Andrews: The following interview is being conducted with Senator Karen Fraser on behalf of the Washington Women’s History Consortium for the 1977 Ellensburg/Houston International Women’s Year Conference’s Oral History Project. The interview is taking place on April twenty-seventh, 2007, in Seattle at the home of Mildred Andrews. The interviewer is Mildred Andrews.

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

Fraser: Okay. Well, I grew up in northeast Seattle and lived in the same house from first grade through twelfth grade. Went to the public schools, grade school, Epstein Junior High, Roosevelt High School. Never planned to go to university anywhere else other than the University of Washington, because we lived in the area. And I guess my major growing up influences were family, neighborhood, school and church. Kind of like pretty normal, I guess.

The one thing that was different about my family is that my parents were divorced while I was in grade school, which was a very unusual thing in those days. So that had a major influence on my wondering well, why did this happen to my family? It didn’t happen to anybody else’s family that I knew. So that was a factor. So in the summers, my brother and I would go down to California and stay with my dad in the summer. So we kind of grew up with two lives as we went down there. Had a life down there, and then came back for the school year, had a life here.

And let’s see, in terms of women, I don’t think I was overly aware of, you might say, discrimination against women, especially in the workplace. Although I did kind of think about it as I grew up. The first thing I can remember was in fourth grade, in an English class, language arts class, they called it. They told us that the word “he” stood for men and women. And I remember at the time, and the word “she” stood only for women. And I wondered at the time, and the word “she” stood only for women. And I wondered at the time, I was like, what is that about?

And what else, what other little anecdotes can I remember? I remember one time, I asked my mother why there weren’t women radio announcers. Of course, this was before much TV. And she said, “Well, women don’t have authoritative voices.”

But I do remember, after the divorce, my mother had to go back to work. And I remember one time she told us she couldn’t get a promotion, which I’m sure she fully deserved, because her boss felt that since she had children, she shouldn’t travel. So her boss decided that. So that probably continued our financial struggle. [laughs]

Andrews: What kind of work did your mother do?
Fraser: She was, I guess you’d call it legal secretary, I guess. Administrative, high level administrative assistant kind of work. And this was with the federal labor department, too. [laughs] But I wasn’t aware of really discrimination against women in education or the workplace until I actually went to work after I graduated from the University of Washington. I wasn’t fully aware of it. Although I must have been more aware than I realized, because when I was a senior, I applied for a Ford Foundation legislative internship in Olympia. It was a fulltime paid internship. And the brochure advertising the internship had a picture of men sitting around a table. And I remember I asked if women could apply. So things were different in those days, including want ads for jobs. There were men’s jobs and women’s jobs in the classified ads. So I remember that, too.

Andrews: So when was it that you went to Olympia?

Fraser: Pardon?

Andrews: The Ford Foundation, you were just telling about the internship? When was that?

Fraser: 1967.

Andrews: So that was just before the women’s rights movement–

Fraser: Before it really built.

Andrews: It was getting off the ground.

Fraser: Yeah. Yeah. At that time, the legislature had hardly any staffing. And the Ford Foundation had a program to try to strengthen, you might say democracy, at the state level. So they were promoting better staffing for legislators by selecting the number of states, and saying, “We will pay half the salary of recent college graduates to go and work for you.” So the legislature paid half the salary. The Ford Foundation paid half the salary. And it was, but I ended up getting another couple of internships in Olympia after that one ended. I went to graduate school, started graduate school, and then got a couple of internships and jobs back in Olympia.

That’s where I really became aware of discrimination in the workplace against women was after I became an employee in administrative agencies.

Andrews: What was it like?

Fraser: Well, I worked for an agency, the highway department. And the first thing I remember, they kept referring to “man hours” for employees. I thought, well, wait a minute. [laughs] I’d never heard of that. But a lot of people still do it. But it seems to me you could call them staff hours. I have a lot of little vignettes, but I’m not sure that’s what the whole interview is about.
Andrews: That’s okay. I just–

Fraser: Yeah. But I could give a number of anecdotes about what it was like to work in administrative agencies back in the late ’60s. And, well, actually I could talk about the legislature, too, because I was the only female intern. And I didn’t realize what an example I was, but I finally found out from one of the legislative agencies. I’d won them over. I didn’t realize, because this was a nine- or ten-month internship. They’d never had a woman be anything other than a secretary before. So I didn’t realize it was a big deal for them to have a woman as a research assistant. I mean, it seems so ordinary now, but the dean of the political science department at the University of Washington, he’d come around once in a while and visit with the interns. I’d won them over, and I didn’t realize that was involved. But back then, it was, because it was so unusual for a woman to have a role other than secretary.

