Kilgannon: This is Anne Kilgannon interviewing Senator Karen Fraser for the ERA Project of the Women’s History Consortium. It’s July 7, 2008. We’re in a conference room in the Legislative Building in Olympia.

May I call you Karen?

Fraser: Please.

Kilgannon: You were previously interviewed by the Women’s History Consortium for your involvement in the Ellensburg Conference, Washington State’s participation in the International Year of the Woman in 1977. There, you gave quite a lot of background information concerning your life and education and some of your work. So, I want to refer readers to that interview for a lot of background for this interview. But we’ll just touch a little bit on your formative years to set the stage for this interview about the ERA.

The campaign for the ERA took place during the early 1970s. It came out of an intensely growing women’s movement in the late sixties. The National Organization for Women (NOW) was formed during this period. In Washington State, there were campaigns both for the State ERA and the Federal ERA.

We’re going to talk first about the State ERA campaign. About that time, the early seventies, please sketch out where you were in your own life history, so that we can place you in your work.

Fraser: In the early seventies, I had been out of the University of Washington for a few years. I had a BA in Sociology and received a Master’s in Public Administration in 1969. I was working in Washington State government in Olympia, for the Highway Department at that time. I was living there, and became active in various ways in our local community. About 1970, when I was 26, I was appointed to the first Thurston Regional Citizens’ Transportation Advisory Committee by the Thurston Regional Planning Council. The purpose was to engage in transportation planning for Thurston County and the cities within it. A couple of years later, when I was about 28, I was appointed to the City of Lacey Planning Commission. So, I had some early involvement in local government advisory roles.

About that time, I became very active in the women’s movement. I was attracted to joining NOW because their focus was the law—changing the law to provide better rights and opportunities for women and girls. I was always oriented toward changing the laws,
more than the many other facets of the women’s movement.

I became very active in the Thurston County Chapter of NOW. I began as an active member, later became Treasurer, and later became the Legislative Chair for the chapter.

Kilgannon: Briefly, I want to remind readers that you became a Lacey City Council member in 1973, at the age of 28, the first woman to serve in that position. And then, three years later, in 1976, at the age of 31, you were elected by the City Council to be the first woman Mayor of Lacey. Then, in 1980, at the age of 36, you were elected Thurston County Commissioner, serving a jurisdiction about ten times larger. You were elected State Representative in ’89, and State Senator in ’93, a position you continue to hold. So, you have now served a long time in elective office, and have served in five types of elective positions at the state and local levels of government.

I don’t know if you have any aspirations for further elective office. But elective office turned out to be a major orientation in your life. So, let’s keep that in the back of our minds, and now go back to where you were in the early seventies.

I’ve heard you mention that you were nominated to serve on the Lacey Planning Commission by the League of Women Voters of Thurston County. That was the group that put your name forward for that appointment. Were you a League member?

Fraser: Yes, I think I was a member of the League of Women Voters, too.

Kilgannon: I was wondering how they came upon your name.

Fraser: They were actively following the work of the Citizens’ Transportation Advisory Committee that I mentioned, and probably had a member on it. I was nominated to serve on that Committee by the Washington Federation of State Employees, of which I was an active member. They thought of me because I was an active member and at the time I worked for the Department of Highways. The Federation was one of about 40 local organizations who received a letter from the Thurston Regional Planning Council asking for nominees. I served on this Advisory Committee for maybe a couple of years, including serving as Acting Chair for a while.

As a result of serving on that, the League of Women Voters and, I think, the Thurston Regional Planning Council staff recommended me to the Mayor of Lacey for appointment to the Lacey Planning Commission. At that time, they had three vacancies, and Mayor Albert Van Andel was specifically interested in appointing women. I think this reflects how the women’s movement was having an effect on people thinking more about trying to get more women appointed to public positions. All three vacancies he filled with women.

Kilgannon: Had there been women members before?

Fraser: I don’t think so.
Kilgannon: So this was quite a transformation. Regarding the local League, was it part of their mission at that point to seek out women for appointed offices?

Fraser: Yes. I think the League of Women Voters felt it was very important to try to find women to be appointed to various boards and commissions. Other women’s organizations did that, too. For example, I recently found an old 1976 letter to me from Kathy Coombs, Chair of the Thurston County Women’s Political Caucus, advising that they would like to recommend me for public office in the future, and would I please fill out an information form about myself. This was common among a number of women’s organizations.

Kilgannon: I know the Washington State Women’s Council and various groups tried to compile lists of good women that likely could do these sorts of things. It was a way of demonstrating that women were ready and available, and... “here they are!” Were women on those boards supposed to mentor and help other women get on, too?

Fraser: Well, when you’re the first woman to serve on something, if nothing else, you’re a role model—for better or worse. Back in those days, the first woman to be on anything was judged to be “The Typical Representative of All Women.” It was so new to have women serve in a variety of public roles that there was a tendency by many in the general public to assume that all women were pretty much alike and interchangeable. There seemed to be a widespread assumption that how ever the first woman served, any future woman would serve similarly. There didn’t seem to be much consideration about diversity of style and philosophy among women. There also seemed to be curiosity as to whether the first woman could really do the job. So, being the first woman to serve on anything was quite a responsibility. That’s quite changed now.

Regarding your question about whether women in elected and appointed office back then tried to help or mentor other women to become elected or appointed officials, the answer is yes. Most such women did what they could to encourage and mentor more women.

Kilgannon: That must have been quite an added dimension to everything you did.

Fraser: Yes, it was, especially in elected office. When I was first appointed to the Lacey City Council, and then particularly after the City Council elected me Mayor, I was very aware that I was always being judged as a role model for other women. If I did well, then people would be more comfortable with other women having a similar opportunity. If I didn’t, it would be harder for another woman to have a similar opportunity.

Kilgannon: Was that a good thing or a burdensome thing?

Fraser: It just was the way it was. It came with the territory at that time, I guess. It was kind of an extra overlay you’d always be aware of. Nowadays, you don’t think so much about it because it’s so common for women to do almost everything, and people are used to diversity among women. What a lot of today’s younger people might not realize is
how different it was thirty to forty years ago.

Kilgannon: That’s important to know. I guess it’s “success” to think that it’s no longer remarkable.

Fraser: It truly is.

Kilgannon: But we had to go through that period when it certainly was unique to be a woman in a visible public decision-making role. Anything a woman did would stand out, be noticed and commented upon, and used as the basis to judge whether another woman should ever be allowed in that position. Yes, younger women today often don’t realize that there’s anything unusual about women serving in a wide variety of roles. They just take it for granted, which is a good thing, I suppose—unless they take it too much for granted and they lose it.

Fraser: Yes, it’s a good thing because that was the goal of the women’s movement all along—for women to have equality of opportunity throughout society. It isn’t one hundred percent achieved at this time, but it’s very substantially achieved. On the other hand, there’s a risk that because it’s still so recent, maybe it’s still a little fragile. There do continue to be people who disagree with the concept of equality for women. Therefore, it’s important to have a record of the history of the last 40 years, so people will be able to understand that this is still kind of a new thing and to appreciate that we shouldn’t let circumstances evolve that will lead to it sliding away.

Kilgannon: So, it’s not yet totally embedded in the culture. You said that you were attracted to the legal aspects of the women’s movement. But where else did you see yourself in the women’s movement? You said it was broad and had many aspects, with many different kinds of women involved. It’s important to say, also, that it was not just one kind of woman who was attracted to the women’s movement. In all the cornucopia of things you could have been doing, how did you pull yourself to one corner or the other? Just this penchant for legal issues? Anything else?

Fraser: Well, maybe you could say I was very interested in seeing that public policy affecting women and girls, as written in the law, would assure equal rights and opportunities. As I said, that’s why I was attracted to NOW. If you are interested in the content of the law as it affects women, you have to be interested in who makes the law, and the processes by which law is made. I was thus very interested in politics as it shaped laws affecting women. I was, and still am, a great believer in democracy, which necessarily involves citizen action. So I really believe that if you think a law needs to be changed, you should join with others and work to change it. I came to believe that at an early age. So, when I saw what NOW was doing with advocating for changing the laws as they affect women, I thought, well, I’m joining. So that’s what I did.

Kilgannon: I’ve been doing a lot of reading on this period. I’ve noted that some people were more interested in the more personal, more internal, sociological aspects of the movement, I’d guess you’d say.
Fraser: Yes. There were a lot of “consciousness raising” activities, to help women see themselves as equal, and to help them be more assertive in situations of all kinds where they were not being treated equally or fairly.

Kilgannon: Did you participate in that kind of activity?

Fraser: I did attend some. I was mostly ready to get out and advocate. And of course, everywhere you went, people were encouraging you to think for yourself, stand up for yourself, and that kind of thing. But maybe I was already a little bit oriented that way, and for my part, wanted to put my personal efforts into improving the laws.

Kilgannon: You’d maybe done your internal work?

Fraser: Who knows? I had my own individual influences in childhood, like everybody does, and probably grew up a little more independent than some women.

Kilgannon: Well, it’s interesting how many different kinds of things were brought to the table. So for you, that would be your piece.

The Equal Rights Amendment is a very short statement. It doesn’t go on and on, and it’s not very descriptive in some ways. It’s just very plain. It says,

“Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged on account of sex.”

Pretty much, that’s it. There are some other short paragraphs about procedural matters after enactment. That has been the proposed wording of the Equal Rights Amendment since 1923, when Alice Paul first wrote it and started advocating for it.

What do these words mean for you?

Fraser: Pretty much what they say—that women should have equal rights under the law for every aspect that the law covers. That includes just about everything, from consumer credit, to job protections, to health care, to education, to protection from violence, fair treatment in the judicial system, and so forth. It means everything. There shouldn’t be a presumption against you because you are a woman or a girl.

Kilgannon: Can you give some examples of how life might be without the State ERA? Say a woman was in a certain situation, what would happen to her if she weren’t given equal protection under the law? Can you think of a story that would tell somebody now what maybe someone back then faced?

Fraser: Well, specific stories would depend on the woman and the circumstances. A really good way to look at the differences the State ERA made in women’s lives would be to see what laws the Legislature changed in order to implement the State ERA. They
related to equal employment opportunity; elimination of various restrictions on working conditions for women that served mainly to block them from getting better paying jobs; marriage and divorce; parental rights and responsibilities; equal treatment in business, credit, insurance, and real estate transactions; pensions; unemployment insurance; rape; state contracting with women and minority owned businesses; child care; and re-wording many statutes to make them gender-neutral. So, it’s obvious that women were facing serious problems across the board that only began to be rectified with passage of the ERA. These bills would not have been introduced or passed without the ERA.

There were, of course, innumerable examples of domestic and criminal court proceedings where women experienced injustice because of traditional presumptions against women. During that period, numerous women’s shelter and rape relief organizations were created to assist women caught up in terrible problems of abuse.

Kilgannon: I remember learning some really kind of quirky things about our state’s laws. For example, I heard that male barbers could cut anyone’s hair, but female hairdressers could only cut women’s hair.

Fraser: An interesting legal restraint on women’s ability to earn income. It’s another bizarre example of what the laws used to be.

Kilgannon: These are things you wouldn’t think about today. I also was surprised to learn that women were discouraged from serving on juries, for the reason that they were supposed to stay home with the kids. This was considered a perfectly good excuse for a woman to be excused from serving. An unfortunate result of this was that women who were in trouble with the law felt that they were not given juries of their peers, because so few women served on juries. Nowadays, we’d find this odd.

Fraser: Yes, this was normal back then. It went on and on throughout every sphere of life. It was embedded in the culture. Sometimes, you need a law to be the force to cut through negative cultural presumptions. Back then, which was not so long ago, in the world of work and professions, there were all kinds of presumptions against women. Women were told they couldn’t apply for this or that kind of job. I remember being told that myself while in my twenties, when I inquired about applying for a job.

Kilgannon: Newspaper ads for jobs categorized them by “men’s jobs” and “women’s jobs.”

Fraser: I remember those.

Kilgannon: And you didn’t bother to look under the other gender’s column, because those jobs were not for you.

Fraser: That’s true. In fact, some years ago, when I was traveling in an Asian country, I saw they were still listing job advertisements that way.
Kilgannon: Were they for very different kinds of work?

Fraser: Yes, of course. Naturally, the “men’s” jobs had higher pay than did “women’s” jobs.

Kilgannon: There’s that too. Also, the “male” jobs were probably more likely to be ones with a good future, and the “female” ones were more likely to be dead-end jobs.

Fraser: Correct.

Kilgannon: And then there was the whole issue later with “comparable worth,” where so-called “women’s work” might require as much education, and effort, and responsibility, but because it was defined as a “woman’s job”, it was....

Fraser: It was devalued.

Kilgannon: It was not paid as well as other jobs requiring equal preparation, effort, and responsibility.

Fraser: That’s correct. I was quite surprised at the final results of the landmark Comparable Worth Study conducted by the State of Washington. I served on the actual committee of the study that evaluated the approximately 110 state employee job descriptions selected for analysis. In going through them, we did not know whether specific positions we were evaluating were held predominantly by men or women as we scored them for level of education required, accountability, impact of the work, etc.

Kilgannon: It was a blind study? You just took off the heading, men or women’s jobs, and just looked at the jobs?

Fraser: We looked only at position descriptions in state government. By that time, jobs were not officially labeled as “men’s” or “women’s” jobs, so there were no labels to take off. But the consultant who organized the study selected 50 or so state jobs predominantly held by men and 50 or so state jobs held predominantly by women. A lot of jobs in state government are fairly specialized, so I and others on the evaluation committee hadn’t heard of many of them before. We therefore didn’t have any idea whether they were held predominantly by men or women. So we methodically went through the position descriptions, systematically evaluating the components of each job description put before us. We also had no idea what the pay level was for any of the positions. After we completed our positions evaluation, the consultant graphed the results—comparing the scores for each position with the pay for each positions, and whether the position was predominantly a male or female held position. The pattern was immediately clear: jobs held predominantly by men, and therefore socially and culturally presumed to be “men’s” jobs, were paid more than positions of comparable responsibility held predominantly by women.

