interviewer is Mildred Andrews.

As the beginning, Tina, will you tell me briefly about your growing up years? Something about your family, community, school? Essentially, how you developed your ideas about your role as a woman at home and in society?

Cohen: I grew up in a household with three girls. I’m the oldest of three. And we were always told, “You can be anything you want when you grow up,” even back in 1946, when I was born. And that was the kind of tone that was set. It was never, “You can’t do that because you’re a girl.” But we did have a conservative background, upbringing, where there were certain things on the one hand we could do, but on the other, it was like, “I’ve got three girls here, and I’m not going to let them go out and be the kind of girls I don’t want them to be.” So it was a dichotomy in that respect.

I moved around a lot, my father was a chemical engineer and a rocket scientist. And by the time I graduated college, I had gone to fourteen different schools. Part of the baby boom. We moved into an area, so first there was a lot of kids with the baby boom. But then also the rocket industry brought in a lot of people, then they had to build new schools. So some of it, we didn’t move to a different area, but they had new schools for us, just because there were too many of us.

My younger sisters are four and six years younger, respectively, so I always play the big sister role. And sometimes it was a challenge. [laughs] I’m close, still, with one sister. Not as close with the other, who lives further in California. That’s just real quick background.

Andrews: Would you like to say anything about your church?

Cohen: Well, we’re Jewish. And my father had been what we would call conservative or orthodox background. My mother was a very reformed background. And we were raised as reform Jewish background, I think probably because of my parents’ feelings about raising daughters. And a conservative, or, actually, an orthodox background, there are certain things that girls, women, don’t do. And I don’t know whose idea it was, but the idea that we were going to be more liberal in our interpretation, girls could do anything, women could do anything, I think that’s why the reform background really worked well for us.
Unlike some of my friends, I went to Sunday school from the time I was four years old until I was confirmed at sixteen, and have a pretty good background and knowledge about history and my faith. Now as an adult, I’m not as active in any of the congregations, although I have been the director of the National Conference of Christians and Jews for a couple of years. My daughter laughed and said, “Mom, you’re the least religious person I know to do that.” But sometimes it isn’t the religion, but your faith and beliefs, and not necessarily what the prayer book says, but how you live your life. Anyway, that’s the way we grew up.

Andrews: What were your major affiliations and networks, and I mean particularly women’s affiliations and networks, in the late 1960s and ‘70s, during the time of the IWY conference.

Cohen: I may be what was called, in that regard, a late bloomer. When I came here to the University of Washington, I joined a Jewish sorority. And in those times, Jewish girls did not go into sororities that were non-Jewish sororities. There were two Jewish sororities. But those were also the friends that you had later on.

Andrews: Excuse me, what was the name of your sorority?

Cohen: I was in Alpha Epsilon Phi. The other one was Phi Sigma Sigma. And my friends today are still those women who were in those two sororities then. My husband was in a Jewish fraternity. There were two Jewish fraternities. They once had had three of them there, but one folded up. Those were the days when Jewish people were in their own Jewish fraternities and sororities. So then, as we got married, and we were still all friends, as we became more involved in family life and in the communities, we weren’t necessarily alumni from those organizations. But then we became involved in different Jewish organizations. But it was almost the same type, same groups of people. Some of my friends became involved in Hadassah, which is a women’s Zionist organization. Some in their sisterhood organizations from the different temples and such. I became involved in the National Council of Jewish Women. I’d also, in high school, been a member of the B’nai B’rith women’s group, or girls, they called it the BBG, B’nai B’rith Girls. And so it was very natural for me to become involved in a women’s group. And it was probably, well, I know it was after both of my kids were born that I became involved because I wanted to do something else.

So my mother had been involved in Council, we called it Council then. My grandmother had been involved in Council, my mother’s mother. And I don’t remember what was actually the one thing that sparked, to get me to a meeting. But I did. And found I knew enough about it, found other women who were involved in different things that I was involved with, or interested in. So I was involved with Council. I was involved with other things, dealing with my kids. But Council was the main organization that I was involved with at that point. And as I became more involved, that’s when I started becoming involved with other organizations, but not necessarily membership in other organizations. But it was more networking with the other organizations: League of Women Voters, AAUW, Church Women United. That was something that Council was already involved with.
As far as specifically the IWY meetings, it was because of Council. I was involved with Council and set up some meetings for Council. But somebody else said, “You know, this would be a good person to become more involved.” And they just said, “Would you?” And I said yes. It really was Kismet. It was just fate. I was in the right place at the right time.

Andrews: How did you view women’s role in the home and in society at around the time of the conference? Did you see a need for change?

Cohen: What I saw was that there was a big division, that there was no compromise. That during those days, you had to, you were out in the workforce, but no, no, you couldn’t be at home as a mother, being a homemaker, also. Or else, you were a homemaker, and, “Oh, those women out in the workforce! You know what kind of women they are.” And it was slowly starting to change a little. But not a lot. That’s what I saw to start with.

So the National Women’s Conference, and actually, the Washington state conference, started laying out some of those viewpoints for me in a bit more cohesive fashion. But if you listened to the media then, and some of the more sensationalist news, it still was you have to be one or the other, you can’t be everything. And the women’s role in the home was still being downplayed quite a bit. I didn’t go to college and use my brain and raise my kids to be that kind of a person.

So I don’t know if that directly answers what you’re looking for. I mean, that’s sort of how I felt about it then. And I think it’s changed. I hope it’s changed.