Andrews: So after you, did other women follow?

Fraser: Well, society changed. Society was slowly changing. Actually, every woman who was in a nontraditional position became kind of a role model for the entire gender. You know, when I became mayor of Lacey, which was some years later, I was the first woman mayor of Lacey. A lot of people have asked me–

Andrews: 1976?

Fraser: Yeah. “What’s it like to be a woman mayor?” So I can give a lot of examples of things like that. Those are just a couple, a few. Oh, maybe I could say it was experiences in the workplace that led me to become active in the women’s movement and say we need law changes. That was always my orientation, was the law. Maybe part of that goes back to my parents being divorced. They’re always referring to “the decree.” What does the decree say? You know, all these arguments would come up. [laughs] So I was always oriented toward the law. So that was why I got active in the women’s movement.

Andrews: And when did you get active in the women’s movement?

Fraser: Well, it was after I moved to Olympia and got into the workplace. So that would have been, you know, I don’t know, 1970, ’71 or thereabouts.

Andrews: What were your major affiliations and networks in the late ‘60s and up to the mid ‘70s?

Fraser: Well, the National Organization for Women. And some people say they’ve changed their focus. But back then, their orientation was the law, and that’s why I was attracted to working with them, joining in, trying to get the laws changed, get our state constitution changed with a state equal rights amendment. I was active in Washington State Women’s Political Caucus, very involved in processes for interviewing and endorsing candidates at the local and state levels. Because I could see, having worked for
the legislature, I can see it really matters who’s there, what their views are and how they’re going to vote. So I was very involved in that aspect of Women’s Political Caucus.

Oh, and I was very active in labor, too. Because I’d worked for the legislature and I was working for a state agency, when I worked for the legislature, I could see that nothing happens automatically. And so when I became a state employee, I thought I ought to join the Federation of State Employees, and do my little part with my dues, my participation to help get improvements, salary increases for state employees. So I joined the Federation of State Employees. And just out of kind of social conscience and duty, I guess. I started going to their meetings and enjoyed it, and became very active in the Federation of State Employees, and became a delegate to various state labor conventions from the state employees.

And then the women’s movement interested me there, and I joined with a number of women who got a women’s committee formed. We had to get a resolution through the state labor convention to get a women’s committee formed. It was controversial. Everything about women is controversial. But we were successful. A lot of the old guard was nervous about it, but it still exists. And issues of women in the workplace are still very serious and evolve as society changes. A lot of situations for women are different, for the average woman, are different than the average man. So I’m pleased that’s still going on.

Andrews: That’s quite a legacy to have started that.

Fraser: Yeah. Yeah, it’s a good one.

Andrews: Now we’re getting up to 1977, the time of the Ellensburg conference. How did you view women’s role in the home and in society at that time? And did you see a need for change?

Fraser: Well, I don’t, I think it was very much different than it is now. I believe that women should have a full range of choices from, in their personal life and in their professional life. And if they want to be a fulltime person at home, that’s great. If they want to be a fulltime person in the workplace, that’s fine. I just think that applies to men, too. I think everybody ought to have equal rights, equal opportunities within their interests and abilities.

Andrews: What did you see as some of the major challenges and concerns at the time of the conference?

Fraser: Oh, boy.

Andrews: Leading up to it.

Fraser: Well, I’d been super active in the women’s movement, probably in ways I haven’t remembered. [laughs] Oh, yeah, I can’t remember all the years. So I was just generally concerned about women having equal rights, equal opportunities, equal respect, in society. And I’d been working hard at the community and state level. Oh, yeah, with
the National Organization for Women, I’d become their state legislative coordinator, coordinating the legislative lobbying activities of all the chapters around the state. I don’t know, there were twelve or fifteen chapters at that time.

Well first of all, in 1972, the state equal rights amendment was on the ballot. So I was super involved with that on the Thurston County level. That was the first big campaign I was ever involved in, and I think we did a very good, thorough campaign in Thurston County. And I think that might have helped carry the day, because the state equal rights amendment won by less than one half of one percent. So it was very close. So a strong campaign in Thurston County did count for something, I think. And it also helped lead to a change in state law in recounts in elections. Before that, there was no requirement for an automatic recount if a ballot measure won by less than one half of one percent. So after that, the law was changed so that you have an automatic recount if it’s that close, which is a good thing.