This clearly showed a pattern of devaluation of work typically performed by women. It
appeared there was a tendency by people to think, “Oh well, she’s a woman, of course she can do it.” But they didn’t think about paying her appropriately for her qualifications and responsibilities, too. This was a landmark study in the nation.

Kilgannon: There was also a presumption that a woman would have a man supporting her, so her job was only for “extra” money.

Fraser: Yes, that’s another piece of it—another reason to pay her less.

Kilgannon: So the presumption was that a job for a woman is not as serious a matter as a job for a man.

Fraser: Yes, women earning income was not regarded as seriously as a man earning income. The general presumption was that the man was the breadwinner, not the woman. I grew up in a household where these presumptions were not the case, which might have contributed to my motivation to actively engage in the women’s movement after I became an adult and began bumping up against these presumptions in the workplace.

This is significantly changed now, although there are still some barriers to break.

Kilgannon: It changed in a relatively short period of time, by historical standards.

Fraser: When you think about it, yes.

Kilgannon: Really one generation, more or less.

Fraser: That’s why this history needs to be recorded, because it was pretty quick. If we don’t record it soon, we’ll lose all the evidence of what happened and how it happened.

Kilgannon: It will become hard to imagine it any other way. But again, all the changes you listed were legal, governmental, policy type of things. A lot of the arguments about the ERA had nothing to do with anything like that. They were personal arguments about whether housewives will be made to work; the relationships between men and women within marriage; and things like that. In fact, it seemed like a lot of the discussion about the ERA had nothing to do with the ERA, but rather all these cultural things on the side.

I’m wondering about a chicken-and-egg question. If people are not consciously engaged in debates about gender-based public policy, but are informally practicing more equality anyway, which is better? To pass the ERA to promote faster attainment of more cultural equality, or to wait for cultural equality to further evolve more on its own, and then pass the ERA when it’s not so frightening to so many?

Fraser: Well, my response would be that it is probably takes a mixture of the two. The reality is that you can’t pass any legislation on any subject without there being a fairly strong base of support, culturally or philosophically. And then, once you pass a law, it
helps pull the social change forward faster. A really simple, easy to understand, contemporary example is the new law requiring hands-free driving with mobile phones. You cannot pass that kind of legislation unless a lot of people are already doing it or think it is important to do. And then, after you enact the legislation, everybody’s rushing off to buy their little ear pieces or connectors or whatever, which greatly increases the number of people driving more safely. This was also the case with the mandatory seatbelt law some years ago. This has been thoroughly studied. You cannot pass a seatbelt law unless “x” percent of people are already using seatbelts, and so forth.

So, I think that’s the same thing with equality for women. There was already a lot of it; it was building for a lot of reasons. So then you kind of captured the wave. And then when you get the law and you get the constitution amended, it serves to build more faster.

It’s the same thing with the history of voting in our country. When our country was founded, only a very small percent of people could vote—mostly white males owning property. Many categories of people, actually constituting the large majority, were excluded from voting. But gradually, over time, different groups gained voting rights because the underlying values in the U.S. Constitution have acted as a positive pull on our society—not just a stick, but a pull, too. As new groups gained the right to vote, it encouraged more groups to work to achieve this, too. After each success, people treated it as “normal” that each group could vote.

Kilgannon: So what is “normal” gets bigger?

Fraser: Yes. And the Equal Rights Amendment is the same thing.

Kilgannon: Did you have that kind of discussion amongst your friends?

Fraser: At the time? No. This is a retrospective perspective. At the time, we were very frustrated with the unfair, arbitrary barriers and discrimination women and girls faced, and we urgently wanted to change this. To paraphrase a popular chant: “What do you want?” “Equality!” “When do you want it?” “Now!” This encapsulates pretty much what we felt.

We knew we had to work very hard. As I’ve said, the Pro-ERA Coalition was one of the biggest coalitions our State has ever seen, both for the State and the Federal ERA, which we’ll get to. There was a massive number of people involved. This was not just a small group. There was very broad political support.

Kilgannon: I’ve read descriptions about how some people firmly believed that it had to be a mass movement, and you could not really get it until you had that huge group of people. However, I’ve also read that other people said things more like, “No, let’s get these things first, more incrementally, and then we’re going to bring the people in.” So there was a difference, almost a stylistic difference, in approach on how people believed social change happens.
Fraser: Well, the debate I do remember was this: Is it worth spending this massive amount of human energy on a State ERA when we knew in the next session of the Legislature, the Federal ERA would be before them for ratification. Some people thought, “Why spend your time on the State ERA when the Federal ERA is so close at hand?” This was a debate in other states, too. Nevertheless, we conducted a strong, huge, successful campaign here in Washington to get the State ERA passed, knowing that the Federal ERA campaign would follow on its heels.

Then, just two months after the State ERA campaign ended, the next session of the Legislature began, and we were re-tooled and geared up, running another massive statewide campaign to get the Federal ERA ratified. Unfortunately, in the end, it never became part of the U.S. Constitution because it lacked just a few states.

Kilgannon: Right.

Fraser: So, again in retrospect, it was good that we did achieve a State ERA.

Kilgannon: So at the time, it was more like, “Let’s just do it all”?

Fraser: Yes. Yes. [laughter] We obviously felt both were extremely important.

Kilgannon: I’ve also read about these various “go slow” arguments. Perhaps these are people who at heart did not support the ERA? Maybe they said this to put it back on the shelf? They thought it would be better to do one reform at a time, piecemeal—“pass a law for a problem here, address another problem there”, and so forth. Perhaps they were a little nervous about this sort of overarching amendment. Perhaps they felt that passing a constitutional amendment was too big a deal and it would be better, instead, to pass a series of laws over time. But that was an approach that ERA supporters rejected. However, it’s not that you were against passing laws.

Fraser: Well, a constitutional amendment becomes a mandate for enacting all these individual laws. Every change had to be an individual law. For those who would argue for the piecemeal approach, I would reply that the piecemeal approach would never have happened on its own without a strong mandate. The State ERA actually served as the stimulus for what the piecemeal advocates wanted: pass one law on one subject, and pass another on another subject.

I do remember this argument against the ERA, “Oh, the courts are going to be clogged with endless litigation, so we shouldn’t pass it.” I sort of felt like saying that if you think the courts are going to be so clogged, this is proof there must be a lot of discrimination problems out there that deserve to be rectified! On the other hand, some thought there would be a lot of frivolous lawsuits filed. In fact, there has been only a tiny amount of litigation.

Another argument against the ERA that just drove us nuts was, “It would mandate unisex bathrooms.”
Kilgannon: Oh, yes.

Fraser: I still think about that argument every time I get on an airplane, or use a sanican at an outdoor public event.

Kilgannon: You’re right. There are unisex bathrooms in use, after all.

Fraser: Everyone finds them acceptable in situations of these types.

Kilgannon: Privacy issues were a real concern for many people, because they thought that in schools, in places where people didn’t really have a lot of choices about those things, that there would be only one locker room, and that kind of thing.

Fraser: Yes.

Kilgannon: Which made many people really nervous.

Fraser: It was always ridiculous. And it hasn’t proven to be the case at all.

Kilgannon: No.

Fraser: There is a genuine, bonafide reason for having separate locker rooms, separate restrooms usually, and so forth.

Kilgannon: Let’s talk about one other preamble before we talk about the actual ERA strategies. The right to choose abortion was legal in Washington State by 1970. It was finally approved by voters as a ballot issue. Did the fact that abortion was “off the table” help the ERA argument? Or, was abortion seen as part of a larger agenda? I understand that in some states, the two issues were interrelated which made the ERA a particularly heated issue. Did it help the pro-ERA efforts in Washington State that abortion was already legal and not part of the ERA debate?

Fraser: All I can remember is that I don’t remember any conversations about that. This is probably because it had already been approved by the voters and wasn’t really an issue. The more active issues were about unisex bathrooms, litigation, interference with family and religion, and these kinds of things.

Kilgannon: In some places, because the abortion issue and the ERA were somewhat entwined, it actually galvanized the opposition in ways that didn’t seem to happen in Washington State. So, I’m trying to tease these two issues apart to see if this had made a difference here.

Fraser: Well, it probably did. I don’t recall abortion being an issue at all. It’s probably because we already had state policy established on that.
Kilgannon: I think we’ve already touched on this, but did you see the Equal Rights Amendment as a first crucial step in the host of many different changes you wished to see in society?

Fraser: Yes, of course.

Kilgannon: Did you have a vision of what the world would be like if all these things were to come to pass? Could you visualize what it would be like to live here if you got all these reforms?

Fraser: Yes. I think everybody involved had a vision of equality, that women and girls would have equal opportunity for virtually everything, subject to their interests and abilities. We visualized that we would see women in all kinds of roles. Back then, you didn’t. For example, there were no women university presidents, hardly any department heads, hardly any business leaders, hardly any political leaders, and there weren’t very many women doing all kinds of things that women do now every day which everyone now accepts. Today, even though women are still a minority in a lot of fields, they have substantially increased opportunities to enter and do well in these fields. In public policy making bodies, now, women are everywhere, and sometimes the majority!

Kilgannon: It’s certainly a different world.

Fraser: It’s changed quite dramatically. Those of us who lived through this change and promoted this change are generally pleased with how things turned out so far. I think what we see today is quite consistent with what we had hoped would be the case. However, some of the problems continue to linger. This is both a disappointment and a motivation to keep working for continued improvements and greater equality.

Kilgannon: Well, you can’t just sit around! [laughter] There were certain stereotypes of women who were involved. What about men?

Fraser: There was a lot of strong support by men.

Kilgannon: Yes. And we can’t forget to say that.

As for you, you were in your mid-twenties, you weren’t married, you were a highly educated person for the day, and you were beginning to work in a professional capacity. You were probably considered a liberal. Were you a Democrat?

Fraser: I wasn’t back then. I was not a member of any political party during or before this period in my life. And I don’t remember being politically labeled. In fact, both political parties were interested in recruiting me.

Kilgannon: You later became a Democrat.

Fraser: I gradually did. But at that time, I was not. I decided some years later to become
a Democrat after evaluating both parties, becoming more involved with political processes, and seeing each party “up close.”

Kilgannon: We should certainly also say that in the early 1970s the Republicans in Washington State were a pretty liberal group, by today’s standards. You had then what were called the “Dan Evans Republicans,” who were the strongest supporters of all these measures. So the ERA was a pretty nonpartisan affair?

Fraser: I’d call it “bipartisan.”

Kilgannon: Bipartisan more than nonpartisan.

Fraser: Yes. The Women’s Council was created by Governor Evans. And yes, there were a lot of fabulous Republicans and Democrats involved, as well as women and men, advancing this cause.

Kilgannon: The general stereotype of the typical person actively involved in the campaign is a progressive, liberal, young, unmarried woman. You might have fit that profile, although later you married and had a family and did things that did not fully fit this stereotype.

This same type of stereotype was prevalent among the “anti-ERA” participants during the 1977 Washington State International Women’s Year Conference in Ellensburg. There were groups of women who came to the conference who were pretty upset about what they called the “feminist agenda.” They labeled the typical conference organizers as sort of “another” type of woman—somehow fundamentally different from themselves. They saw themselves as traditional homemakers, churchwomen, and in related roles. They seemed to assume that pro-ERA women did not lead similar lives. I heard that such assumptions were so prevalent that some pro-ERA women felt they had to defend themselves by letting it be known that they, too, were also parents, homemakers, church members, and so forth. You could sense they felt it necessary to assertively explain that, “I have children. I go to church. I do these things.” So it’s interesting that the assumption that pro-ERA women didn’t have “traditional” lives was employed against them in some ways—although it didn’t seem to have been true at all.

Fraser: Well, this is the thing with stereotypes. Generally, they’re incorrect. Look at the stereotypes about people who were enslaved or persecuted at various times in the history of our country. Nearly every group has suffered from inaccurate stereotypes about them.

Kilgannon: It makes it easier to treat them negatively?

Fraser: For some reason, there’s something inherent in some people and organizations that generates a need to feel threatened or defensive. As part of this, they seem to feel a need to label somebody else as an “enemy,” or whatever—so that this other person or group becomes defined as being “against me or us.” Such people often exaggerate things. So, just because there’s a stereotype, it doesn’t mean it’s true. And in this case, it
was not true at all.

Kilgannon: Did the pro-ERA groups you were affiliated with ever try to address some of those stereotypes?

Fraser: Yes, of course. Steadily! Among other things, we tried to emphasize that we truly felt that homemaking is a great role. Raising children is great. It’s a wonderful choice, to be able to do that. So, we always tried to emphasize that we think parenthood and homemaking is one of the many great ways to choose to spend one’s life.

Kilgannon: And the word, it would be “choice”?

Fraser: Yes.

Kilgannon: Maybe that was the critical word.

Fraser: We felt that was, and still is, the critical word, “choice”—the ability of each person to choose. The whole point of the ERA was to give women, and men, more choices, not fewer.

Kilgannon: So, in our effort to get at this story, we’ve tried to find women of different kinds, or who represent different groups: rural women, urban women, different age-groups at the time. It’s not been that easy, because we don’t have good records. But could you think of different women who personified these different kinds of backgrounds, who brought all that varied experience into the ERA campaign? Can you think of various women from around here, for instance, in Thurston County?