Andrews: More choices, perhaps.

Cohen: I think more tolerance. And that’s what I don’t think there was. There was no tolerance. You were either one or the other, and no acceptance.

Andrews: Were there any specific events that spurred your thinking about the changing roles of women?

Cohen: I never considered myself a prejudiced or bigoted person. But I’ll tell you, in Ellensburg, I was so ticked at some of the men I saw there directing some of the women from the more conservative element. I felt, what are these guys doing? Don’t these women know— I guess the best way to describe it is in my daughter’s words, “Do they really believe that?” And that was probably the one thing that made me the maddest. And sort of made me want to work more.

Andrews: Were there quite a few men there?

Cohen: More than I thought there should be. More than a handful. You know, I swear that I remember, and I don’t think that this has been altered by other things, hearing an announcement on the floor of one of the plenary sessions, “Would the motor home with the Utah license plates please move.” You know, wherever it was parked. I swear that I heard that. And I don’t know if anyone else has repeated that. But it was just really being
inundated, and having men there. I mean, the separation that was there. I mean, it was like women who were only with the men, and didn’t know what the men were saying, and it was a women’s conference. And then there were the women who were just there with their girlfriends, other women, colleagues. So I can’t tell you numbers, but I can tell you there were probably more than there should have been. That’s my memory of it. I don’t remember speaking to the men.

Andrews: Did you hear any conversations between the men and the women that were with them?

Cohen: No. I didn’t. Not that I remember.

Andrews: Were you there when all those unexpected people began to arrive?

Cohen: You know, I reread the report, the state report. And it did remind me that there had been some things that had sort of been snafus about the registration and all. And I remember I came, there were probably six of us, or seven. And I remember being outside, and I remember a lot of people. It must have been like four or five, or maybe later, but it wasn’t real cold yet, on that original registration day. And I just don’t remember hearing a lot of hubbub about, “Oh, there are so many more people. We’ve got to do this and that and whatever.” I just remember it taking a while for myself. But I don’t remember a lot of dissent and people being upset and such at the time I was going through registration. Because we went through registration, and then went and got our room. I don’t remember if we went and ate or something after that. So I don’t remember that.

I do remember, though, standing in line voting. And that took forever. And it was cold. And I had never been in Ellensburg before. And the wind, I couldn’t believe it was so windy and cold that time of year. And that may have been a result of more women than expected at that time.

Andrews: So did you suffer from the logistics of all these unanticipated 2,000 people that showed up?

Cohen: We had to get to sessions early, I do remember that. But no, I don’t remember. You know, the thing, Millie, is that everything was so new to me. I was not really active and out there and at the top of the list as far as involvement in things. I was one of the newbies. Remember, I was barely thirty years old, and I didn’t know what to expect. But I was on a college campus, which was my element. I hadn’t been out of college for ten years. I knew I was going to have to walk around different places. I saw a lot of people around. And I may not have even realized that there were more people around than we expected, because I wasn’t that involved with it up to that point. It was probably only a couple of months, that I had been involved. I knew people by sight and by name, and I’d been to a couple of meetings of some organizing groups. And I knew what my role was.

Andrews: And what was that?
Cohen: My role was to represent the National Council of Jewish Women. That’s what I was being asked to go for, to be there for, along with the other women. I was teaching for Bellevue Community College at the time in home and community education, teaching parent education, and toddlers. Daycare was a big thing for Council. Windows on Daycare [name of a study/book] had been something they had worked on for quite a while. So I was there to make sure that whatever came out of it, our local Council people knew, as well as around the country.

Then when it came time to nominate someone to be on our state slate to go to Houston, we realized that if you’re going to have a cross section of the community, of the state, there was nobody else who was Jewish. And with Jewish women being as involved as they had been, especially in Seattle, and settling Seattle. And even in Pullman, there were Jewish women involved. So I was elected from our group. They said, “Okay, if you think you can do it, go ahead and do it with our blessing. Go ahead.” So I was nominated.

So a lot of the expectations weren’t there. It was just so new for me. I just didn’t know what to expect. It was fun. [laughs]

Andrews: Oh, I bet. You said in your questionnaire that Houston actually stood out for you more than Ellensburg.

Cohen: It did. Probably because Ellensburg was so new. And afterwards, I was sort of geared up by that point to understand a bit more. If you’re working on the beginning, you don’t quite know how the organization is going to run. You don’t have a context for putting it together. It’s just sort of an experience. And to remember an experience, you sort of need some milestones or benchmarks or something. I didn’t have as much experience to put it within a context in my own personal filing cabinet for Ellensburg. By the time Houston came around, I sort of got it. I understood people from other parts of the country, and some of the contentiousness that was going on. And I knew the women that I was going to Houston with more. I knew people from around the country who were coming from other delegations who were going to be there. So it was a different experience for me in that regard, to be able to remember it better. And again, it was fun. [laughs] It was long and tiring, but it was fun. I enjoyed both of them, but I just seem to remember Houston a lot more.

Andrews: Tell me about some of the fun.

Cohen: Well, listening to some of the women who came. I mean, we had three first ladies who were there. Maya Angelou, I remember, was there.

Andrews: Which first ladies were there?

Cohen: Let’s see if I can remember. If I can remember correctly, I think Rosalyn Carter was there. And Betty Ford. And who else would have been there? I’m pretty sure there was a third one.