So then, after that, I became the statewide legislative coordinator for the National Organization for Women, coordinating all the chapters. So in the 1973 session, it was a huge session for women’s rights. We lobbied many bills to change the state statutes to implement the state equal rights amendment. They were on a lot of subjects, including credit, I remember. And we also lobbied in coalition with many, many organizations around the state for state ratification of the federal equal rights amendment. And that, I think, was one of the largest campaigns, lobbying campaigns, in the history of the state. And that alone deserves a write up of how that all came about.

And there was a state women’s commission at the time, state women’s council, I’m not sure. It was appointed by Governor Evans. And if you’re not interviewing Gisela Taber, you probably should. She was the executive director at the time. So she was a key person in information and advocacy for all of these bills implementing the state equal rights amendment, and getting good information out on the federal equal rights amendment. And Sue Dunn was her administrative assistant, and she lives in north Seattle. So she would remember a lot. So she would be another good person to interview. I can get you the contact information.

So those were just huge, huge things during the 1973 legislative session. And it was in June of that year that I was appointed to a vacancy on the Lacey City Council. So you know, women’s movement was in full bore. And a lot of women, and men, were saying, “We need to get more women appointed to things in government.”

Oh, yeah, so it’s around ’71 or ’72, I was appointed to the Lacey Planning Commission. There hadn’t been women on the Lacey Planning Commission before. So the League of Women Voters nominated me, and somebody else nominated me. And to my amazement, the mayor appointed me. Here I was young, and lived in an apartment, had an old car. You know, I wasn’t married, I didn’t have kids. I didn’t think I’d fit the image, but I was on the planning commission.

And then in ’73, vacancy on the city council occurred. So I became the first woman on the Lacey City Council. So the, and then in ’76, January of ’76, the city council members decided they wanted to change the mayor. The city had gone through a reorganization of its structure, going from a mayor-council form of government to a council-manager form of government. So under a council-manager form, the city council members select one of their number to be mayor.
So three of the city council members called me and said if I would join with them, they would like to vote for me for mayor. So anyway, as a result of those dynamics, I became the first woman mayor of Lacey. So that was ’76.

So then in ’77, I was planning to get married in the summer. But it was around then that this International Women’s Year conference planning started. And I was invited to be a member of the planning committee, I think because I’d been so involved in the women’s movement. So I started driving up to Seattle to go to all these planning meetings. And I think I have copies of a lot of the minutes and the files.

And then, of course, when the conference got close, you have to decide well who’s going to do what. I was the only general purpose elected official on the planning committee, I believe. So they said, “Well, Karen, why don’t you be in charge of elections?” And one of the reasons I said yes is because I knew I was getting married in August. And I thought well, with elections, there will be no follow-up. No follow-up reports, no follow-up meetings, no nothing. The nice things about elections is the date, right after they’re done, you’re done. And I can get on with finishing getting ready for the wedding. [laughs] Famous last thoughts.

So I agreed to do that. And so I got it organized. And then what happened is, and this is an interesting part of the conference. I hope you’ve talked to other people about it is, the conference was going to start on Friday, and there was no deadline for when you had to register. I needed to know how many people were going to be there for the election supplies—the ballots, and number two pencils sharpened so you could fill out the little, you know, the number two pencil fill in circles on the ballot.

Andrews: That’s how we did it in those days.

Fraser: Yeah. And this was kind of modern technology back then. So around, I think it was around Wednesday we were expecting fourteen hundred, fifteen hundred people. That’s what I was preparing for. And then, I think it was Wednesday or Thursday, someone called the chair of the conference and said, “Well, we have fifteen hundred more people coming. Just wanted to let you know.” So for me, that meant I had to buy out every number two yellow pencil in Ellensburg. So I bought two electric pencil sharpeners, and got volunteers to sharpen them. [imitates sound of electric sharpener] Put wet towels over them, because the machines were getting so hot, from trying to get ready for suddenly doubling the number of people who were going to vote. So my whole experience at the conference was just election logistics. I don’t think I had time to go to any of the meetings, because all of a sudden the number of the people who were going to be there doubled. And my absolute focus was a fair election.

And then, a last minute thing happened. My husband-to-be and I had driven over to Ellensburg, looked at where elections were going to be—

Andrews: When did you get there?