Fraser: With regard to age diversity, I was among the younger women involved. Most were older and, I would say, “more established” than I was, were married, and had children. I was a bit of an exception.

Come to think, the ones I remember who were particularly active, yes, most of them were married. Many had children. Quite a few had professions, but some didn’t. Some were very active in the League of Women Voters—there was a really strong core from the League of Women Voters. Our Equal Rights Amendment Coalition here in Thurston County was very active in the campaign. And it was probably a good thing we were, because in the end, the ERA passed by a very narrow margin.

I believe the outcome was so close that the next session of the Legislature amended the election laws to provide that if a ballot measure passed by less than one-half of one percent, then it would be subject to an automatic recount, the same as with elections of public officials.

Kilgannon: Was it such a squeaker that it highlighted that issue?

Fraser: Yes, it was such a squeaker! I’m glad it squeaked on the right side! I don’t think
that until that time a ballot measure had passed by such a slim margin.

Kilgannon: The voters are usually either clearly for a measure or clearly against a measure?

Fraser: True.

You asked about who I remember worked on the ERA campaigns. Let me divide my recollections into two parts: One, the State ERA, the campaign to achieve voter approval of the Equal Rights Amendment to the State Constitution (HJR 61); and second, the Federal ERA, the campaign to achieve state legislative ratification of the federal ERA, the proposed amendment to the US Constitution that was sent to state legislatures for their action.

I played different roles during each of these two back-to-back campaigns, so my knowledge of each campaign and who was involved depended on what my own involvement was.

First, the State ERA campaign. During the State ERA campaign in 1972, I worked in the campaign as an active member of the Thurston County Chapter of NOW. My various roles over time in the Chapter had included: Treasurer, Political Issues Chair, and Legislative Coordinator. I worked on most phases of our Chapter’s Thurston County campaign for the State ERA.

Refreshing my memory with old records, other active Thurston County NOW members included: Hildegard Dietz, our oldest member who was in her seventies or eighties; Mildred Roberts, also an older woman; Karey Griesman; Joy Davis; Denise Livingston; Margie Reed, whose husband, Sam Reed, is currently Washington’s Secretary of State and was Thurston County Auditor for many years; Joni Schlarb; June Hansen, who was also an active League of Women Voters member; Jane Eldridge; Margaret Knudson; Sandra Gray, later a Tumwater School Board member; Linda Lombard, later very active in the Washington Federation of State Employees and Thurston County Democrats; Jo Calk; Laura O’Brady; Doris Watson, whose husband was later a very popular Mayor of Olympia; Terry Kulkarni; Rosemary Hartwell; Karen McAndrews; Jan Spear; Corinne West, Co-chair of the Chapter’s Legislative Committee; Carroll Dick, Chapter President, and later campaign manager for my initial Lacey City Council race; Cynthia Foster, now Deputy Administrator of Thurston County; Connie Jones; Nancy Johnson; Pat Kieffer; and Naomi Duke.

There were also many, many women and men from Thurston County, in addition to NOW members, who very actively worked for both the State and Federal ERAs. Leaders from the Thurston County League of Women Voters included Barbara Gooding and Marie Cameron. Thelma Jackson, long time former North Thurston School Board member was very active, as was Cora Pinson, now deceased, former Olympia City Council member and; Elsie Schrader from the Washington Federation of State Employees. Both Thelma and Cora were the first African-Americans to be elected to their
respective elective bodies.

Organizations whose members were very actively involved included: Olympia YWCA, Thurston County League of Women Voters, Thurston County Chapter of the American Association of University Women, Olympia Chapter of Business and Professional Women, Thurston County Chapter of the Women’s Political Caucus, the Washington Federation of State Employees AFL-CIO, various churches and synagogues, various professional organizations, and many more. The Co-Respondents, a highly acclaimed readers’ theater duo composed of Pat Larsen and Sandra Nisbet, also hailed from Olympia.

**And then the Federal ERA Campaign.** During the Federal ERA ratification campaign of 1973, I worked at the state level of NOW, as State Legislative Coordinator, coordinating the lobbying efforts of all our chapters around the state.

After checking my incomplete old files, which have somehow survived over all these years, here are some of the women who were actively involved at the state level working for ratification of the Federal ERA. During the 1973 legislative session, we were not only working for ratification of the Federal ERA, but also working for implementation of the State ERA by pushing for many bills. It was exceptionally busy!

I recall that at the time, Jan Swanson, of Snohomish County, was the State Coordinator of Washington State NOW, the top organizational position in Washington. Her key responsibility was to organize more chapters.

I was the State Legislative Coordinator, responsible for coordinating the legislative advocacy for all our chapters around the state. We had active chapters in Seattle-King County; Tacoma; Renton; Snohomish County; Bellingham; Yakima; Pullman; Spokane; Bellevue-Eastside; the Tri-Cities of Kennewick, Pasco, and Richland; Kitsap County; and probably a few more.

Some of the women who were key organizers and spokespersons for the organization during the 1973 session included: Judith Lonnquist, former Legal Vice President of the Seattle Chapter, former National NOW Board Member, currently an attorney in private practice in Seattle; Elaine Latourelle, an architect, who was also a National NOW Board Member; Jean Marie Brough, who later served with distinction as a Republican leader in the State House of Representatives; Jean Withers, of Seattle; Pat Cochrane, from the Tri-Cities; Delores Doninger, President of the Kitsap County Chapter, and later Mayor of Bremerton; Patricia Marx, President of Spokane Chapter; Marian Moos, Legislative Coordinator of the Spokane Chapter; Betty Kersh, Seattle, UW Professor; Ann Worcester, Tri-Cities, later a state agency administrator; Georgie Kunkel, President of the Seattle Chapter; and Corinne West, of Olympia, my daily “partner” on “The Hill.” She played an ongoing critical role. She would go to legislative meetings during the work day, while I was working at my job at the State Department of Highways, and let me know the details of what was going on in the various committees acting on our bills and the ERA so that we could get the word out to chapters about what contacts they needed to
make with their local legislators. There were many, many more—it was long ago and I need to find more records to help refresh my memory on names. I apologize to those whose names are not on this list.

I must also give special, exceptionally laudatory mention to Gisela Taber, who was a member of the Thurston County NOW Chapter while she served tirelessly, and continually inspired all of us, as the Executive Director of the Washington State Women’s Council. Her Administrative Assistant was Sue Van Meter—now Sue Dunn, who was also a tireless worker, and remained an active member of Thurston County NOW.

Superb, steadfast statewide leadership came from: Governor Dan Evans, who created the Women’s Council by Executive Order; the excellent members of the Council; and the Attorney General’s Office who provided legal advice to the Council. I presume that Gisela Taber in her oral history will recount many of the incredibly effective efforts by specific individuals associated with the Council.

A couple of legislators who were key leaders for the ERA campaign, were also members of the Council: Senator Lois North, of Seattle; and Representative, and later Senator, Lorraine Wojahn, of Tacoma.

Mailing and phoning were very important means of sharing information. Looking back through my old files, I see that most chapters’ newsletters made use of “ditto” or “mimeograph” technology, which you hardly see any more. A few used “xerox” machines, which were still somewhat new and quite slow compared with today. Newsletters were hand stapled and folded for mailing by hand. There were no computers or cell phones. Pay phones were in common use. Again, no email.

As State Legislative Coordinator, I received a lot of helpful materials from National NOW, and, of exceptional aid, money to help with mailings and phone calls. Thus, people from around the country were substantially helping us with our efforts, which was greatly appreciated! I sent out a weekly newsletter to each of the chapters with the latest detailed news from the Legislature and a list of which legislators needed to be contacted by which chapters. The chapters were excellent in following up!

Kilgannon: Had you worked on campaigns prior to the campaign for the State ERA?

Fraser: Not significantly. The State ERA was the first really big, intense campaign I worked on in my life. We hand-made big, heavy wooden signs, silk-screening them ourselves. We did a big newspaper endorsement ad in The Olympian. I remember I had the job of calling a lot of the elected officials to see if they’d let their names be used on the endorsement ad. We even called statewide elected officials. I remember calling Lieutenant Governor Cherberg, who was running for re-election, who declined, apparently because he was in an active re-election campaign, saying, “Everyone’s in this for themselves.”
I found my hand-written notes from this calling in my old files. They show who I called, their responses, and whether they also contributed the requested one dollar toward the cost of the ad.

Kilgannon: So, in the newspaper, the ad would say something like, “We, the following citizens…”

Fraser: …“endorse”, yes.

Kilgannon: …endorse the ERA. And in a smaller community like Olympia, and in other parts of Thurston County, those names would be known and that would mean something to people and influence their vote?

Fraser: Yes. So, one could go back and find that ad, I presume, in the archives of *The Olympian*. And you’ll see, it was just very upstanding people who were in support of this.

Kilgannon: You tried to get a broad range of people, I imagine.

Fraser: Yes. We called local officials, legislators, candidates, civic leaders, and a wide variety of people active in the community. It was a big long list!

A large group of us worked hard at getting endorsements, dividing up calling lists, and so forth. Sheila Guenther, an active League of Women Voters member, was a graphic artist and donated her time to design the ad, place it, and so forth. In our county campaign, we each just kind of did a little of everything. As I said, that was my first big, intense campaign. I had done a little bit of work on maybe one or two local elections prior to that. I believe the first campaign I did a little work on was Jack Cameron for Olympia Port Commissioner. I recall I helped a little on Ev Fourre’s campaign for Thurston County Commissioner. In both, it was minor projects.

If the Thurston County campaign hadn’t been so active, I sometimes wonder if that small margin of victory might have instead become a small margin of defeat!

Kilgannon: It certainly makes you feel like your time wasn’t wasted.

Fraser: Yes, that’s right.

Kilgannon: It seems that every vote really was needed, wasn’t it! We’re going to come to that discussion, as to why it was so close.

There were a couple of groups that were sometimes unsure of whether they belonged in this campaign. And that would be women of color and women of different sexual orientation. Did you have discussions about bringing in all kinds of women, including these types of women? Or, was that just something that wasn’t talked about very much?
Fraser: Well, during the State ERA campaign, I was mainly involved in Thurston County. At that time, there were not very many people of color here. That is quite changed now. I don’t remember discussing that, but not because anyone would have been against it. Because of the general demographics of the area, it probably just didn’t come up, or happen as a matter of course.

Kilgannon: I wondered if it was a conscious thing or not. I have read that some Black women questioned whether they should even bother being involved in the women’s movement.

Fraser: That wouldn’t have been the attitude of people working on the campaign here. Everybody was welcomed. Like any campaign, there was more to do than our group could get done. Of the small number of women of color in Thurston County, I recall Thelma Jackson, of African heritage, was very active. She was very involved in a lot of other women’s movement activities, too. She was a very strong, effective, highly respected proponent.

There certainly were more in Thurston County. Again, it was long ago, so I cannot recall everyone.

Kilgannon: I just wondered if you had had discussions about inclusion issues.

Fraser: I don’t recall. We were mainly doing the nuts and bolts of the campaign, and everybody was welcome.

Kilgannon: If you can pick up a paintbrush and make this sign…And while you were doing all the nuts and bolts, did you have philosophical discussions? Or was it just strategy and actually just getting it done?

Fraser: I’m sure we chit-chatted about our mutual philosophical and public policy aspirations, and how the campaign was going. However, we were all highly committed to the campaign, so there was no need to engage in any efforts to persuade each other.

Kilgannon: Those sorts of philosophical discussions would have happened before, and elsewhere, I guess.

Fraser: Correct. The campaigners were already highly committed to the issue. Those working on the campaign itself were quite focused on the actual work of organizing and implementing the campaign.

We did, of course, talk about how to best explain why the ERA was needed, and to best counter arguments against it. We would probably have exchanged information about discriminatory things that were happening to women. That was always a motivator!

Kilgannon: So let’s get to that campaign now. How many groups were part of this large coalition? Eighty-something? It was a large number.
Fraser: Statewide, it would be a huge number. It included labor and professional organizations, religious organizations, a wide variety of ethnic heritage organizations; teacher and education organizations; student organizations; human rights organizations; political organizations; and many more.

Kilgannon: So in Thurston County, it would have been what kinds of groups?

Fraser: Some of the particularly active groups included: the Thurston County Chapter of the National Organization for Women; the local chapter of the Washington State Women’s Political Caucus; the Thurston County League of Women Voters; the YWCA; the Washington Federation of State Employees, AFL-CIO; the Olympia Chapter of Business and Professional Women; the local chapter of American Association of University Women, and others.

Kilgannon: Yes, and the women’s clubs? Was there, let’s see, Zonta, the Soroptimists? I’m trying to think of other groups.

Fraser: They might have supported it. But I don’t remember them being in the core group running the nuts and bolts of the local campaign.

Kilgannon: They’re more philanthropy oriented, I believe. What about women from the political parties? Did they come as individuals, or did their parties get involved?

Fraser: Well, the campaign ultimately boiled down to individuals who worked hard, and it included both Democrats and Republicans.

Kilgannon: And the NOW chapter here, how big was it?

Fraser: I don’t remember—twenty or thirty women, maybe. It wasn’t huge. But we had regular monthly meetings. It grew fairly rapidly during this back-to-back campaign period, and I noted in a Chapter newsletter in late 1973 that our outgoing Chapter President indicated that adapting to the Chapter’s rapid growth was a new challenge we needed to discuss.

Kilgannon: Who would have been the president here?

Fraser: Carroll Dick was President in 1973. For 1972, I’d have to look that up. I remember Gisela Taber was an active member. So was Margie Reed, whose husband, Sam Reed, is now Washington’s Secretary of State. Margie and Sam were active Republicans. I was not active in a political party at the time. Many were not.