Andrews: Lady Bird Johnson. Would she have been there?
Cohen: Yes. Yes. I’m trying to think. Yes. She would have been the one. I remember Betty Ford. And I’m pretty sure that Rosalyn Carter would have been there, also. Maybe because I also had a chance to meet her at the White House, which was very exciting. But some of the speakers that we had. And the women that were in the delegation. When you go through some experiences like that. I mean, there were some real nasty things that went on and were said, and everybody had rumors and things. And just that support group.

I remember going out to dinner one night, and I’m sure it wasn’t all of us, to some restaurant somewhere. It was just a restaurant in Houston where everybody would write their name on the wall by the bathroom. I’ve been back there, and I can’t find the restaurant. [laughs] Houston, because of the flash floods, has very high sidewalks in places for the sewers, for the water to go down the sewers. And where the convention center was, I remember a big wide intersection. And across the street was a man with a sign, telling us how we’re all going to go to hell and everything. And I just remember, there were hundreds of women just sitting there laughing at him. And then I’m sure there were hundreds who went over to say, “Oh, yes, you’re so right, I wish I weren’t here.” But just things like that, just a lot of good memories along with a lot of very eye opening memories.

Some of the women, I’m sure, had a lot harder experience with it. I may have written in the questionnaire, maybe because I felt that I was a homemaker and a part time worker and a mother, I didn’t think I was quite as radical, maybe, as some people thought. So when I went and stood in line for something, someone thought well, are you one of them? It was just sort of like I was a chameleon, and I would fit in, and I would hear stuff. So I just had fun with it, I really did. I worked hard, but I had fun with it, too.

Andrews: What were some of the issues that were of primary concern to you?

Cohen: Well, the ERA was really big for me. I remember when the Pro Plan was put together, and all of the different things that we talked about that we believed in as being pro-ERA. And the abortion rights was a big part of it for me. Equal pay. All of those things. You can wrap it all up in a package. I can’t say that one part of it was more important than another. You know? They were all important. And as I get older, I realize, maybe then I thought you either have it all or you don’t have it all, as far as the ERA and the equal pay. And now I realize you just slowly make incremental improvements on it.

About 1970, I remember having a job for the telephone company. I quit because there was a man who was getting more money than I was. And also, they took a lot of women and they did a lateral transfer, which was their way of not paying the women. And after they offered that to me, and I knew a lot of stuff that was going on, and they did it to me, I said, basically, “You can take this job and shove it.” And I walked out and started bawling. But I quit. The equal pay was a big hot button issue for me. I’m trying to think what else.

Andrews: Were there many that objected to equal pay?

Cohen: I can’t say that I remember anyone coming out. I mean, some things, even then, weren’t politically correct to say. But you don’t have to worry about equal pay if the
woman’s place was in the home. Why should you have equal pay if, in fact, you’re going
to be at home, and you don’t need to worry about that? And the man needs the job in
order to be able to take care of the family. There were other issues that were hot button
issues. I don’t know how many lesbian delegates we had. One, for sure. Maybe, and I
know we had support groups. I had no problem with a woman who’s a lesbian. I have a
cousin who’s a lesbian. I have a niece who’s a lesbian. And even then, you know, it was
like okay, it’s not my thing. Okay, so what else is new? Those were really things, and
those women really had some harsh words with them. I don’t know if anyone got
physical with them. So there were some real nasty things, too. But I think the equal pay
and equal rights were probably my hot button issues.

Andrews: How would you compare the atmosphere at Ellensburg with the atmosphere at
Houston?

Cohen: Well, Houston, there were so many more people, it was diffused. And people
went, knowing more things about parliamentary procedure. And there weren’t as many of
the workshops. The workshops did become shouting matches in some places. I remember
sitting in one in a very large hall. And it wasn’t a shouting match, it was just plain boring.
Because everybody else was over in the shouting match, and I wish I had been at one of
those. But I did hear other people who were with me talking about it.

Houston, it was like people were together in cliques. I don’t remember offhand
having confrontations, other than the man across the street who said, “You women should
go home. You’re going to go to hell” and all that. But the atmosphere was just much
more organized. But it may have also been because it was bigger and more diffused. And
there weren’t as many chances for run ins with some of the smaller groups. I’m not sure
what the difference would have been.

Andrews: What about the Washington delegation? What was its influence at Houston?

Cohen: I think there was a big influence, and I’d credit Judith Lonnquist with that. Elaine
LaTourelle was probably in there just as much. There was a woman who was not a
member of the delegation who I think was very involved, and that was Judith Turpin.
I saw her some years later, and I think she is still a lobbyist. I’m trying to remember what
group [Washington Environmental Council], but possibly Judith Lonnquist would know.
Mickie Pailthorp, Michelle Pailthorp, was also a firecracker. I think of Elaine, Mickie and
Judith as far as strong vocal leadership. Dorothy is a leader in her own quiet way. I don’t
think of Dorothy—

Andrews: Dorothy Hollingsworth?

Cohen: Dorothy Hollingsworth. She wasn’t as in your face. Maybe because she was
older, and had been through a lot. And I knew Dorothy, her experiences in education
from a lot of good discussions, because she was still on board when I was on the board,
and we had a lot of discussions. And Dorothy had been through a lot. And Judith had
been involved with the WEA, Washington Education Association. Mickie, I think Mickie
was an attorney then. And I’m not sure Elaine’s background as much. But I saw the three
of them, that’s in my memory, the three of them, as being the active, vocal, in your face type. But still, you know, nice type. And Dorothy, a little more finesse. And Marianne Kraft Norton, who ended up being my neighbor, not knowing that she was my neighbor. [laughs] There are leaders who are out there in front, and there are leaders who sometimes do a lot of the work behind the scenes. And sometimes I’d see Marianne like that. Because she knew everybody. That was just what she did then. I’m trying to think of some of the other people.