Fraser: Well, this was a month before the election. It was going to be in the gymnasium. And so I’d planned the whole set up. Well, you get over to Ellensburg, and they’d changed it. Suddenly we’re not voting in the gymnasium. Their college is worried about the floor. So we’re going to be voting in the hallways around the gymnasium. So we had
to completely change the, you know, reorganize the set up. So we did that, but one of the unfortunate outcomes of that was there was no place to wait in line inside. So people had to wait in line outside. And there was a smaller area. And so people were out, and it turned out there was a cold wind that night. So I’m sure you’ll hear stories of people waiting in line until eleven at night, freezing cold.

And let’s see. What else. Then, well, I’m kind of getting into your question on elections.

Andrews: That’s all right.

Fraser: We had a lot of volunteers.

Andrews: You’re anticipating my questions.

Fraser: Oh, okay. So I really wasn’t involved in the conference other than just getting the election stuff going. I actually lost five pounds that weekend because I was so busy, probably ate so little, and slept hardly at all because of this.

So then we took all the ballots after the election was over to the computer center, where a professor was in charge. And some people, of course, had filled their ballots out wrong. They didn’t fill in the little circle, they put an X or something. So we had to convert the Xs. We did all this with witnesses and everything to fill in the circle. And then before we put them all in the machine to find out I had everybody sign a form that they felt all the processing had been fair and accurate. And everybody was absolutely dedicated to that.

So after everybody who’d helped with that signed, that included a fabulous woman from the blue and white caucus. I don’t remember her name, but she was really wonderful.

Andrews: Was it Beverly Hubbert?

Fraser: I’d have to look through my lists. There was just an absolutely wonderful woman from their caucus. So, everybody signed. It was the middle of the night. So then the professor put all the ballots in the machine. And out came the results. And you know, there had been two slates: What you might call a pro-ERA slate, and then a blue and white caucus slate. And to our amazement, well, not amazement, but to our great interest, these sides were very close. Oh, the part I left out–

Andrews: Let me interject this, could you explain blue and white just so that the listener will know–

Fraser: Yeah. The blue and white caucus were the people who had come at the last– when I said somebody had called the chair of the planning committee and said there were suddenly going to be fifteen hundred more people there, or some number like that, I don’t remember exact. But it was going to at least double the number of people there. Maybe we had twelve hundred registered, and then they were going to bring fifteen hundred. Anyway, the whole idea was to shift what they had perceived to be the direct
philosophical direction of the conference in one direction, to shift it in another direction by trying to overwhelming the conference with new registrants. I think that was the purpose.

Andrews: And these were conservative women.

Fraser: Well, yeah. I don’t like labels, but maybe you could characterize them as not supporting the ERA, just to give a general label. I don’t know what these conservative and liberal labels mean. I mean, I’m a mixture myself. But they were people who didn’t support the Equal Rights Amendment. Anyway, you can at least say that.

Oh, the other thing is, with the elections, this was a last minute thing we had to figure out. The federal rules require that only people from the state of Washington can vote. You can’t have somebody come from, say, Idaho, and vote. So we already had procedures in place to check ID. Well, because this new group came with clear intentions to overwhelm the conference, and there were a lot of out-of-state license plates in the parking lot, the question of, “Well, where do you live?” became a big deal. So each side set up an observer at the election checkin points to look at every person’s ID. So we had a number of, like going in through, like checking out a big supermarket, or a big event, there were numerous desks where you go in and they’d check that you were registered, and check your ID. You could use a driver’s license.

Well, anybody, well, for each checkin point, there was an observer for each caucus, because this had divided into slates. And each side had big meetings to figure out who from, which candidates from their side they were going to endorse. And you don’t want to dilute votes when it’s that close. So you had a slate of candidates for the pro-ERA side, and you had a slate of candidates for the blue and white caucus that were not ERA supporters. And I know at least on the pro-ERA side had been a very intense process to narrow it down to, there were twenty-four delegates to exactly twenty-four. And then each side would hand out a piece of paper to their supporters, saying, “Vote only for these people. Vote only for these people.”

So that was all going on. Of course, I didn’t attend any of that, but I heard about it. So you had people with challenged ballots. So we established a challenged ballot process. Pretty much the way it works now at the polls, if you want to vote, but there’s a question about whether you’re a registered voter or not, or an eligible voter, you can vote, but your ballot is put in an envelope, and it’s not counted now. It’s saved, and your identification is checked to see if you are an eligible voter or not. If you are, well, then later, your ballot is counted. So that’s what we did for the voting. And there ended up to be about eighty challenged ballots.

So in the middle of the night, when we got the election results, they were so close that the outcome of these challenged ballots could affect the philosophical makeup of the delegation. It was that close. So the results showed most of the people who won were on the pro-ERA side. But the non-ERA side was just right in there with a very close number of votes.