Kilgannon: Just think back. Did you meet in each other’s homes?

Fraser: I think we frequently met in homes. Once in a while we might meet somewhere else, such as at a church. I recall some meetings at United Churches in Olympia, near the
Capital Campus.

Kilgannon: And the ERA would be your main focus?

Fraser: The meetings were about a little bit of everything. Sometimes it was “consciousness raising.” Becoming aware of what is discrimination and stereotypes and strategies to counteract this. Sometimes it was hearing from a speaker on a special area of public policy such as employment or education; sometimes it was political campaigns. It was a variety of things. We did a lot of information exchange.

Kilgannon: For campaigns, would you be trying to get women to run for public office of any kind? That kind of thing?

Fraser: Well, actually, it was the Women’s Political Caucus that was more oriented directly toward campaigns. I was also very active in the Thurston County Chapter of the Women’s Political Caucus. I might have joined the Caucus after the Equal Rights Amendment passed. I kept staying really involved, because I could see that political action could achieve results.

The Thurston County Women’s Political Caucus made campaign endorsements a big priority. We would methodically interview every candidate for every office up for election in the County—from Congressional offices, to legislative offices, to county and other local government offices.

Many organizations such as NOW, Women’s Political Caucus, League of Women Voters, and others, actively promoted getting women appointed to state and local boards and commissions. The State Women’s Council did this, too. They would obtain lists of vacancies and advertise for and recruit women nominees for them.

Kilgannon: You would interview both men and women to see what their position was?

Fraser: Yes. We invited every candidate for every office that was on the ballot to be interviewed. Most would accept our invitation. We’d develop a questionnaire, and discuss the questions with each candidate. We’d spend the whole day with scheduled interviews, and then we would make endorsement decisions.

In my old files, I found my information from September 1972 interviews: the invitation letter to candidates, the questions, and the responses by the candidates!

I also found a letter inviting newly elected or re-elected legislators to an issues discussion meeting in January of 1973, at United Churches, to hear from Gisela Taber about bills the Women’s Council would be sponsoring that session.

At the next statewide election, a coalition of women’s organizations joined together to create a process for jointly interviewing all statewide candidates. I remember we did the interviews at a school near SeaTac Airport. I chaired the panel that interviewed the
Governor candidates. We had a variety of questions for them. Every candidate came! I recall that Dixy Lee Ray was one of the candidates who came to be interviewed. Coalition members included: NOW, Women’s Political Caucus, Business and Professional Women, and a few others. Each organization made their own independent endorsement decisions, but we interviewed together.

Kilgannon: What sort of questions would you ask them?

Fraser: We probably asked about their views on women’s employment issues, appointment of women to boards and commissions, child care, and the extent to which women were involved in leadership positions in their campaigns.

Kilgannon: In other words, you were asking, in effect, “Are you already demonstrating your support for women?”

Fraser: Those were the kinds of questions we would ask. I think we probably asked about continuing the state Women’s Council. Unfortunately, Dixy Lee Ray, after she became Governor, discontinued it some years later.

Kilgannon: Yes. That was interesting. Would you also, at that time, have been compiling lists of women who would be good for appointed positions and staff positions, and advocating for them?

Fraser: Yes, there were many groups doing that. There was also a lot of effort to identify appointed positions that were open and find women who might like to apply.

Kilgannon: In your ongoing activities, when you would meet some interesting women, would you try to find out if they might be interested in doing this sort of work?

Fraser: Yes. There were both organized and informal networks of people looking for women to apply for these kinds of appointed policy positions. In Thurston County, I recall that there was kind of a quiet, loose network of people working on this. There was also kind of a common social and cultural understanding in many quarters that we all had to make efforts in our own respective spheres of life to encourage appointing authorities to recruit and select women to fill vacancies.

Actually, it was through this type of effort that, at the age of 26, I was appointed by Lacey Mayor Albert Van Andel to the Lacey Planning Commission. I was recommended to him by the League of Women Voters and some of the Planning Commission staff. I would not have known about this opening otherwise, so certainly would not have applied for it. He appointed the first three women to the Planning Commission at the same time: Mary Wilson, another woman, and myself.

Later, when I became Mayor, and still later when I became County Commissioner where I had appointing authority for a wide variety of local boards and commissions, I always would consider gender balance in making appointments. At both the city and the county,
we would advertise vacancies in the newspaper, and people would contact us to let us know of their interest. I was surprised to note that usually only about one in ten applicants would be women. So, sometimes I would have to make some special efforts to recruit women myself.

Kilgannon: Recruit?

Fraser: Outreach, I guess, to be sure women applied. Groups like the League of Women Voters, in particular, were very strong in kind of searching around, encouraging women to apply.

Kilgannon: Very grassroots.

Fraser: Yes.

Kilgannon: Embedded in the community, and kind of pushing from the bottom to get that to happen? You can’t appoint women if you don’t know their names!

So returning to the 1972 campaign for the State ERA, HJR 61 as it was called, when did you first become involved?

Fraser: I think I became involved after the Legislature voted to put it on the ballot. That would have been the Spring of 1972. So when the campaign started getting organized, that’s when I became involved.

Kilgannon: Had there been a group that had lobbied to actually get that to happen?

Fraser: There had to have been a well organized campaign to get it through the Legislature.

Kilgannon: Of course. I’m just seeking to clarify the fact that you came in a little later in the process, after the ERA was already rolling.

Fraser: Yes. I came in after it had passed the Legislature, and the campaign was gearing up. I got very involved in the Thurston County campaign.

Kilgannon: So the Legislature approved it by the necessary two-thirds vote, and then it went to the voters to approve it to become law, to become part of the State Constitution.

Fraser: Right. To amend our State Constitution, an amendment must pass each Chamber of the Legislature by a two-thirds vote, and then be approved by a majority of the State’s voters at the next General Election.

Kilgannon: And how did you get involved? Were you already a member of NOW?

Fraser: I was.
Kilgannon: And then this was your next assignment—that kind of thing?

Fraser: This came along, and it was sort of “all hands on deck!” I was a very enthusiastic “hand.” [Laughs]

Kilgannon: So you were able to get this broad experience, painting signs, writing things, and calling people. Just a bit of everything?

Fraser: Yes, I did a little bit of everything. However, I didn’t do it for the purpose of “getting experience.” I did it for the very serious purpose of advancing the campaign.

Kilgannon: Did you ever specialize? Or you just were….

Fraser: I don’t recall that I specialized.

Kilgannon: You were good for anything anybody wanted? [laughter]

Fraser: Yes, I pretty much was! I remember making those signs—big heavy wooden signs. We hand painted them in Carroll Dick’s yard. Nowadays, we’d pay to get them printed on plastic. Then we put them up. Finding sign locations was as big a hassle then as it is now!

Kilgannon: You have to ask someone before you pound that into their lawn?

Fraser: That’s right. We didn’t have a huge number of signs. For the big ones, you try to find strategic locations where you get permission from the owner, and so forth.

Kilgannon: The best corners, where everybody’s going to go by. Is there anything you didn’t do?

Fraser: I think I did a little bit of everything, yes.

Kilgannon: Did you meet new people? Or was this sort of something you did with people you already knew?

Fraser: It was probably a mix. Like any campaign, it attracted people who were turned on by the issue; they’d get involved. So, you’d both meet new people, and get to know a lot better the people you already knew.

Kilgannon: Right. Because you were down there in the trenches, doing whatever. Again, if you could recall any names of people we should remember who were active.

Fraser: Well, as I said, we made the signs in the yard of Carroll Dick (later Carroll Boone), our chapter president, who has now moved away from the area. Let’s see…Our graphic artist was Sheila Guenther, who now lives down in Vancouver. I think Barbara
Gooding. I’d have to look back in my files for a lot of memory refresher. A lot of these women were so active not only in this, but also in other women’s movement efforts.

Kilgannon: I was just wondering if when you pictured yourself in a room doing certain things, who might have been next to you?

Fraser: Gisela Taber was very active. I think Margie Reed was. I know the YWCA was active—meaning individual members of the organization. I think, under their tax-exempt status, they can’t be directly involved as an organization, but a lot of their members were. I’d have to find an old list.

Kilgannon: Sure, just wanting to give credit! Did you do fundraising as well—parties, or whatever one does?

Fraser: I remember one time we had a book sale. We collected a lot of books. Someone let us use their small store on Washington Street for our sale, located next to where the Washington Performing Arts Center now is. I remember this quite well because my car was stolen while we were setting up.

Kilgannon: Oh, no!

Fraser: I had stupidly left the keys in the ignition while I was hauling boxes of books in. I did manage to get it back. I appreciated the Sheriff’s Department’s successful recovery of the car!

Kilgannon: Was it still full of books?

Fraser: No. I’d gotten all of the books out. I was inside, helping set up.

Kilgannon: Oh, sort of got carried away?

Fraser: Everybody had brought their books and we were getting all set up for this book sale. So, I remember this fundraising effort. We probably also just asked for straight-out donations. As I mentioned earlier, when we did our endorsement ad in The Olympian, we asked each endorser to contribute one dollar toward the advertisement.

Kilgannon: But I’m just wondering if the women’s movement was funded by bake sales, or exactly how you went about it.

Fraser: Well, I remember the book sale! [laughter]

Kilgannon: Back then, were there phone banks where you flat-out asked for money? Or did you raise it amongst yourselves?

Fraser: You know, I can’t remember all the ways we did it. The bumper stickers and pins came from the state level campaign organization. So, maybe we got a grant from the
Kilgannon: That costs money.

Fraser: I’m sure we raised money in other ways, but at this time I can’t remember clearly.

Kilgannon: Did you go on the radio? I’m just trying to think of the various ways people did it. Did you doorbell?

Fraser: You know, I can’t remember. I do not remember a doorbelling campaign. We probably had a speaker’s bureau.

Kilgannon: Political campaigning back then was a lot of footwork. And then, certainly, getting endorsements was a very big method.

Fraser: I remember getting endorsements. I was on the phone doing that.

Kilgannon: That was a good way of getting more mileage out of your ad.

Fraser: It was an important way to give voters confidence that the ERA wasn’t just a crazy person’s idea, or a “fringe” group’s idea. Supporters were solid, very fine people, well known, and very active in community life, government, and so forth.

Kilgannon: I don’t suppose churches could be officially involved, but I suppose ministers or different people could endorse?

Fraser: They could lend their personal names. But for the statewide campaign, there were a variety of associations of churches that lent their names.

Kilgannon: I’m just trying to think of other things that people did back then for campaigning. A lot of it, it was pretty much face-to-face conversation, perhaps, talking it out.

Fraser: It was. And the issue was very high profile. So people were talking about it a lot anyway.

Kilgannon: Might you have had a booth at the county fair, that kind of thing?

Fraser: We might have. I can’t remember. What I do remember is talking a lot with friends, trying to get them to understand why the ERA was needed and getting them to vote for it.

Kilgannon: Did you have little pamphlets that you could hand out?
Fraser: I’m sure we did. We had “fact sheets.” We had to spend a lot of time explaining that the ERA doesn’t mean the end to separate bathrooms for women and men. It doesn’t mean “bathrooms”; it means more significant things—like jobs!

Kilgannon: Let’s discuss that. When you would talk to someone, someone maybe you didn’t know really well, is that the kind of thing that would come up right away? What exactly are you talking about here? If you had to say, “No, we don’t mean bathrooms, we mean this other thing,” would that persuade people?

Fraser: Well, you would have to then get into all the substantive reasons and help them see beyond this initial, superficial stereotype thing.

Kilgannon: Almost a scatological interest!

Fraser: Another argument against the ERA was fear that, “It’s going to clog the courts.” Other times men would say, “Well, you know, my wife can vote, so what’s the problem?”

Kilgannon: In other words, “Since women have rights, what are you talking about?”

Fraser: Yes. Some men would say, “My wife runs me, she’s in charge already. Why do I need this?” So, you have to do an educational process, and say to them, “Women need better opportunities for employment, business, education, protection in the courts” and so forth.

Kilgannon: Could you use humor in any way?

Fraser: Oh, I’m sure we did.

Kilgannon: Feminists are usually charged with being completely humorless people.

Fraser: The campaign was so widespread, I’m sure everything was used.

Kilgannon: I have seen some newsletters that circulated amongst women’s groups cautioning women not to be angry in their responses—to be even-tempered and kind of calm about the whole thing. Especially a certain part of the campaign where things were looking like they were just grinding along, and the word went out: “Don’t yell at people. Don’t get sarcastic.” Did you actually try to teach each other about what are the best, most useful approaches?

Fraser: Yes, we were always talking about the best ways to communicate. I mean, those are kind of normal things in a campaign. Among the Thurston County active campaigners, I don’t recall any who communicated in an angry or sarcastic way—maybe there were a few I didn’t know about. But when you have a big issue that touches people so deeply, sure, you’re going to have a few people who are inappropriate and get very emotional about it. I certainly don’t think that was a majority. And the reason it passed,
I think, is that the majority of people advocating for the ERA engaged in an education process with others. You know, “think about this, think about that”—that maybe the voter had not thought about before. We talked about the fact that voting isn’t enough. You need to do more. The laws need to change to help people’s lives change, and a constitutional amendment will do that. No, it doesn’t mean unisex bathrooms. No, it doesn’t mean it’s going to change relationships in the family, and so forth.

Kilgannon: Were you ever surprised by anyone’s response—where they came from, some place that you hadn’t even dreamt of? Or, if somebody would say something to you and you’d have to come up with a quick response?

Fraser: No, my memory is that you just kind of kept educating. Of course, this interview is many years later, so it’s possible some conversations have dropped from my memory.

Kilgannon: Did you feel like a broken record?