There were, I’m trying to think if it was two or three women who were not part of the pro-ERA group. And I remember Kay Regan. I don’t know how old she was then. She seemed much older than I was. I remember we did not agree on almost anything. She was someone I could still talk to, and felt she wasn’t going to be there, in your face type of thing. And I remember saying, “We’re going to agree to disagree.” But there were other people there that wouldn’t do that. But Kay was, “Okay, I don’t agree with you, you’re not right. But we can agree to disagree. We’ll agree on other things. And maybe another time we’ll agree on something, and we’ll work together.” And there were other people like that.

Andrews: Were there things that you agreed on? You and Kay?

Cohen: There were, but I honestly can’t remember right now. I remember more the situation, because it sort of set the tone that I realized in later years. There were other people that worked on coalitions, and we called it a rolling coalition. Because we would agree on certain things, and we wouldn’t agree on others. But we would work together on certain things.

Audrey Gruger was another one who was part of the delegation. I see her occasionally at the Husky football games. I don’t even remember if I saw her last year. I know I did the year before. I’d come down here and have lunch with her every now and then. And I saw Audrey probably as much as, well, Marianne I saw the most, because we were living there. But I saw Audrey quite a bit at the time. Let me think, who else? What was it, Roylance?

Andrews: Susan Roylance?

Cohen: Susan Roylance was someone that I just felt, she was very bitter. And it was possibly because things in our state delegation weren’t working out the way she wanted it. But she was very bitter.

Andrews: She was an alternate delegate.

Cohen: Yes, and that may be part of it. I remember when, I think I wrote it down, the woman who fell off the curb and broke her leg. Elsie—

Andrews: Elsie Schrader?

Cohen: Yes. Elsie Schrader. When Elsie broke her leg, I remember, she did not want to go to the emergency room. She wanted to sit there. She had her leg propped up with ice
on it, because she did not want one of those alternates to come in. Because we only had one person elected – was it one person? Maybe you can remind me. Who was not pro-

Andrews: Kay Regan was the only one.

Cohen: Yes. And Susan was an alternate. And wasn’t there one other alternate, too?

Andrews: Judy Quinton? [ed. There were twenty-four delegates and five alternates.]

Cohen: Yes. And I don’t remember her at all. But while we still had the majority in the delegation, Elsie did not want to give up her seat at all. I mean, even going to the bathroom, you had to give up your seat. So if there was a vote or anything, you didn’t want to do that. I remember I did not speak, but at times I tried. But I do remember, because they would put us in different positions each day on the floor, where we were sitting. And Washington could always have been towards the back, but sometimes we were toward the front, and sometimes closer to an aisle than others. I remember being a placeholder and standing. So that right when we got to a place, somebody else would be able to stand in from our delegation, or even another delegation, to be able to say something. So that’s how low down on the totem pole I was. [laughs] It was just an eye opener for me. It just started everything else.

Andrews: Now when you got back, you and Dorothy Hollingsworth did quite a bit of public speaking, didn’t you?

Cohen: We did. We did. And I was trying to find the list of the places that we had gone. I remember, and Dorothy may not have been with me on all of them. I remember I took slides everywhere. And made the mistake of putting my film in my suitcase, which didn’t arrive back home with me in Seattle.

Andrews: And are these at the University of Washington?

Cohen: I believe they are. I don’t think I threw them away. I really thought that things were going to be important enough that we needed to keep track of them. So when I sent all of my presidential papers and everything to the University of Washington, all of my stuff from Houston was with that. Except for some personal things.

Andrews: I’ll check the photo archives.

Cohen: Okay. So anyway, these pictures I had, I made the mistake of putting in my suitcase. And Dorothy and I had something scheduled like within a week or so. And my suitcase did not come back to Seattle. We swear, when we compared notes afterwards, we think some of the porters who were checking them in sent them all over the country, ’cause they knew who was there. Anyway, I finally got my slides. We had them taken care of, so we did some slide shows. And I remember that King County had a women’s discussion group that we went and spoke to. The one that stuck out in my mind most was
there was a woman from Council whose husband was with Kiwanis. And I remember that they were meeting at the Swedish Club. And I’d never been to the Swedish Club before. And when he introduced us, we were women who’d gone to the ERA convention. And it sort of hit us the wrong way at the time, or hit me the wrong way, because it was much more than ERA. It was a lot of stuff. But we had gone to the ERA convention. It was, us girls had gone. Because Kiwanis didn’t have men at the time, at least in that club.

Andrews: Didn’t have women?

Cohen: Didn’t have women. Yes. Thank you. So it was, I remember speaking there, and of course Council, and Dorothy spoke, also. I know that there were other groups that we spoke to, but I just can’t remember offhand. I once had a whole list of them, and that’s part of what I, somewhere in my files that are out in the garage.

Andrews: Well, I know you spoke to the Council for Jewish Women.

Cohen: Yes, yes, we did do that. It would have been a lunch meeting. And that was probably the one that we had planned, that was the first one when we came back. But there must have been five or six, at least, but I just can’t remember them all. But yes, Council would have been one. And I also had an obligation to Council. Council was the one that sent me there. I mean, they paid for me to go to Ellensburg. And then some of the other support I had was all from Council, both locally and nationally. So I needed to let the women know what was going on.