So then, so obviously the election was, it was still hanging in the balance when the conference adjourned. So I remember, I heard, you know, I never went to any of the plenary sessions. Kind of the anti-ERA forces were winning all the votes on resolutions in the big plenary sessions. And then in comes somebody saying well the election results
are that the pro-ERA people have won, I think, all but one delegate spot to the national convention. They go, “Well, how could this happen?”

Well, the answer was that as soon as this, the blue and white group announced they were coming and trying to overwhelm the convention, the women from the pro-ERA side went to all the payphones—this is pre-cell phone. They were steadily on the payphones calling back home and saying, “You’ve got to come and register and vote and go home. There are no motel rooms for fifty miles around here, but we need you to come, fill up your car, bring your friends, come, vote, register, and leave. You’ll have to go back home. Or go a hundred miles away and get a motel room or something.”

So that’s what happened. So a lot of people came and registered toward the end that stayed long enough to vote, and then drove away. So they did not attend the plenary sessions. So that created some paranoia, you might say. But that is what happened.

So in the middle of the night, we counted all the ballots. And this was announced. So the next day, the conference was over. So I put all the, the ballot boxes were locked. They were county ballot boxes. And I remember all in my little old Volvo, I drove directly to downtown Seattle, and the leadership of the conference, along with two attorneys, met me on a corner of downtown Seattle with a Brinks truck. And we immediately put all the ballot boxes that were sealed and everything into the Brinks truck. And they were for then on through the rest of the challenge ballot process in the custody of an armored car company.

And we had to have, we had a big meeting, I think at a hotel in downtown Seattle to figure out what to do about the challenge ballots. We figured out we would send a letter certified mail, return receipt requested, meaning they have to sign their name. It goes to the address they had registered with when they wanted to vote. And then as of a certain date—and I saw, I looked at the records recently. The law firm that handled the case for the committee, they still have them all. And I noticed the return address was Lacey City Hall. So it wasn’t anybody’s home. So this was all legit. And the conference gave me money to hire secretarial assistance to help with all this.

So then we had another meeting at the old Queen Anne, I think, High School [in Seattle]. And I remember the armored car company wheeled in all the ballot boxes. And we had all the return receipt envelopes in front of us, and we opened them there. The election committee was sitting up on the stage. And there were probably, I don’t know, 150 people there to watch. This was very intense. Very, very intense.

Andrews: Were they from both slates?

Fraser: Oh, yeah. Both sides were there. And I remember the, you know, the ballot boxes were sitting there, and they had locks on them. I think armored car company locks or something, I don’t know. And one woman said, “I could open those locks with a hairpin! That’s how inadequate those locks are.” They were concerned about tampered ballots, which I would never, ever let happen.

And I said, “Okay, we’re going to stop the proceedings, and you have ten minutes to do it.” So we stopped. So of course she couldn’t do it. I mean, they were legitimate locks, and nobody could get in. They were, so we went back. Then we checked the signatures of the return receipt against the signature from the voting entrance area. And I
think we had a pretty good return rate on those. And determined which ones would be counted. So then we counted them in front of everybody, and it didn’t change the results.

So then, shortly thereafter, some attorneys for the blue and white group filed a lawsuit with federal district court, alleging all kinds of things, including that people put ballots in a cardboard box, which was absolutely untrue. But they got that rumor circulating.

Andrews: Was that the group that was called the Concerned Women’s Coalition?

Fraser: Yeah. I think they created a name for purposes of a lawsuit. And so, yeah, so then getting married in the middle of, I’d never even heard of a deposition, I didn’t know what it was, and pretty soon I’m doing one. [laughs] And it was in response to the attorney who brought the lawsuit for them. You should interview him, too. His name is Dick Durham. He’s still an active Republican in the state. And his name is on there. Anyway, he worked for a law firm where my uncle was a senior partner. So I have a bunch of stories about the deposition that we may not have time for.

Andrews: Preston, Gates and Ellis?

Fraser: No, that was the one that supported the side I was on. He was with Davis Wright. It’s now called Davis Wright. It used to be Davis, Wright, Todd, Riese and Jones. My middle name is Riese. My uncle John Riese died recently, about six months ago. Anyway, so I have a number of quips about all of that. I have a great shorthand story out of it. Just some interesting family quips which you don’t have time for today. But if you ever want, I can give them to you. Kind of human interest stuff.