Fraser: No. I think I probably was an example of an ERA advocate who so thoroughly believed in this that we felt every vote was important and we never felt like a broken record. Every person was important to educate, to try to get them to a point of understanding where they would vote “yes”.

Kilgannon: Was there organized opposition?

Fraser: Yes, there was. I found among my old papers a group that was against it.

Kilgannon: There were certainly national groups and state groups. There was “Happiness of Women,” there were groups whose names consisted of acronyms with themes of women, wives and mothers. “Happiness of Women” was sort of saying, “We’re fine the way we are.” I don’t know about Thurston County, though. It’s hard to find records of what exactly happened here, if there were very many people here that you ran into who belonged to these groups.

Fraser: If they did, they were not very public about it, and must have talked mostly within their own organizational sectors. I don’t recall local media coverage of local organized opposition.

Kilgannon: You might not cross paths? I was wondering, did the League of Women Voters have a voter forum, and if so, did it include both sides of the question?

Fraser: You know, we have a couple of League of Women Voters historians here in town who have a lot of records. One is Barbara Gooding. She might have old records on that.

Kilgannon: Yes, we will be calling her. Was an even bigger issue “apathy”—people saying, “We don’t need this.” Because an amendment is an active thing, you have to put some energy into passing it. And if you were in doubt, or not too sure, you just won’t know and might not vote.
Fraser: Yes, I think a lot of people weren’t initially persuaded. Often, they didn’t see the problems in their own lives. So, therefore, they would question, “Why do we need it?” That’s why this constant education was so important. It was important to educate people, as part of the effort to counteract this superficial, stereotypical, strange negativism.

Kilgannon: It was in the paper; people were reading about it; and the paper would bring up these things?

Fraser: That’s right. Newspapers feel an obligation to print “both sides.”

Kilgannon: It’s kind of a journalistic rule. Now there were, at least in Seattle…. Again, that’s the trouble, most of the records deal with Seattle or other large cities. Unfortunately, there’s very little of what local groups did in smaller communities. In Seattle, they had candlelight vigils, parades, and demonstrations—although that might be too strong a word. In larger cities, they had more methods to get in the newspaper and to get their message out. Were there actions down here in Olympia like that?

Fraser: There probably were. I’m sure we tried. Again, a lot of the details are a little hazy. In going through my old files, I don’t find many local news articles. Most are from Seattle newspapers. So you are probably right.

Kilgannon: I was wondering about the fact that Thurston County is special in that it includes the State Capitol. Sometimes the Capitol Campus is the setting for demonstrations. Even though the ERA had passed the Legislature, it would still have been a good location where people could get attention for their issues. It’s dramatic. It’s a good photo-op. Did people come to the Capitol for this purpose?

Fraser: They were probably more likely to have done that during the 1972 legislative session, in trying to get the ERA through the Legislature. After it passes the Legislature, the action shifts to trying to get local voters to vote for it.

Kilgannon: Just simply getting out the vote. Now that was, let’s see, 1972. Wasn’t that a big year? Wasn’t that a Governor’s election year? I’m wondering if there was a natural kind of movement for voter turnout.

Fraser: Yes, it was. It was a year in which all statewide elected officials were up for election. Some would endorse, and some wouldn’t.

Kilgannon: I can picture that. Politicians up for re-election might not want to get involved in something that they perceive as controversial.

Fraser: Well, they have to calculate their own election risks. They have to calculate the public mood and how that might affect their own election. I think that’s the reason that Lieutenant Governor Cherberg didn’t want to endorse—he wasn’t sure of the outcome of
the issue. He was sure of his own election, but it he tied himself to this, what would it mean? Would he lose some votes?

Kilgannon: Sure.

Fraser: So, when I called these various elected officials to see if they’d endorse, some were just, “Oh, sure, of course!” Some said, “no”. One said, in declining to endorse, “Well, you know, everyone is in it for themselves.”

Kilgannon: It was well known that Governor Dan Evans, Attorney General Slade Gorton, and Secretary of State Lud Kramer were very supportive. So, as you got closer to the vote, did you have a sense of how it was going to go? You probably knew your local area. Did you feel like you were riding the crest of a wave? Or, did it feel like a complete slog? Or, was it somewhere in between?

Fraser: I think we thought it was going to pass, and were shocked at how close it was.

Kilgannon: Didn’t it take days to count, because it was so close?

Fraser: It was a long time, yes. Because it was so close, we had to wait until every ballot was counted to finally know the outcome. But, they didn’t do a recount.

Kilgannon: There was no early trend?

Fraser: The trend was that it was close the whole way!

Kilgannon: I understand Thurston County was considered a leader in passing it. Did you had a pretty good margin here?

Fraser: We probably did. I’d have to look up the actual returns.

Kilgannon: It’s a difficult number to find. But I have heard anecdotally that Thurston County was a contributor to the final success.

Fraser: I’m sure it was. And that’s partly why I thought it was going to pass handily.

Kilgannon: It was similar in Seattle, I suppose. Were there areas where it was a flaming success, or a complete failure? Did it break on east/west, urban/rural, or was it really mixed? Do you have any sense of that?

Fraser: It was probably more of an urban-pro and rural-con. The next year, when we were pushing for the Legislature to ratify the Federal ERA, I recall that most of the active “con” leadership seemed to be from the Tri-Cities area or Snohomish County.

Kilgannon: Certainly the Snohomish County State Senators were against it.
Fraser: Oh, they were? Did that include the State ERA, too?

Kilgannon: Yes, the State and the Federal ERA. Senator Gissburg and Senator Mardesich were both against it. They each voted “no”.

Fraser: Probably reflecting their districts.

Kilgannon: Possibly. It’s hard to say. When you look at which legislators voted against it, it was both Democrats and Republicans. It was mixed throughout the state. About the only thread that stands out—and it’s not everybody—is that many Catholic Senators voted against it. But this was not universal, so that’s kind of a weak thing to say. But just looking over the list, that’s a bit of a trend there, but not the strongest one. It’s quite difficult to get any kind of a pattern at all as to why these people were against it.

Do you remember those days of waiting to hear? The vote happened, and then finally you learned the outcome. Did you hear any glimmers either way while you were waiting? Did you know that it was going to be tough? Were you getting any kind of reports?

Fraser: You know, I don’t remember that kind of detail. But I do remember we were hanging on everything. But at that point, there was nothing we could do—other than just sit and wait. People didn’t do techniques like they did in the last gubernatorial election, such as double-checking on absentee ballots, and so forth. There was none of that.

Kilgannon: Just nail-biting?

Fraser: Yes, just sit and wait. I mean, what can you do? And we were stunned it was so close.

Kilgannon: There were some early assessments in some of the newspapers interviewing people about, “Why did it fail?” Obviously, these assessments were too early, because, of course, it didn’t fail. So they had to retract some of that. But did your campaign organization do any early assessments? What were you thinking while you were waiting to hear the final result? Did you think you’d have to re-gear up and do it all again?

Fraser: I don’t recall that we got that far! [laughs]

Kilgannon: Or, just kept in suspended animation? When it did pass, was there a party?

Fraser: Must have been. Must have been.

Kilgannon: Did you have a good “hurrah moment”?

Fraser: We must have! Everybody was pretty happy.

Kilgannon: You would probably be pretty exhausted at that point.
Fraser: Yes, and then you go take the signs down, and all of that.

Kilgannon: Clear up. Within days, are you then thinking about what’s next? Or, do you just take a break?

Fraser: Well, we didn't get much of a chance for a break. What happened was that as soon as the State ERA campaign was over and we closed it down, within a few weeks, BOOM! We were into the Federal ERA campaign. It was almost nonstop, as soon as the State ERA campaign was over we started up the campaign to get our Legislature to ratify the Federal ERA.

The Washington State NOW then asked me to become their State Legislative Coordinator for the 1973 session, to coordinate the legislative advocacy of all their chapters throughout the state. Since I was from the Olympia area, I think they observed that I was well located geographically, knew the legislative process, and was highly motivated. So, I went almost nonstop from working on the State ERA campaign to working on getting the Legislature to both pass a Federal ERA and pass legislation to implement the new State ERA.

Kilgannon: As you hadn’t been involved in the legislative part before, did you have to learn that new piece?

Fraser: No. Actually, I had quite a bit of legislative background. My first job after graduating from the University of Washington was as a Ford Foundation Legislative Intern with the Washington State House of Representatives. So I knew the legislative process and how it worked—how a bill progresses, how to read documents, how to go to committee meetings, and so forth. After that, I had a couple of state agency internships. One was with the State Department of Highways. That internship consisted solely of following legislation for the Department. Later, the Department hired me as Assistant Legislative Liaison, a position I held when I became NOW’s State Legislative Coordinator.

Kilgannon: So you were very well placed. Even though you hadn’t been involved in the legislative part for the State ERA, you certainly….

Fraser: I had a strong background in the legislative process.

Kilgannon: Was that difficult for you, since you were working there professionally to have this added lobbying role?

Fraser: No. First, I didn’t do it alone. I wouldn’t go to legislative meetings during the day for NOW business, but other people would. In particular, I must give credit to a fabulous Thurston County NOW member named Corinne West. She would go to the hearings during the day, and tell me in great detail what happened. Then I would type up a weekly newsletter to all the Chapters around the state, describing what was going on,
what happened in each committee, which legislators needed contacting on which issues, and so forth. For example, I’d let the Spokane Chapter know which Spokane legislators were on committees critical to our issues, let them know about the hearings coming up, and advise that they should contact specific local legislators on specific matters. The Spokane Chapter was wonderful! Boy, they’d jump to! We had many really active, highly motivated chapters all over the state. I recently ran into the legislative chair for the Spokane Chapter, Marion Moos. She’s still going strong with her women’s movement involvements after all these years. In the Tri-Cities, there was a wonderful leader named Shirley Shepherd, who headed up their efforts. Again, these women are all older than I am. This image of young, wild people running this campaign was not the case at all.

Kilgannon: That’s an image I’m trying to correct.

Fraser: There was a really active chapter in Yakima. And of course, King County had just a superb, active chapter. Many were issue experts and would testify for us at hearings. They were highly, highly motivated. There were so many key people in that Chapter.

Other very active chapters included: Bellingham, Tacoma-Pierce County. I think there was one down in Vancouver. So they tended to revolve around cities, mostly the larger urban areas of the state.

Kilgannon: Did you have areas where you really didn’t have much participation, where it was pretty patchy? Would you try to recruit some people from areas that maybe didn’t have an organization?

Fraser: Well, I was the State Legislative Coordinator. A separate position was the State Coordinator, the top elected position for all the chapters in the state. It was the role of the State Coordinator to try to create new chapters. So, I was involved some, but was not the lead. Legislative coordination took up most of the time I had to offer.

In terms of forming new chapters, one thing we would do was to look at where we had organization members who were not also members of a specific chapter. Where there might be a cluster of them, we’d contact them to see if they might be interested in forming one.

Kilgannon: So you personally didn’t have to go and beat the bushes. You just had to coordinate the people that were already part of the organization?

Fraser: Yes. I coordinated the legislative activities of the Chapters. Each Chapter was asked to have a legislative lead, and I was the statewide legislative lead. So I would coordinate through the Chapter legislative leads. They were all highly motivated and very good. They were in easy contact with their active members. They would rapidly get phone calls from their members in to their legislators when needed. We made it very targeted. We’d let them know which of their legislators was leaning which way, what
their legislators said or did, what their legislator on Rules Committee needed to hear, etc. Chapter members would use this information in contacting their legislators.

Kilgannon: And you’d let them know who’s on the Rules Committee?

Fraser: Yes, we would let local Chapters know if their legislators were on Rules Committee at a time when we needed their help in getting a bill “pulled” out of Rules. Somewhere I have a nearly complete set of my old newsletters with all of this information for the Chapters to use. I hope to find them and donate them to the Washington Women’s History Consortium.

Kilgannon: And that would be the main tool, this newsletter?

Fraser: Plus phone calls.

Kilgannon: Obviously, you’d have to move a little faster than a newsletter, perhaps, wouldn’t you?

Fraser: Yes, I also made a lot of phone calls. I would start after getting off work at five, and go until late at night. I also spent nearly every weekend during the session working on this.

Kilgannon: Wow!

Fraser: Yes.

Kilgannon: Work all day, meet, and then type?

Fraser: Yes, That’s what I did. Write, make copies, address envelopes, put them in, and mail them out around the state. Oh yes, it was a total effort!

Kilgannon: How many newsletters do you think you mailed out?

Fraser: Well, we had a dozen or more Chapters, or something like that. So I would mail one to each chapter—usually once a week, sometimes more often.

Kilgannon: Now is this before Xerox machines? Or, how were you doing this?

Fraser: No. Xerox machines were invented by then. They weren’t as fast as they are now, however.

Kilgannon: No, but I mean they weren’t quite what we have now. And they’re certainly not email.

Fraser: No email. Didn’t exist.
Kilgannon: I’m just reminding younger readers.

Fraser: Oh, yes. There was no email back then. There were no cell phones. Long distance phone calls were relatively expensive, so much of it was actually done by mail. I would send my letters out saying who needed to be contacted on what and by when. Then the local Chapters would make the phone calls to their legislators. That’s how it would work. Nowadays, everybody sends email and uses cell phones. But back then, it was by land line phone and mail.

Kilgannon: Sometimes the technology....It’s important to remind ourselves just exactly what it meant, technologically, to do that kind of work.

Fraser: Yes. I used a manual typewriter.

Kilgannon: I was just wondering if you were dealing with carbon paper and that type of thing.

Fraser: I usually typed an original, scotch-taped on NOW’s logo at the top, and then had it copied. Electric typewriters were still fairly new back then, and I did not have one at home. I used a manual typewriter.