Andrews: So how did the conference influence your perceptions of women’s role in the home and in society?

Cohen: I honestly don’t remember that the conference influenced or changed any of my ideas other than opening my eyes. And as I mentioned a little bit earlier, I felt that, those days, you were either one thing or the other. The women who were “homemakers only” thought I was a “homemaker only,” and I was one of them. And professional women in the workforce who recognized that you could be both, still thought I was more a professional woman in the workforce. It was like there was nothing in between. And if it influenced me at all, it was this is all wrong, you can be both, but you need to have support.

And I was probably one of the fortunate ones. I had both; my husband supported me, I don’t mean just financial, but he’s the one who said, “Go, go!” And my mother-in-law had retired, and she stayed and helped. I had preschool and elementary aged kids. So what it influenced for me then was to think, we’ve got to let people know more about the value of the homemaker; the woman in the workplace who needs to be there or wants to be there, either one; and the support that they need from family or from society in general. And I think that right then, I knew what I felt it should be and I saw what it wasn’t. I don’t know if that makes sense. But what I remember is, it was just so polarized. It just was so black and white. That was my perception of it.

Andrews: In your opinion, what were some of the positive and negative outcomes?
Cohen: I think one of the most disappointing outcomes was that we didn’t see it go any further. We saw very little happen afterwards. As far as the media taking things further with national laws and initiatives. Even today, the whole women’s movement, unless you were in it, people just don’t know what it was, because it doesn’t have that kind of charisma. And I don’t want to say that’s positive or negative, it’s just sort of disappointing to me. On a positive front, it had its fifteen minutes of fame. And for women who had a need to be there, I mean, they were coming from all over the country. Is it Chris Marsten? I’m trying to remember her name. It may have been Christine Marsten. She may have been one of the delegation. I mean, this was a welfare mother.

There were women who were there because they needed to be. That was the most positive. The networking, on a personal standpoint, the contacts, the learning experience of organization and coalitions for me was, I couldn’t have gotten it in four years of college. That was, to me, the big lesson. The subject matter, the women’s rights issues, I already had that in me. It was my own personal belief system. That didn’t change. If anything, it strengthened what I believed. It didn’t sway me. We weren’t there to sway each other. I guess those were the things that impressed me the most. You know, it’s been a while, Millie. [laughs]

Andrews: Oh, I know. You’re doing very well.

Cohen: I guess over the years as people ask me, my friends, “How did you get so involved in this?” And “How did you get so involved in that?” I thought, being at the right place at the right time. Being the right age and having the right family environment to accept what was there at the time to become involved. Because you can be in the right place and just say, “I can’t do it.” But being able to do it. And that was sort of a benchmark, a watershed event, that just taught me so much. And to be able to go back, then, and make connections, and say, “Do you remember? I met you back when.” “Yes!” It’s just sort of one of those things.

And it sort of made me realize that on a personal level, you can go out and say a lot, and if people don’t know how afraid you are or how little you know, but if you really are able to express yourself, you’re going to be able to work your way in there. I mean, when I think of some other things I’ve done in my life, it isn’t because I had more knowledge than someone else. It was because I was persistent, and I could sort of wiggle my way in there. [laughs] I don’t know. That’s more on a personal level of what I felt from Houston.

Andrews: I think you probably just covered this, but I’ll ask it anyway, and see if anything else comes to mind. In your opinion, what was the significance of both the Ellensburg and Houston conferences?

Cohen: The significance on a society was really a coming of age, I think, also, for women in the United States. Or a benchmark, let’s put it that way. But my disappointment is that as we get older and then we have younger women becoming involved, they don’t realize it, and they take so many things for granted. So that, to me, it was significant at the point.
On a personal level, what I had mentioned earlier, it opened my eyes to what I could do. And where I could be. Just to go forward.

Andrews: You mentioned earlier that you had met Rosalyn Carter at the White House.

Cohen: I did. It was through Council, again. The National Council of Jewish Women has a, I’m trying to remember what they called it at the time. But it’s like a legislative assembly. And it’s a day on the hill. And I went to DC twice. We were invited to the White House both times. And I remember they wanted my Social Security number ahead of time. And the only way I could get there is if I was on the bus as they went through the gates. And we had pictures taken. And I remember I tried so hard to get a hold of that picture, even afterwards. There were a couple hundred of us.

But the first time that we went, I remember we had wine and hors d’oeuvres, appetizers. And we met then with our state delegation, congressional delegation. I remember someone telling me, “You can tell where an organization is on the pecking order by what they’re being served when they go to visit the White House.” And that time, we shook hands and had pictures, and she spoke to us, then we mingled, all that. Very nice.

Second time, we had coffee and cookies. [laughs] So we may have gone down a bit. But it spoke to the stature of the organization that the large delegation that came from throughout the country was invited to come. And it’s one of those things that you don’t forget. So yes, I met her, in a greeting line, reception line, along with everyone else. But I met her. I shook her hand.

Andrews: Were you involved in the White House Conference on Families?

Cohen: No. I wasn’t involved in any of the other White House conferences. Shortly afterwards, I was a States Public Affairs chair for Council. I became involved with the National Resolutions Committee, which is where all of the sections around the country set the national platform. I was on the committee one year, and its chair another year. And then I was on the national board. So a lot of my effort went into working with Council, but not as Council’s representative. And different committees or things like that.