Anyway, so they filed a lawsuit, this lawsuit. And a couple of depositions later, I was the principal defendant because I’d been in charge of the elections. So then we were finally in district court one day, and you have the papers there. See, I had three attorneys. The litigating attorney was with the U.S. Justice Department, because this was a federal program. Then the International Women’s Year commission at the federal level had an attorney they sent out. Then I had an attorney that the state committee hired from Preston Gates. Her name was Elizabeth Osenbaugh. And her name is on the lawsuit papers.

So those are my three attorneys. But when you get into federal district court, the only person who can argue your case is the federal justice department attorney. So she’d written a big thick brief or something, and it might be what’s in those papers, or it might be what we’ll get from the archives of the federal district court.

Andrews: Those papers that Karen is referring to are being donated to the archives of the Washington State Historical Society for the Women’s History Project.

Fraser: Yeah. These are papers I’ve saved in boxes over the years from this major event. So we get in the courtroom that day, and two of my mother’s sisters come to give me emotional support, even though the law firm that Mr. Durham was with was with my uncle’s law firm, their brother. But the thing I was in shock about– well, first, I was a little depressed because I couldn’t speak in the courtroom. Only attorneys can speak. But what I really went into shock about was when my attorney got up to speak, he wouldn’t
even allow her to speak— I don’t remember if he allowed her to speak. I’ll have to check my notes. I took notes during the court proceedings, which are also in the files. But he berated her, and he said he wasn’t going to read her brief because she didn’t get it in on time. She was with the U.S. Justice Department, so she ought to know the court rules. And he was going to punish her and make an example of her, I guess, because she hadn’t turned in her brief on time, or her argument, or whatever it was. And he said he would read the deposition, but that was it. So it was my deposition that became what he read.

Anyway, they ruled in favor of my position. They didn’t grant the, Mr. Durham had asked for a motion for summary judgment to basically cancel all the delegates from the state of Washington. And so Washington would not have been represented. But the magistrate found, apparently, that that action wasn’t warranted. And you’ll see, I couldn’t believe how many records and effort I went to. I think I was pretty thorough back then. [laughs] I was impressed.

Andrews: That’s a lot of documentation.

Fraser: I was looking back through my documents the other day. You’ll see. And I should say, at the Preston Gates firm, I visited there recently because of this interview coming up. And they still have in their archives all the documents from the challenge ballots. The ones that, I guess, the armored car company had kept or, I don’t know. Anyway, they still have documents there. [laughs]

Andrews: I’ll have to see if we can get copies.

Fraser: Yeah, I think they’ll let you go look at them. And if you need my help, that’s fine, since I’m a defendant.

Andrews: I might need your permission.

Fraser: And when I looked at them, I didn’t have the case number. But now that I’ve found my boxes in the garage, I do have the case number. So that might help their librarians find whatever else they have. So I’ll call them.

Andrews: So when did this happen? How close was it to Houston?

Fraser: Well, I just saw some of the dates, just looking through the papers. I think the court decision was in October.

Andrews: That was cutting it close.

Fraser: And the Houston convention, I think, was in November.

Andrews: Yes.

Fraser: So that was a totally exhausting experience. But fortunately I married an attorney, so he found it all very interesting. Then they had, the committee had some
money left over, so they sent a couple of people as observers down to Houston. So I was one of them. But I was still exhausted from it all. [laughs] But I did go there, and I found that I made a diary and took a lot of notes that are in the file. So some of them may be in shorthand. So anything you need transcribed, I can do.

Andrews: Oh, wonderful. So at Houston, I assume that you got to go to some of the workshops and get involved in the issues. Or do you remember?

Fraser: I probably went to workshops. I don’t remember. I mainly remember watching the plenary proceedings. And I remember that some of the delegates from the state of Washington were major national leaders at the national convention. Like Judith Lonquist, for example. And Elaine Latourelle, and some others. Then if, if Mr. Durham had been successful in basically canceling the delegates from the state of Washington, the national conference might have gone a little differently.

Andrews: That’s a chilling observation.

Fraser: Yes. So, that kind of ties back to Washington being one of the bellwether states, kind of cutting edge of what’s happening in the country. We were back then, too. So women who were active here were also active nationally.

Andrews: How did the conference, both conferences, I guess, Ellensburg and Houston, influence your perceptions of women’s role in home and in society? Or did they?

Fraser: You know, I think I’m pretty stable in my views. But I think politically, it was very interesting. So it didn’t change my views on anything, one way or another. But in terms of analyzing the politics of a situation, it was interesting. The, you might say, anti-ERA movement was very small in 1973. And I think it started to grow. So you saw some growth of it in ’77. And you’ve seen, especially like in the anti-choice movement, it’s kind of gotten stronger.