Kilgannon: Electric typewriters were probably expensive, yes. At your home office, you’re not going to have the full range of professional office equipment.

Fraser: There was a lot of expense for postage and phone calls. I’d call people when it was urgent. I’d usually phone to arrange for people to testify at legislative hearings. Very fortunately, National NOW sent us hundreds of dollars to help pay for this. I recall the final total was around $800. If you recalculate that for the effects of inflation since then, it was quite a significant amount.

Kilgannon: Oh, that’s a good amount!

Fraser: I was so grateful for the funding assistance. I couldn’t have done it otherwise.

Kilgannon: Well, it otherwise might have been on your own dime, which would have been kind of difficult.

Fraser: I didn’t earn enough money to be able to do that. It was hundreds and hundreds of dollars to do all this mailing, phone calls, etcetera.

Kilgannon: How long did that campaign have gone on? During one legislative session?

Fraser: That was it: one legislative session.

Kilgannon: So, three months—but pretty intense.
Fraser: Yes. Exceptionally intense. Yes. There was a huge coalition of organizations supporting the ERA ratification. I was the legislative coordinator for just one, NOW. Other organizations also had people like me. It was a massive undertaking.

Kilgannon: So you’d have colleagues, peers, doing the same thing for other organizations?

Fraser: Yes. And a lot of it was coordinated through the State Women’s Council, which played a key leadership role. The list of organizations was very, very, very long. There were a lot of people doing the kind of thing I was doing, with other organizations.

A huge bouquet of thanks should go to Gisela Taber, the Executive Director of the State Women’s Council, for her stupendous leadership. Thanks should also go to the appointed members of the Council, and to the State’s attorneys who helped with incessant legal questions. A couple of key members of the Council were Senator Lois North and then-Representative Lorraine Wojahn. Gisela Taber is probably covering this in her oral history.

Kilgannon: I wondered if you shared newsletters with other organizations?

Fraser: No, I don’t think so. We were too busy to do that. But this was such a huge movement. It’s almost hard to describe how big this effort was and how intense it was. I really think it was one of the largest legislative lobbying efforts in the history of the state.

Kilgannon: And how many women would be coming down and meeting with legislators and buttonholing people?

Fraser: Lots and lots! The hearings were always full. And when the ERA got to the Floor of the House or Senate, people would come and pack the Gallery. I remember a horrible thing happened once on an absolutely critical day in the House. Talk about a combination of stereotypes and bad timing! On the day the ERA was going to be voted on the House, before it was brought up, it happened that the House had a ceremony relating in some way to veterans. The Galleries were already packed with ERA supporters.

Kilgannon: It was for a returning Vietnam vet.

Fraser: I was in the House Gallery, watching all this. A lot of people came and sat in the Galleries wearing ERA buttons pinned to their lapels. They’d made paper buttons out of colored construction paper, wrote “ERA” on them in bold letters, and pinned them on with just a little straight pin, such as you use in sewing. Back then, people didn’t always get the metal political buttons so common now.

So the House Galleries were packed with, for the most part, pro-ERA people with their paper buttons on. And something relating to veterans was going on. There was a flag salute as part of the ceremony honoring the veterans. So, of course, everybody stands up
for the flag salute.

Guess what? Everybody EXCEPT two young women in, of all places, the front row of one of the Galleries.

Kilgannon: Front row! Oh dear!

Fraser: We almost lost the ERA over that. This highly visible, inappropriate action of those two young women who none of us knew, unfortunately, fit in with the negative stereotypes about ERA supporters held by anti-ERA legislators. It definitely added to the already highly charged atmosphere and enraged some legislators who might have been “on the fence” on the ERA issue. They looked up in the Gallery, and here, you know, we’re doing the flag salute, and here are a couple of women wearing pro-ERA stickers not standing up to show respect for the flag, or respect for our veterans, in this special ceremony that’s taking place. It was simply awful!

I recall it caused the ERA vote to be delayed while people “regrouped” and re-checked votes.

Kilgannon: Just to cool down the tempers?

Fraser: Well, to regroup their votes. There was a ferocious negative response to those two young women by members of the Legislature.

Kilgannon: In the Gallery, did you notice these two women not getting up?

Fraser: I can’t remember specifically.

Kilgannon: Just wondering if anyone behind might have prodded them and say, “Hey, you know…..”

Fraser: Most people in the Gallery probably didn’t see them, because it was so packed. If the few around them did, they might not have thought quickly enough about what the reaction of the legislators might be. So anyway, it was simply awful. I recall it made the news. We were worried we might lose the ERA over that. Just two people—combined with stereotyped thinking! We already knew it would be a close vote, because it needed a two-thirds vote.

Kilgannon: That’s a hard thing to get.

Fraser: I don’t remember if they postponed it to later that day or to another day.

Kilgannon: I believe I’ve read that there was a little hiatus there where you regrouped.

Fraser: The legislative leaders probably had to recount their votes to be sure they still had them, after the emotional impact of that incident.
Kilgannon: It would be embarrassing....

Fraser: Legislative leaders usually don’t like to bring something up for a vote if they think it’s going to fail. But that was really awful. Finally, it was brought up for a vote and passed. Then it went to the Senate.

In the Senate, I remember it had a hard time, particularly in Rules Committee. I remember Senator Slim Rasmussen from Pierce County was against it. By that time, the opposition was getting more organized. They were still just a tiny group, but they found good ways to make themselves visible. I recall there was an organization called, “Stop ERA.”

Kilgannon: I understand they were handing out apple pies and cookies and bread and roses—sort of “motherhood” types of things.

Fraser: I remember they had literature that had a symbol like a typical traffic stop sign on it, saying, “Stop ERA”. It had a red background with white writing. I remember that quite well. They somehow managed to get a lot of attention. Finally, the Senate brought it up for a vote. We all sat in the Senate Gallery holding our breaths while the roll call was slowly being taken. It did pass, but not by a huge margin. But two-thirds is two-thirds—which is what it needed. Now that I’m a legislator, I know how tough it is to get two-thirds on anything!

Kilgannon: You know the magic number. Yes, I think thirteen senators voted against it.

Fraser: One was the Senator I had been an intern for when he was a House member. I was very disappointed in that. I held him in the highest esteem. Still do. But to see somebody you knew and respected go against it was hard.

Kilgannon: He couldn’t bring himself to do it?

Fraser: I don’t know why he voted as he did. And he was considered to be one of the “Dan Evans Republicans.”

Kilgannon: I understand people couldn’t always really describe why they were for or against it—something in their life, or whatever it was, it was hard to say. They were either moved, or they weren’t.

Fraser: Yes, who knows? There is such a multitude of considerations that go into a big issue.

Kilgannon: So you were more in a coordinating role. You didn’t actually do any personal lobbying?

Fraser: Well, with our own local legislators, I did. But I recall they were all for it, so that
wasn’t very hard. My biggest role was to know exactly what was going on with other legislators in other districts, and get the information to our chapters about contact needs with their legislators.

I worked full time for the Department of Highways during the day, so as I mentioned earlier, I kept up with the fabulous aid of Corinne West, one of our local Chapter members. She was available during the business day to go to all the legislative meetings, observe all that went on, and report to me in detail. I also got updated information from the Washington State Women’s Council Office, from Gisela Taber and Sue Van Meter (now Sue Dunn).

The most effective lobbying is for constituents to contact their own legislators. For example, my lobbying a legislator from Spokane would mean nothing to that legislator. Hearing from their own constituents means a lot!

Kilgannon: So you would get them the procedural information about committee and floor action, cut-off dates, who needs to be contacted about what and by when, and the like? Things someone outside the process probably would not know?

Fraser: Yes. Those kinds of things. That’s why every successful lobby group has people on The Hill who know the details of the status of a bill, who’s thinking what, or who’s leaning how, or who doesn’t have an opinion, who’s for it, who’s against it, and so forth. Then you get that word out to the folks back in the districts and they contact their members. That’s the tried and true method of lobbying. Nowadays, much of this is done by email. Back then, it was by phone, telegram, or letter.

Kilgannon: Did you study the particular legislators as to exactly who, or which groups, would “move” them, what they were interested in themselves, that kind of thing?

Fraser: We would study every aspect of legislative opinions and actions we could in Olympia. However, we mostly relied on local citizens to contact their local legislators. For example, we would notify a local Chapter if their legislator was on a particular committee that was going to have a hearing or a vote on a bill we cared about. We would suggest what kind of message might be helpful.

Kilgannon: What about their local newspaper, or something like that?

Fraser: That would be up to the local Chapter to do that.

Kilgannon: Just wondering if you would get at people from different ways.

Fraser: Of course. And remember, we were just one group. There were hundreds of other groups doing what we were doing.

Kilgannon: So, were people writing letters to the editor?
Fraser: Oh, yes.

Kilgannon: Were you making it seem like this is a tidal wave, “everybody’s for this”? 

Fraser: Yes. In fact it WAS a “tidal wave”. However, there were some smaller groups against it, who managed to achieve influence beyond their numbers.

Kilgannon: Well, it’s always easier to say “no” than “yes.” It’s interesting that way. And it did represent a big change. Because the State ERA had passed, and no dire things happened afterwards, did that make arguing for the Federal ERA easier?

Fraser: Well, actually, I don’t recall that being an argument at all, because the State ERA was still so new, and there hadn’t been much time for implementation to occur. We went immediately from campaigning for voter passage of the State ERA to campaigning for legislative ratification of the Federal ERA. And it passed the Legislature two or three months later.

Kilgannon: That same session, I believe, that you were working on the Federal ERA you were also working on the laws that needed to be changed to bring the state into compliance with the new State ERA.

Fraser: Yes, that was another huge part of the job.

Kilgannon: Gayle Berry, the Assistant Attorney General, was going through all the statute titles and looking for the places where it identified different issues by gender and pulling them up for review.

Fraser: There were a lot of bills on a lot of different subjects. In my box of old papers, which I’m donating to the Women’s History Consortium, I have copies of many of them. They can be easily researched. In terms of NOW, we had our designated experts on different subject matters. So, whenever a bill would have a hearing, we would contact these members to get them to come to Olympia to testify.

Kilgannon: Did the new laws implementing the new State ERA get tangled up in the discussion of the Federal ERA? Was there so much ERA business that legislators thought of it all as one big thing? Was there any exasperation that maybe they thought the legislative session was overrun with ERA issues?

Fraser: I don’t recall that. I think it was a little bit like the question you asked about the reproductive choice issue earlier. The State ERA had passed, so the general legislative feeling seemed to be that they had a duty to pass the implementing legislation. So that was one whole set of activities that was really somewhat separate from seeking ratification of the Federal ERA.

Kilgannon: So they weren’t just thinking, “Oh, here’s another women’s thing”?
Fraser: I don’t think so. There was a big difference in thinking about the State and the Federal ERAs. The State ERA dealt only with state level domestic issues. In contrast, the Federal ERA generated concerns about big national and international issues, such as, “Will it require women to be subject to the military Draft?”

Kilgannon: Yes, I was thinking about that.

Fraser: That wasn’t really a state issue. So, the two didn’t get very intermixed.

Kilgannon: How did you address the Draft issue? It had to have been the most hot-button part of the Federal ERA.

Fraser: I can’t remember. I think different people had different answers for it.

Kilgannon: I know I’ve talked to male legislators, especially, who were veterans. They were all for the State ERA, but the Draft provision in the Federal one, that was really tough for them. They said, “I don’t think we could have done that. I was in the Army, and I just can’t, I don’t want a woman there.” And I just wondered what you would say to address that concern.

Fraser: Of course, we don’t have the Draft anymore, so that’s a major change. We also have many women going into combat zones now in the Middle East, so that is also a major change. But the law did say, and still does, that women are prohibited from serving in “combat” positions. Yet, nowadays, women do get into positions that are as close as you can be to combat, or they’re in combat areas. It’s a little hard to tell the difference sometimes now. Back then, some people thought it would help women who chose to be in the military to have better career advancement opportunities. Others, I think, said, “Don’t worry too much about it, because the law says women can’t be in combat.” And then others would say, “Well, you can’t be drafted unless you are physically able to do the strenuous physical work, and most women wouldn’t meet such qualifications, so wouldn’t be selected to serve. You have to be physically able. If you’re not strong enough to carry all this military equipment, then you just won’t be drafted.

Kilgannon: You’ll get washed out anyway?

Fraser: Yes. So, it’s not a lot to worry about. Besides, most military jobs are in “support” roles and not in the direct line of fire.

Kilgannon: True.

Fraser: So there were various responses. I don’t think there was necessarily one uniform answer. On the other hand, some people asked, “What’s the problem with women being in combat?” So there was a whole array of different answers.

Kilgannon: I think this last point would be somewhat rare for someone to say.
Fraser: I don’t think the two ERAs really got mixed up. But it’s a good question.

Kilgannon: As they started to work through the titles of the various chapters of state statutes, I would think that it would just bring up more and more issues. Were legislators faced with a greater number of implementation bills than they had expected? I understand some of the questions raised were: Can girls play football? Should pregnant women get unemployment compensation? There were some really practical issues that started to come forward, although maybe not right away. I was wondering what the mindset was while everybody worked through all these issues?

Fraser: Initially, in 1973, immediately following the passage of the State ERA, there was a large amount of legislation enacted to implement it. In 1974, there were probably a few more bills that were billed as implementing it. But in a sense, we’ve never really stopped implementing it.

Kilgannon: No.

Fraser: There continue to be issues of gender in situations where gender shouldn’t be that important. We’re still updating statutes to be “gender neutral.” Old attitudes, and old institutions persist, old practices linger. So, we’re still implementing the ERA slowly. Yes.