I do remember testifying on behalf of Council when there were hearings out in the state. But no, I wasn’t involved.

Then, shortly after I became president of the local chapter, I volunteered to be on a fiscal advisory committee for the Mercer Island School District. There were all men on the committee with maybe one woman. And I was never the kind of mother to bake cookies and go into the classroom. Maybe it was just my stubbornness. I just wasn’t that kind of person. But I did want to be involved in the school district. So I was on that fiscal advisory committee, and then ran for school board. So it was like I slowly, I changed direction. I was still involved in the public and nonprofit organizations and working for children and families and women, but in a little different way. So the large conferences were sort of out of it for me from that respect.

Andrews: Again, we’ve touched on this question, too. But I will ask, what kind of follow up activities did you participate in after the conference? Both short and long term.
Cohen: Okay. Short term, we came back and decided not to let the momentum drop. And that’s about the time that Washington Women United got started. And when we talk about Earlyse Swift, I was involved with her and others, not for a long time, with sort of setting up an organizational structure. Mary Helen Roberts was very involved with that. Marianne Kraft Norton, as I remember, having a meeting at her house. I’d have to think about who else was involved at that time.

But I remember doing some work on figuring out how could we—because what we had got together for Ellensburg and Houston was really a larger coalition of existing women’s organizations. So the issue became, do you start another organization, or do you take advantage of the wealth that you already had. And we didn’t want to reinvent the wheel, but we still wanted a way for women who were involved with organizations as well as those who were not to become involved in different issues. And my role at the time was to do a little bit of research on dues and dues structures, and things like that. But I was not involved for a long period of time.

And then, other than reconnecting with women who’d been there occasionally, I was not really involved for a long time that I can remember, with things. It was like, in my own world, it was a milestone, a benchmark, then it went on from there. So I wasn’t so involved. Which shows that we weren’t as involved in quote, “the women’s issue Houston” as we were involved in women being involved in everyday life. Which to me was just as valuable, and was probably much more my style than being involved in just this one organization.

Andrews: Were there types of involvement that were possible for you after Houston and Ellensburg that might not have been before?

Cohen: Oh, without a doubt. Without a doubt. Probably because I was able to look, I would go and become involved in something. And as soon as I said I had been involved in Houston at that time, they’d open the doors. I mean, it wasn’t something like, oh, it’s on my resume, that’s another thing. I mean, people knew about it then, I’d say, three to five years later. And it was something that gave you a little bit of social capital. I wouldn’t say political, because I guess I just didn’t see it that way. But people knew about it. They knew that you were activists. You didn’t hesitate to go out in the community or to knock on doors.

From a personal standpoint, I already mentioned, it just opened my eyes and made me realize, yeah, I can open my mouth. I can go out and get involved. I just wasn’t as hesitant to be by myself in a large room of people without somebody with me that I knew, because you just have to be that way. So, yeah. There were a lot of things.

But I have to tell you, it’s just funny running into people years and years later and having that connection. All of a sudden, it’s like here in Olympia, people talk about where they were when the earthquake hit, and the experience that they have, no matter where they were. Being a child of the ‘60s, you know, “Where were you when JFK was assassinated?” You have that experience. Well, these twenty-four women, plus all of the other women that were there, we have this experience, even if the memories fade. So you can go and say, “I remember that. Yes, I was there.” Or, “Did you know so and so who was there?” So it really is a watershed thing.
Andrews: Did you meet Bella Abzug when you were there?

Cohen: I remember seeing Bella Abzug from a distance. Betty Friedan was in the elevator with me. And I looked at her and I thought, oh my God, what a shrimp! And the tiniest, skinniest little legs. [both laugh] But I don’t remember meeting Bella Abzug. I just remember being near her.

Andrews: Did you talk to Betty Friedan?

Cohen: I was probably too intimidated to talk to her. [laughs] Other than a hello. But I remember being at the elevator with her at the hotel. I’ve got to tell you, I was at that hotel last July. My husband and I were in Houston. We didn’t go out to the convention center. And I was thinking, how much would I remember about it? And I knew we were in that hotel. It’s one of the Hyatts that’s open atrium-style. It was the first one I’d been in. And it was actually the first time I had traveled without anyone with me, completely alone. No husband, sister, mother, whatever. Other than coming to and from college. I did that. But I mean going somewhere.

So I went to this hotel, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up, just because it was the same hotel, the same atrium. The little breakfast eating area is the same place. It was just so weird. And I said to my husband, “I remember that! I remember that! I remember that!” I should have gone down to the convention center, which we didn’t do. It was just chills. It really was. [laughs]

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

Cohen: Well, let’s see, how have they changed? I do think women are being paid a little bit more, as far as the equal pay. I do think there’s the glass ceiling, still, which hasn’t changed. Even working for the state agency, it wasn’t administrative work as far as support staff, but it’s like the women do this, and the women stay in the office. And then the men are the ones that go out in the field, they’re the hunter/gatherers. And I was on their case all the time. That hasn’t changed, and that’s state government.

I want to say things have improved somewhat because there are so many rights that young women have today that they just take for granted. And that’s got to be an improvement. It’s a shame that they don’t know the history about it. But the fact that they don’t have to worry about some things, that they have other things to worry about. The abortion issue. The fact that Washington has had abortions available is wonderful. The fact that there’s a lot of doctors who won’t do them now because of insurance as well as other things. I mean, here in Olympia, I don’t know if you know about the Eastside Women’s Clinic. They were burned out. They opened up again. But they had picketers there every week. I mean, those are the types of things that haven’t changed.