But on the other hand, acceptance of women being equal citizens in our society has grown to the point that it’s just kind of viewed as normal now. And that’s why I think having some history recorded is important. Because a lot of young women don’t realize how new this is, and maybe that it’s still a little bit fragile. And you look at countries around the world where women live in horrible legal, political, social, economic, financial, family situations, and you go, oh, my. So nothing, you shouldn’t take anything for granted. Everybody.

And I think there are a lot of values that women who are both for and against the Equal Rights Amendment share. I think there’s a huge middle ground in America. And I think there are maybe different ways of viewing how you get there. But there are some issues on which it’s still a giant, giant difference. That would be a whole study in itself.

So, no, I don’t think anything changed my views. I guess the main thing is, you’ve got to stay politically active. Maybe that’s what it just kind of reinforced. You have to stay politically active and politically tuned in. I don’t think it changed my views on anything other than that.
Andrews: In your opinion, what were some of the positive or negative outcomes of the conferences?

Fraser: Well, I hope they had, I hope they had some positive pulling together of communications, and sharing of views. What really counts politically is having more people think similarly. So hopefully education and awareness. Somebody other than me would have to study that. [laughs]

Andrews: Let’s see. In your opinion, -- it’s very similar to the previous question-- but what was the significance of the IWY conferences?

Fraser: I don’t really know. It was a creature of its times, I guess. It’s something I would have to study. I don’t know. Resolutions were adopted. People came together. People lived out their commitments. Hopefully there was education, communication, better understanding to lead us forward. You don’t see somebody say, “Well, because a resolution was adopted at this convention, we should therefore move forward.” But I think it became part of the whole political mix. It reflected the political mix and it hopefully helped move things forward.

Most of the resolutions that were passed at the national convention were on what I would call a progressive side of the spectrum. So hopefully those were used for positive political dialog. I don’t remember what ones were adopted at our state one. But I recall, I heard that the side that I have less agreement with won most of the debates posed in the plenary session. But you know, I wasn’t there for that. I was busy with the elections. But I don’t think that necessarily reflected the majority view of women in the state. If you compare whatever those resolutions were with how politics has evolved in the state of Washington. So it certainly showed good organizing.

Andrews: What kind of follow-up activities did you participate in, both in the short and long term?

Fraser: Well, my commitment to civil rights is, I think, pretty steady. [laughs] This is a civil rights issue, in my view. So I continued on. We had a ten-year celebration of, reunion, of the Ellensburg conference in ‘87. There might have been a few others I couldn’t go to. Yeah, I think there were a couple others that a few people in Seattle organized called “We Were There,” because it was such an intense, overwhelming experience for everybody involved. So I think we achieved, well, so those who were there, I think, wanted to share their experiences. But I wasn’t able to go to those. I was always going on a trip somewhere, or doing something else. But I wanted to go, because the people who were on the organizing committee were just fabulous leaders. Just fabulous leaders. People I greatly admire and appreciate.

But we all, well, I think one thing that’s happened is I think people who were involved in all this kind of went back to their, carried on in their, you might say, regular lives, whatever they were. So it became a loose network of people who could communicate and interact when they needed to. So, for example, in the legislative process, if certain issues come up, there’s still this sort of loose network that you can call on if something major needs action. So I guess maybe that’s it. Plus, I think it fortified
commitments that carried on as people lead the lives they do in the organizations they work on and the issues they work on in their personal lives and political lives.

Andrews: When was it that you were elected to the legislature?

Fraser: I was elected in 1988. So I began serving in 1989. So, yeah, just my quick political history, let’s see. In 1973, I was appointed to a vacancy on the Lacey City Council. I was the first woman. And then in the fall of ’73, I was elected to a four-year term by the voters of Lacey. So I was the first elected woman on the city council. And I became very active. Because I really enjoyed being involved in the democratic process.

So then two years later, the city council elected me to be mayor. These are two-year terms. You have to be elected by the citizens to a four-year term, and then the council elected me to a two-year term the second half of my first four-year term. Then I ran for a second four-year term, and the city council reelected me mayor two more times.

And then in January of 1980, yeah, the county commissioner from my area of the county told me he wasn’t going to run for reelection. And he encouraged me to run for his seat. That’s a full time elective job. City council and mayor is part time. So I was working for the state at that time. So a lot of people encouraged me to run, based on my track record as mayor. So I finally decided to do it. And I had to quit my job with the state to even announce, because there was federal money in my salary.