Kilgannon: So that’s actually an argument for it being a State Constitutional amendment. If the Legislature had only enacted a few improved statutes here and there, you would have nothing permanent to stand on.

Fraser: It’s important to keep in mind the distinction between a broad fundamental principle and a specific policy. It should be a fundamental principle that all people are equal under the law. And our country was founded, in spite of its imperfections, as a country of “We, the people.” So we keep working to “form a more perfect union,” to quote the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution.

Kilgannon: You must have been very persuasive. You got it!

Fraser: So, we’re still working on this. And it keeps getting better as we go. Yes.

Kilgannon: Again, some states have passed State ERAs, some have ratified the Federal ERA, and some have done both. I don’t know where Washington State falls in the national picture of how many states had already passed an ERA and where we are in this lineup.

Fraser: I recall we were about the twenty-fourth state to ratify the Federal ERA.

Kilgannon: So Washington was in the middle, but not the fastest out of the gate. We were probably influenced by what was happening nationally as well. There was a lot of press. There was a lot of talk and debate and political action on both sides of the issue.
When you worked on the State ERA, perhaps those things weren’t quite as prevalent. But, by the time of the campaign for the Federal ERA, how much did the national picture and national opposition by organizations like Phyllis Schlafly’s start to impinge on what you were doing here?

Fraser: Well, it all comes down to in-state organization. I think that some in-state organizations were allied with Phyllis Schlafly’s national organization. They were reiterating her national rhetoric. Everyone was aware of national media, both pro and con as the Federal ERA was being considered here.

Kilgannon: There was a lot of literature washing around.

Fraser: There was.

Kilgannon: A lot of trees died in this process! I’m wondering, how do you, on a state level, address these national figures, both pro and con? You get sort of the “star” quality thing going on with, say, Gloria Steinem on one side and maybe Phyllis Schlafly on the other. Do you have to start using that imagery? Or, so you just try to stick with your local resources?

Fraser: We tried to stay grass roots and out-organize the opposition. That’s what we did, and that’s why we won. Out-of-state people are maybe good for influencing general citizens, but legislators are most influenced by what might happen to them at the next election. So we tried to focus on their perceptions of how people in their districts viewed the issue, and how it might affect their next election.

Kilgannon: I was struck by the “mobilization” factor. Some newsletters from the time, in discussing working on State ERA implementation and Federal ERA ratification simultaneously, referred to a “fatigue” factor. They would say, “This is the time, don’t take a break now. Feminists have really got to do this big push now. Because, if you aren’t among the counted now, we’re going to lose, and people won’t take us seriously. They’ll think the State ERA was a fluke and that we’re not serious people. We’ve got to stick with it.” Did you have strategies to keep up your morale and boost each other up? The “fatigue factor” is not only physical, but also mental and emotional.

Fraser: Yes, I would say there was a fatigue factor, but we overcame it because everybody was so highly motivated. They said, “We’re doing this. Even if we’re tired, we’re keeping on doing it. We’re keeping it up. We’re working on all fronts. We’ve got the State ERA. Now, we’re working on its implementation. And, yes, we’re also putting everything we have into getting the Federal ERA ratified.”

Again, it was one of the biggest campaigns directed at the Legislature that I think we’ve ever had. The day it passed the Senate, which constituted final ratification by the Legislature, the inside of the Legislative Building was just packed with people. You could hardly move. I remembered thinking to myself that as NOW’s State Legislative Coordinator, my first act should be to call the National NOW office to let them know one
more state had ratified. I found a pay phone, which was all we had in those days. But I couldn’t get through. Their phone was busy, busy, busy, busy back there. I became a little frantic, because this was so important.

Kilgannon: How frustrating!

Fraser: Finally, I called the operator to plead that this was an emergency. She broke in on NOW’s line back there so I could let them know we had just ratified it. Everybody was just so happy. Of course, there were probably a few of the opposition present. But the building was packed with thousands of people who were jubilant. You could hardly move.

Kilgannon: What a moment!

Fraser: Yes. It was quite a moment. It was an exhilarating moment, reflecting massive work, just massive, by a massive number of people.

Kilgannon: The sheer effort—it’s quite stunning to think about. Maybe the quick timeline was actually helpful. Nobody dissipated their energies. They just went at it, and there was no time to think twice about it.

Fraser: Not if you were involved in this. You just immediately shifted. Maybe you took a little time for Christmas, but that was it. Boom! You were all about Ratification!

Kilgannon: Fortunately, it was a concentrated period of time, and there was a deadline.

Fraser: That’s true.

Kilgannon: It’s not like you had to run a marathon. It was a sprint, a three-month sprint. It didn’t go on and on, and you knew when it would be over.

Fraser: Yes. Just as it is with elections. There’s a specific date when it’s over, however it turns out.

Kilgannon: So then, what did you do? You were with this mass of people. Did you all surge out to a restaurant?

Fraser: Oh, probably many restaurants. [laughter] There were thousands of people. It was quite a day.

Kilgannon: Do you think legislators felt pleased? How often do they have so much attention?

Fraser: You know. I didn’t talk to any at that time.

Kilgannon: It’s impossible to say.
Fraser: I mainly talked to the people I’d been affiliated with in the Big Push.

Kilgannon: If you could even find them in the crowd.

Fraser: If you could, yes.

Kilgannon: I imagine your personal life was completely on hold while you were doing this. You were working full time, you were going to a lot of meetings, and you were working on this into the wee hours.

Fraser: Well, that was okay.

Kilgannon: You were young?

Fraser: Yes, and I wasn’t married. I was just fully dedicated to this during this period.

Kilgannon: I wonder if it would have happened without people like you.

Fraser: This is what it takes. And I was just one example of many, many people doing this. There were people all over the state, in their own respective communities, organizing lots of other people to contact legislators. We’d bring experts down to testify. It was massive. There were newspaper strategies, radio strategies, and so forth. It was massive. It really was a popular movement, in the true sense of the phrase.

Kilgannon: Yes.

Fraser: You can’t just say it was a few people trying to get something.

Kilgannon: No. No. But the coordination aspects were…. 

Fraser: Coordination was a huge matter. Yes. And the State Women’s Council played a major role in all the groups staying as coordinated as possible.

Kilgannon: Now, could the Women’s Council be openly “pro”? Weren’t they just informational?

Fraser: Yes, they were highly informational. We’d get information from them, and we would use it to advocate. They also took official positions of support on this and all the legislation.

Kilgannon: But they didn’t play an advocacy role, did they? Didn’t they just give information, straight information?

Fraser: They were also active, highly effective advocates. State agencies can get approval to advocate.
Kilgannon: I wasn’t sure about their role as a state agency.

Fraser: Agencies can take positions on legislation; they do it all the time.

Kilgannon: That’s true.

Fraser: So, yes, they had a position in support the State and Federal ERAs. I’m sure Gisela Taber’s oral history will discuss this. The Women’s Council always had excellent information. We could always go to them for information in addition to getting it in other ways.

Kilgannon: So these experts you would have testify, would they be lawyers or economists? What kinds of people would speak to these issues?

Fraser: It would depend on the issue. Sometimes you’d have somebody from a religious institution come, or people from education, labor or business, or women’s groups, people from all walks of life, who were well versed on the issue at hand.

Kilgannon: Labor was involved?

Fraser: Labor was supportive.

Kilgannon: Earlier, of course, labor was one of the reasons why nobody would look at the ERA, because they were concerned about protective legislation for women. So swinging labor into your column was a huge achievement. Were all labor groups pro-ERA? Were there some that were kind of holding back and not thinking this was such a great idea?

Fraser: I don’t remember at this point.

Kilgannon: Did the Washington State Labor Council itself take a position? Or, was it union by union?

Fraser: I’d have to check. I do know that the Washington Federation of State Employees, AFL-CIO was very supportive.

Kilgannon: Your own union would be involved.

Fraser: That was my union.

Kilgannon: Did you go to your own Federation meetings and talk this up?

Fraser: Probably, but there were many members and staff who were already highly supportive.
Kilgannon: You were everywhere!

Fraser: I used opportunities available to me.

Kilgannon: Well, it’s your group.

Fraser: I was very active in the Washington Federation of State Employees at the time. But I would not have been the only one talking it up. There were women all over the state, and men, who would have encouraged the Federation to take a position in support. I might not have needed to do much, you know, because there was just so much support for it.

Kilgannon: And educational institutions, that would be like the universities? Or teachers?

Fraser: I doubt a university as an institution would have taken a formal position on a political issue of this type. However, organizations of educators did, and student groups did. Sometimes a religious leader would come, or an expert in civil rights. Organizations and leaders of various racial and ethnic groups endorsed the ERA to show it had broad support. That was very important in the testimony.

Kilgannon: Not just a small elite.

Fraser: Not just Caucasians only.

Kilgannon: I know that was a difficult issue sometime, to make sure that that was true.

Fraser: If you look at the list of organizations in support of it, you’ll see just about everybody. There were some people against it. But the array of organizational support was huge—and very, very broad.

Kilgannon: And that’s the main message, isn’t it? That is was broadly accepted.

Fraser: Yes. And such broad support indicated it was therefore worthy of a Constitutional Amendment.

Kilgannon: Let’s see now. I skipped over some of the efforts. Were there particular State Senators that we should credit with pushing this through? There weren’t a lot of women Senators, although there were some.

Fraser: I think Lois North was in the Senate then. She was a very prominent Republican supporter.

Kilgannon: I know that Senator Bob Bailey was one of the ones who pushed it from committee to committee, a Democrat.
Fraser: Yes, he was a senior member of the Democratic Caucus.

Kilgannon: Yes, he was in the leadership at that point. The Senate Majority Leader back then would have been Senator Bob Greive, who opposed it. So, strategically, supporters had to work around him.

Fraser: That had to be tough. He was a real pro.

Kilgannon: In addition, the people next in line in leadership were also against it: Senators Mardesich and Gissberg.

Fraser: Wow!

Kilgannon: You had some pretty big leaders who were not with you. So getting it through the State Senate must have been quite difficult.

Fraser: I recall it was. My own personal experience with the Legislature at that time had been mainly with the House, where I had been a Ford Foundation Intern. So, I didn’t relate as well to the Senate back then. Of course, I certainly do now. So, from my current perspective as a seasoned Senator, when you tell me this, I can appreciate that it was an extraordinary thing—to get it past that many major leaders.

Kilgannon: Senator Bailey was really with you, but it must have been hard for him to stand alone in the leadership group to pull this off. I’m interested in how on earth you got it done.

Fraser: That would be a great story about the internal workings of the Senate. It would be a great research project for someone. They could interview some of the people who are still around who were legislators or staff.

Kilgannon: Did women members play a special role that you recall? Did you work with them?

Fraser: It was mostly men, as I recall, as the vast majority of the members were men.

Kilgannon: They would have been the leaders, of course. No woman was in a leadership position back then.

Fraser: I doubt it. It might have only been Ruthe Ridder. I don’t know.

Kilgannon: She was in the Senate. She was one of the very few women Senators.

Fraser: I remember when she was the sole woman Senator.

Kilgannon: It must have been a lonely job.
Fraser: During my early years in Olympia, I’d spend many of my lunch hours in the Senate Gallery during legislative sessions, just watching and absorbing all I could. I remember when she was the only woman there—a harbinger of the future.

Kilgannon: Did you ever dream that you would sit there? Just curious.

Fraser: No. Not in the Senate. I could sort of visualize the House, because I had worked there. But I couldn’t visualize the Senate.

Kilgannon: Do you think any seeds were planted in yourself at this point, such as, “Gee, if I want to get things to work here, maybe I should be on the inside of this”?

Fraser: I don’t know if I ever thought about being a legislator at that point. But if so I recall that I couldn’t visualize how one ever got elected to a legislative seat.

Kilgannon: It’s always interesting—when does that idea start for a person?

Fraser: Well, I actually first became interested in maybe holding public office back in high school or university, but with no idea how to go about it, because I was from a totally non-political family. But, I always followed my interests.

Kilgannon: You were in this with both feet, and you certainly knew the political process.

Fraser: I should probably be clear that I worked on these issues solely for their sake, not with any intent of it preparing me to run for office, although it turned out to be excellent experience.

Kilgannon: Right. Inadvertently, you received quite a schooling in how these things work.

Fraser: Well, my case is typical of how people become involved in politics. They get involved in an issue they’re passionate about, and then one thing leads to another. But they usually don’t get involved initially only for the reason of developing experience to pursue public office. If they did, they would probably come across as somewhat superficial and people would see through that. Also, they probably wouldn’t be as effective as others who actually care about the issue at hand.

Kilgannon: You have to engage in political action for a reason.

Fraser: People who engage in political action solely to pursue public office don’t get elected very often. Sometimes they do, but, in general, they don’t.

Kilgannon: After you’d been through this huge experience, did you get more involved in political campaigning for a particular office—for other people, not for yourself?

Fraser: Definitely. I got involved in all kinds of campaigns after that.
Kilgannon: Did you try to run more women?

Fraser: I was always encouraging women. I became very involved in the Women’s Political Caucus endorsement process, to try to help women and men who supported our issues.

Kilgannon: So this was a huge apprenticeship. You then took this knowledge and experience and did all kinds of things with it.

Back to the ERA, after the Washington State Legislature ratified the Federal ERA, Washington State was added to the roster of states that had passed the Amendment. Then there was that long grind where you had to wait for other states. Did you stay involved in the ERA? Is there anything that a state like Washington, which has already passed it, can do to help other states?

Fraser: After we ratified, many advocates in Washington consulted with advocates in other states. I remember that National NOW organized a conference of leaders in states both where it had passed and where it was still pending, to discuss lessons learned and strategies. I, and others like me, were invited to discuss how we did it, what happened, and lend a little advice for other unratified states.