Daycare, the daycare workers are still not paid very much. But there’s more available.

I think one thing that’s changed a lot that I’m really glad to see, I remember when my kids were young, and my husband would take them to the doctor. And he would tell
me, “Where are the other dads? There’s all women around here.” I mean, my dad used to take us to the doctor. He was that kind of dad. And now I go over to Group Health, there’s men with the kids in the backpacks and everything. To me, the father’s role and the father’s responsibility has just changed immensely. They used to say the best thing that a woman can do for her son, the best thing a man can do for his son is to treat his mother, or, I don’t know. It has to do with the mother being a role model so that her son will be a good husband. And my daughter-in-law says I did the right thing, because he’s a good husband. He’s a good dad, a very good dad.

So those things have changed, and I think for the better. There’s always going to be something. I’m not naïve enough to think we’re going to solve all the problems.

Andrews: So do you feel that some of the issues that were of concern in Ellensburg were eventually resolved? Or are they still being debated?

Cohen: I think they’re still being debated. I think it’s one of the things, you know, a couple of steps forward, a couple of steps back. Societal change isn’t easy, and that’s really what it is. I think, when we live in Washington, we see things from sometimes a narrow viewpoint. The state of Washington does this, so that this is the way the world is, or the country is, and it really isn’t. I mean, the fact that we had so many women in nontraditional jobs back in the ‘70s, that was a fluke. We did it because that’s the way Washington is, but that isn’t the way the rest of the world is. I mean, Oregon is the closest, maybe Idaho. But Idaho has its other influences.

So from the viewpoint of Washington, I think we’ve made progress in some things, maybe more than other parts of the country. I’ve been fortunate to travel around the country and around the world, and there’s a lot of things we just haven’t made any progress on, or very little progress on.

Andrews: For example?

Cohen: Well, I can see on the one hand, we have more daycare. We have people who love and take care of kids. But on the other hand, we have big turnovers, and we have people who have more problems and more child abuse. So is it more child abuse? Or is it that it is just more magnified because of the media? Those are the things that I think about. And maybe it isn’t worse, but it’s sort of looking at it from a different set of lenses and a different context.

The abortion issue, from last I heard, in the whole state of North Dakota, I don’t think you can get an abortion. You have to go out of the state to get it. I mean, years ago, even before they had abortions, the doctors would do a D&C, instead of an abortion. Doctors won’t even do that. You can barely even find an OB/GYN who will deliver babies, much less things like that.

The whole birth control, the whole thing. We know the people who own the Thriftways here, the Stormans. And there are people, again, like I said earlier, you agree that you’re going to disagree. We do not talk about things like that. We do not talk about the fact that they will not have the pill that, you know, they say is the abortion pill. And those are the things that bother me. But I agree to disagree. I vote with my feet. I don’t
shop at their stores, except for very little things. There’s people who will only shop there,
and I just won’t.

Those are the types of things that are more magnified. Maybe ‘cause my
antennae’s up more, and I’m realizing it more. Or maybe the media’s on it. It’s the
context, maybe the Internet, I don’t know.

Andrews: In summary, is there anything else you’d like to add? I think I’ve covered my
list of questions.

Cohen: You know, I don’t think so. I think the biggest thing is Ellensburg and Houston
were just wonderful for me. And just, I think, paved the way for a lot of the other things
that I was able to do for my career. And wonderful women and men that I met through
the whole experience. And I always wondered why we never had a reunion. I mean, there
are people I still see, like Thelma Jackson.

Andrews: Yes, I talked to her.

Cohen: And I just wish that there were ways to connect with people a bit more. Maybe
I’m just at that point in my life.

Andrews: Before we close, you’ve mentioned your career a few times. Could you give
some of the highlights, so that listeners will know who you are?

Cohen: Well, I’ve had what I call a very eclectic career. Starting out with the volunteer
sector, it took me maybe ten years to realize that what I call community development and
community affairs is really what my interest is in. But that can mean just improving
people’s lives, whether it’s women or children, families, men, whatever. Just improving
lives. So after I was president of Council, which I mentioned earlier, the volunteerism
sort of opened things up. And I was also involved in putting together sort of a notebook
for women to help document their volunteer experience, which is just as valuable as paid
experience, to then be able to go into the paid sector, if they wanted to. So it made me
realize my own volunteer experience.

So then, school board. And I was involved with the legislature, advocacy
legislature, through school board. Growing up in Sacramento, you have to be involved
with the legislature. We used to go down and watch them debate licensing canaries and
garbage disposal. I mean, crazy things you wouldn’t expect in the state legislature, but
California did it. So, school board.

And by that time, my kids were getting older, and I was starting to prepare for the
future. My husband was a school principal, and we had two kids to send through college.
So I was looking for a job. And I got a part time job as the Washington state director for
the National Conference of Christians and Jews, which, again, goes back to community
development and coalition building, bringing people together. Different viewpoints,
different backgrounds. Agreeing to disagree. But this was from a faith-based
organization. And I did that for a couple of years, and realized that there were a lot of
other organizations doing the same thing. And I was fairly good at fundraising, and took
them out of the red, into the black, and said to the national office, “I think it’s time for
“you to close up.” I said, “Your goals are being met out here by other organizations.” And they did. They closed the office here.