A unique thing happened during the ratification period for the Federal ERA. Normally, after a state ratifies a proposed U.S. Constitutional Amendment, the state cannot change its mind.

Kilgannon: That’s what I’ve understood.

Fraser: Normally, when Congress refers a proposed constitutional amendment to the states, they prescribe a deadline for ratification several years out into the future, such as five years. Within this specified time frame, two-thirds of the states must ratify for the Amendment to take effect. With the Federal ERA, a couple of states wanted to change their minds a couple of years later. So they went to Congress to ask that this be allowed. Congress did vote to allow it.

Kilgannon: That must have been quite a messy constitutional issue.

Fraser: I don’t recall that anyone took it to court. I don’t know whether we would have been over the top if that hadn’t happened. But, a couple of states did change their minds.

Kilgannon: There were a couple, which ones I’m not sure. I do know that a person here in Washington State was part of that movement: Michael Farris. He was part of the movement to rescind Washington’s action to ratify. I believe he started the movement here in Washington. It was about the time of Washington’s International Women’s Year Conference in Ellensburg and the whole fight about whether to retain the state’s Women’s Council, there was quite a movement here to rescind the vote. Do you
remember the discussion or actions around that?

Fraser: I had not heard that before. If I did, I must have forgotten, because it must not have been a large movement.

Kilgannon: I don’t know how big it was. It’s really hard to tell. But certainly there were some State Senators who put it forward.

Fraser: They introduced it in the Legislature?

Kilgannon: Yes, but it didn’t really get anywhere.

Fraser: I don’t recall.

Kilgannon: I don’t know how much effort there was, or if there was a counter effort.

Fraser: I think if it had had a big head of steam I would have heard about it, or at least have remembered it.

Kilgannon: There was a lot of noise in some parts. There seemed to be some activity and help from other states. This erosion movement seemed to consist of a little sniping around the edges. The move to rescind didn’t actually happen, but it still hasn’t gone away, either.

Fraser: I think that’s right. The people who are opposed to it have never stopped opposing it.

Kilgannon: No.

Fraser: In fact, their numbers might have even grown since the early 1970s. They’ve stayed active.

Kilgannon: The initial ratification deadline, what was it? 1979? Then they extended it for a few more years until 1982, I believe. By then, it had stalled. For one reason or another, there was a sort of sea change in the national political climate with Ronald Reagan being elected President. The Republican Party discontinued supporting the ERA and for the first time took the ERA off their party platform. There was a kind of movement going on. It’s so hard to know the true numbers of things. But there was definitely a sense of reversal—the “ins” were out and the “outs” were in. Things started to go backwards. The deadline went by without enough states ratifying, so the ERA did not become part of the U.S. Constitution.

Fraser: I remember that at the National NOW conference I attended, where they brought people both from ratified and unratified states, a major question for discussion was this: Is it worth the effort to campaign for a State ERA in addition to a Federal ERA? I recall the prevailing opinion at that conference was that achieving the Federal ERA was so
likely, why bother with a state one. I found that question interesting because my experience had been to work for both. The people in other states who were so deeply involved in campaigning for the Federal ERA generally felt it was more effective to put all their energies into that and not into a state ERA. Since the Federal ERA didn’t happen, I sometimes wonder what they think now. I don’t know whether other states have enacted state level ERAs or not since then.

Kilgannon: Did they see the state ERA effort as a distraction from the main issue?

Fraser: Well, in campaigning, there’s only so much energy and so many people. So, I assume they prioritized the federal ERA. I think they were also fairly sure the federal one would be enacted.

Kilgannon: So in one sense, the timing here in Washington State was lucky.

Fraser: Yes. In retrospect, I’m certainly pleased we did the State ERA. It’s important to note, too, that state ERAs cover many different laws than does the Federal ERA. The federal one, just because it’s federal, doesn’t mean it covers everything. There are a lot of laws at the state level that are outside of the federal domain. So, I think it’s good to have both.

Kilgannon: So, if you were to do a national tour giving talks, would that be one of the points you would make?

Fraser: That would be a major point, yes. Especially given that we do not have a Federal ERA, I think that fact makes a state level ERA even more important.

Kilgannon: It’s not too late. Although the Federal ERA failed, states can still pass a state ERA.

Fraser: Correct. I am also aware of a proposal which has been introduced in Congress to do a “statutory” ERA. This wouldn’t be a constitutional mandate. Perhaps the issue of the Draft might be neutralized by this approach.

Kilgannon: What would that mean?

Fraser: If it’s not part of the U.S. Constitution, one could unquestionably retain the exemption of women from the Draft. There would be no constitutional principle against which such an exemption could be challenged in court.

Kilgannon: But if it’s a statute, it would not be embedded in the constitution and could be amended?

Fraser: Yes, it could be amended by Congress like any other law which is not based on a constitutional mandate.
Kilgannon: It would be a law that wouldn't stand for all time, and would be subject to change?

Fraser: Yes, it would be subject to change by Congress with a majority vote in each chamber, the same as with any other federal law. However, the concept of a statutory ERA has never been considered very seriously by Congress.

Kilgannon: I understand that there are renewed movements to enact an ERA. As recently as 2007, there was another try at it. Senator Kennedy and another Senator introduced it. I have certainly never heard of Congress acting on it. Do you think it will ever happen? Will people get fired up again and go for this one more time?

Fraser: Maybe at some point.

Some of us now are turning our attention to working on international women’s issues—to try to improve the status of women and girls in many countries where they are so horribly discriminated against. The United Nations has been a great friend to women, at least in terms of policy and various program efforts. One of the documents the UN has adopted is the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Its acronym is CEDAW. I have three times introduced a measure here in the Senate to have our state endorse it and request the U.S. Senate to ratify it. For four years, I was unable to get it out of the Senate Judiciary Committee, due to opposition. It appears that some Senators are still opposed to concept of equal rights for women. Some think it endorses abortion, even though it does not, and there is a letter from the U.S. State Department, written during the Bush Administration, attesting to this. Some Senators think it will eliminate Mothers’ Day, which is as ridiculous as thinking the ERA will require unisex bathrooms. Finally, in 2009, I did get the CEDAW Memorial passed by the Legislature.

Several of us in the Legislature have regularly introduced bills to address international issues affecting women and girls in our country and abroad.

Kilgannon: Now, it’s true that there’s not as active a women’s movement now as there was in the seventies. Is that what it would take to launch a new ERA campaign?

Fraser: Well, you need a lot of support. However, there is still an active women’s movement.

Kilgannon: Oh, yes. I’m not saying there isn’t, but it’s not as visible.

Fraser: The groups that are dedicated solely to that are fewer and smaller. This is probably due to the remarkable achievements we’ve had during the last few decades. However, I also think there are more organizations now who incorporate it as one of their multiple concerns. It does take a huge amount of political support to pass anything. And then there still is some opposition to women’s equality.

Kilgannon: Looking both forward and backward, how do you place this achievement in
perspective for the state, and for yourself?

Fraser: For our state, it’s a major historical development that really builds on our past. Washington, even in its early days as a Territory, and during its early years as a state, had more protections for women than did most other territories and states. Women had community property rights here right off the bat. A lot of states still don’t have that. We were one of the last areas of the country to be settled and developed by the pioneers who came West. So we have a somewhat different history and a somewhat different set of attitudes than in many other states. Maybe we have a little fresher attitude than do some of the older historical places in the country. I don’t know.

It’s significant, I believe, that women’s right to vote on a state by state basis had its earliest successes in the West. This was a movement that went from West to East, in contrast to so many other national movements. Washington was the fifth state to establish women’s right to vote in its state constitution, and the first state in the 1900s. The success here in Washington sparked renewal of the national women’s suffrage movement, which culminated in the women’s suffrage amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920.

But Washington has long been regarded as a “bellwether state”—a state where many national trends begin. We are one of about half a dozen such states identified in the widely acclaimed book, Megatrends. So, we were an early state for women’s suffrage. We have a State ERA, we ratified the Federal ERA, and we enacted considerable legislation to implement the State ERA. We continue to enact legislation that is sensitive to needs specific to women and girls.

I think our cultural and social values have evolved immensely in the last four decades. I think we’re still a “bellwether” state.

Kilgannon: As a legislator, does the ERA come up? You’ve touched on the fact that it’s still a guiding light to help move some issues forward. Does it continue to shape state legislation?

Fraser: It’s there in the State Constitution, so it is a guiding principle. You don’t hear a lot of conversation about the amendment specifically anymore. I think people tend to take it for granted.

Kilgannon: I’m wondering if, as proposals come up, is the ERA ever a touchstone, such that somebody might say, “Yes, the ERA supports that,” or, “No, we can’t do that because of the ERA”?

Fraser: You don’t hear that type of conversation very often, meaning specific reference to the constitutional amendment itself. You are more likely to hear it embedded in people’s values. You hear people discuss generally that women and men should have equal protections, opportunities, and rights. It’s more of a social/cultural value that gets talked about, rather than a specific constitutional provision.
Kilgannon: Does that in a sense undermine getting a Federal ERA, in that people assume women already have all those rights? It’s taken for granted?

Fraser: It might.

Kilgannon: People don’t see the urgency?

Fraser: It probably reduces the urgency factor. Also, federal laws have improved substantially over the same period without an ERA. So the number of issues around which this is viewed as “urgent” is probably declining.

Kilgannon: Of course, that’s a good thing from one perspective, but from another perspective, it makes political organizing more difficult.

Fraser: You know, maybe the issues aren’t as great in Washington as they are in some other states where gender discrimination is more entrenched. Possibly, a Federal ERA might help women in other areas of the country more than here in Washington.

Kilgannon: Washington State could be a leader or an example.

Fraser: Well, we are a continuing positive example in almost every field of endeavor. There’s no question about that. We are a role model.

Kilgannon: Certainly in government.

Fraser: Not only in government, but also in the private sector, in academia, in the professions, in education, in medicine, in religious institutions, in volunteer organizations, and on and on. Really, in all spheres of life.

Kilgannon: We have an extraordinary number of women legislators, two U.S. Senators, and a lot of women in key leadership roles.

Fraser: Women are members of Boards of Regents and Boards of Trustees of colleges and universities, which are major policy roles. There are women galore in local government; women galore in business. There might even be more women-owned small businesses than men-owned at this point. The private sector is now a major sphere of opportunity for women. This was not the case when we were working on the ERAs. And women are in all kinds of jobs they used to not be in. There are now lots of women lobbyists, for example, for every kind of interest that comes before the Legislature. This was not the case at all when I arrived in 1967. Back then, there were only a few women lobbyists, and in only a limited number of policy areas. There are women in every type of legislative staff role. This has all changed since the early 1970s.

Kilgannon: So, on balance, do you feel hopeful?
Fraser: Oh, yes. Very positive, yes. We have so very many great achievements to build on.

Kilgannon: Is there anything else you want to add to the story?

Fraser: I think we’ve covered quite a bit. Well, maybe one other thing. When I go to interstate conferences—currently as a legislator, and previously as a county commissioner, I talk with elected women from other states. They frequently marvel at what women have achieved in the State of Washington. Often, they ask with a bit of wonder: how did we do this? How did Washington achieve so much when they were maybe twenty years behind us?

That’s why I think all of this history of the advancement of women in Washington State is important to record. Washington is unique in this regard, and people can learn from what we achieved, and how we achieved it. There are probably other states, even now, that might still take some useful lessons, and inspiration, from what occurred here.

Kilgannon: Earlier, you said that Washington had a unique history because of our pioneer era and our early statehood years. It must be more than something that’s just “in the water” here. What is it? Is it one thing leading to another, building toward another, until you somehow achieve a critical mass?

Fraser: Well, at some point, you do get a critical mass, which is essential for success. But my opinion is that the foundation for achieving that critical mass is a combination of various earlier historical forces, including that we were among the last places in the U.S. to be settled by pioneers.

Because the question is being asked, we should enable people to study this.

Kilgannon: Might this discourage other states with a different history? Might they think, “Well, we can’t duplicate it, so why should we try?”

Fraser: No. I think the concept of women’s equality spread, just like the concept of suffrage. But I think that women were always treated here with a little more sense of individualism and respect than in many other places, because they had to work hard, to get here, and to participate in developing early settlements.

Kilgannon: Were they full partners?

Fraser: Without the right to vote, one can’t say they were. Then, we always were an area with an influx of many different kinds of people: explorers, native peoples, immigrants from throughout the world. All of this probably leads to a little more open-mindedness, I think.

Kilgannon: Your sense is that no one group was in charge?
Fraser: Somehow, we developed a populist spirit early on, which means respect for the individual and grassroots action. So I think this populist background, which people don’t talk about very much but just live it, has imbued the history of the state and attitudes of many people. This has boded well for women.

Kilgannon: Women are part of the population! Major organizations back then like the Grange included women as full members. You don’t hear so much about the Grange now, but back in the early years of our state, it was a really important organization all over the state. They gave women the opportunity to participate more fully in civic life on par with men. Through the Grange, and other organizations, many women learned how to go to meetings, how to organize, how to participate politically. Opportunities like that maybe gave them a leg up in some way.

Fraser: Among the major foundational forces in the early years of the state were Catholic nuns.

Kilgannon: The Sisters of Providence.

Fraser: Yes, they established some of the basic institutions for health care and education that continue to be major institutions today. One of our State’s two statues back in our Nation’s Capitol representing major historical leaders in our state is of Mother Joseph, the head of that Order. So, there’s a lot of early history here of women being strong leaders of the community. I believe Washington is the only state that has a woman among their two allowed statues.

Kilgannon: It makes for a rich story!

Fraser: It does. A wonderful tapestry. I’m so pleased we are recording much of it for future use.

[End Interview.]