Then I was also involved in the Citizens’ Education Center Northwest, which changed to Citizens’ Education Center. It goes back to full school funding that I’d been involved with, again, through Council, where we worked with the state to, you know, you need full school funding. And I could mention some of the women that I’m sure you met over the years, like Betty Jane Narver and Diana Gale. They were involved with those things. There was just a whole group of us that say, “You’ve got to get involved.” And this was Seattle schools, and Seattle school funding. And then we went on from there. So I was involved with schools, and Citizens’ Education Center, which was, again, an organization representing people from around the state, involvement with schools.

And, let’s see, some of these small, part time things, working, until I realized I wasn’t getting a full time job because I didn’t have the credentials. I decided then to get a master’s in public administration. Not business. Didn’t want to go to law school. We have too many lawyers in our family who aren’t practicing law. So I got an MPA from Seattle University when I was on school board and still working part time.

And from there, I knew I needed a full time job, and went to work for Girl Scouts. I’d been a Girl Scout growing up, from like fourth grade through seventh grade. And I thought, well, this is something I know about. And I was a field director for Girl Scouts. And my check was almost direct deposit to Whitman College, where my son was a freshman. I mean, the money went straight in and out again, to pay for tuition.

But that didn’t last very long, for a variety of reasons. And I applied for a job out of the newspaper. I found a job. They were looking for a grant manager for the Department of Community Development in early winter, 1990. And I came down to Olympia to see what I could do. And they hired me. Actually, they hired me for a different job than what I thought they were going to hire me for. And I stayed there from ’90 until June of 2005. I had already worked for Bellevue Community College at one point, so I’d been a state worker. So I was renewing my career as a state worker. And I’d managed state and federal grants. I’d worked in rural communities. Because of my background with the National Conference, I did a lot of work with tribes.

I’ve worked in so many sectors with so many different people and so many different backgrounds, I just sort of, when people ask me what I did, the agency that became CTED, Community Training and Economic Development, my job was “other duties as assigned.” I mean, I did everything. I was project manager, operations manager, managed grants. I just did a lot of stuff, working in community and economic development, which is sort of the underlying theme of all of what I had done over the years. So that’s what my career was.

Now, I have again, I was just telling Larry Swift when I saw him on Sunday, I’ve reinvented myself. Every fifteen years, I reinvent myself. I am on the Western Institutional Review Board. I am a board member. And you’ve heard about different medical research that goes on, either pharmaceutical companies, or universities. They want to do human subject research. And I was probably interested in this because it came out of what happened back with the Holocaust, and all of the experiments that went on. There were conferences, and different standards were set, so that will never happen again. Then with the Tuskegee men, and all of the things that happened there.
So here in Olympia there is a hidden gem. And Dr. Angela Bowen started it back in 1968, ’67? Because she had a grant to do some research. And she put together a panel to help her with overseeing. What we do is, we make sure that the subjects’ rights are being looked at, and that they aren’t going to take advantage of the subjects. Now it has grown tremendously. There are over 100 people on the board. And we meet in different panels. And I meet once a week. And I read the protocol or the plan of the research. And then I review the consent forms that as a subject, you would sign. There’s different things that we look for. But mostly, it’s can somebody understand this? Do they know what they’re getting themselves into? Are their rights being looked after? Are they going to take advantage of them?

And as someone who’s been an educator, who’s been involved in so many different areas, there are some real hot button issues that come up for me on some of these. Some of it is so very sad, because we have all of, what I’ve been looking at is a lot of cancer protocols. And some of it is just wonderful what they’re trying. But some of it’s so sad because these are people that you know they have nothing left but some of the research. So you want so much to give them some opportunity, some hope. But on the other hand, you don’t want someone to have to go through more suffering just for research. So, anyway, that’s what I’m doing now. That’s my third, fourth, fifth, sixth career. [laughs]

Andrews: They’re very connected, though.

Cohen: It is volunteer. I am connected with community, still. I’m meeting, there are some real hot button issues that come up for me on some of these. Some of it is so very sad, because we have all of, what I’ve been looking at is a lot of cancer protocols. And some of it is just wonderful what they’re trying. But some of it’s so sad because these are people that you know they have nothing left but some of the research. So you want so much to give them some opportunity, some hope. But on the other hand, you don’t want someone to have to go through more suffering just for research. So, anyway, that’s what I’m doing now. That’s my third, fourth, fifth, sixth career. [laughs]

Andrews: And I have one more final question that came to mind. And that is, I would like to have you talk a little about the Council of Jewish Women.

Cohen: The National Council of Jewish Women, which is known as, quote, “Council,” is a national women’s organization, and it has chapters or sections all over the country. And I was involved with that as a volunteer. Council does a wonderful job of training. I went to the National Center for Voluntary Action, and they gave me wonderful training. Nonprofits and organizations and such.

Council is still going strong. In recent years, I have not been as involved with it, though, I’m a lifetime member. There’s a Seattle section [chapter], and there’s Tacoma. And I know that they’re still doing work on women’s issues. In Seattle, there is also a younger women’s group that is doing a lot with helping with domestic violence and women who need help with relocating and different support like that. They have a babies’ closet, have things for the babies. And again, they still work in coalition with other organizations.
But since I moved to Olympia, I’m just not as involved with it. I get the materials. And I have to give it credit for my background, and who I am. But I just can’t be connected as I had been at one time.

Andrews: Well, this has been absolutely wonderful talking with you.

Cohen: Thank you.

Andrews: Thank you so very much.

End Interview]