So fortunately my husband didn’t expect me to maximize my earning potential. So I was unemployed for about six or seven months while I ran for county commissioner. I was elected. So I was the second woman to be a county commissioner in Thurston County. And that’s a position, it’s not quite like King County. It’s, you’re a legislative executive and quasi-judicial on land use. So King County used to have that. That’s kind of the form of government counties have in the state, unless you do adopt a charter and change it.

So I was elected to two terms as Thurston County commissioner, which was eight years. In the course of that, I became active in the State Association of Counties, and ultimately becoming the first woman president of the Washington State Association of Counties. So that’s, it’s got its own interesting anecdotes, too. But it was fun. I really loved every commissioner in the state. Knew them all well.

And then a series of political dominos occurred, and the legislative seat, House of Representatives seat in my district, became open when our legislator decided to run for Congress. Because our congressman decided to run for U.S. Senate. Because Dan Evans had decided not to run for reelection to the U.S. Senate. So I ran for the House seat. Decided to get back and pursue statewide issues a little more.

So I served two terms in the House. By that time, there were lots of women in the House. It was no big deal to be a woman in the House. And I thought that was going to go on for who knows how long, and then, with the crystal ball getting foggy after a few terms. But then came redistricting. The state got a new congressional seat, because of our growth compared to national growth. Then the redistricting commission placed that seat in mostly Pierce County and part of Thurston. So our then state senator Mike Kreidler, who I thought was going to be senator for life, he ran for this new congressional seat. My seatmate, Jennifer Belcher, who was a major statewide women’s advocacy leader, she
was going to run for commissioner of public lands. So that left me. So I announced for
the state senate seat, and am still there. [laughs] Okay. What else did you want to cover?

Andrews: This is a bit of an aside, but I’d just like to have your comment. I broached
environmental issues, and I know that’s a big concern of yours and some of the other
people that I’ve interviewed. Do you see a tie-in between environmental issues and
women’s issues? It seems so many women have moved their activism in that direction.

Fraser: Hmm.

Andrews: I don’t know if that’s, if you want to just say it’s an irrelevant question, you
can.

Fraser: Oh, no. It’s not an irrelevant question. It would almost be interesting to do a
study. I’m sorry I’m so oriented toward studies.

Andrews: I thought perhaps one might have been done.

Fraser: It would be an interesting study for somebody to look at women who’ve been,
say, active leaders in the women’s movement, and to what extent did they shift over to
being leaders in the environment. I don’t think it’s necessarily connected, as one who’s
been hugely involved, major leader in the legislature, in environment. A lot of people
involved in the women’s movement, I think, kind of support improvements in
environmental policy. Because maybe the commonality would be you see how one thing
affects another thing. Because in environment, if you care about how one thing affects
another thing and how people’s lives are going to be good or bad, you have to care about
the environment. Because it’s called pollution, making people sick or die, or have birth
defects. Or it’s, there’s a lot of social justice issues in the environment, which people
don’t talk about enough. If you’re going to pollute this neighborhood but not that
neighborhood, or you’re going to drown somebody in noise, but not somebody else, and
so forth. Or do you care about creatures of the earth, and them surviving? Do you care
about the identity and quality of an area, you know, like the Puget Sound basin? Should
future generations enjoy the same quality of where you live that we do?

So, I guess maybe from, to be involved in the women’s movement, I think you
have to have a social conscience, that you care about people other than just yourself and
your family, your immediate family. And so that would be a commonality with
environment. So I think there’s kind of a common attitude. But if you were to do a study,
did women in the women’s movement who were leaders tend to shift over to become
leaders in environment? Well, some did, some didn’t. But I don’t know if it’s any rate
higher. I guess I’d have to say I’d be interested in an empirical study.

There’s a lot of different areas of emphasis in advancing the status of women.
You know, like there’s health care, there’s the justice system, there’s education, there’s
business, there’s employment in jobs, there’s labor. So, you know, a lot of women come
to the women’s movement because of the sector of life they’re most involved with. And
maybe, they’re more likely to kind of stay with it, I think, rather than switch.
You know, I never started out in environment, but it just kind of happened to me. [laughs] Because I’d been involved in local government. You know, I was a sociology major. I wasn’t a biology major. And I had no background in environment. But then once you get involved in local government, though, because I cared about democracy, and I cared about women’s role in democracy. That’s how I got into politics and elective office. So that’s what I cared about.

But then, when you get involved in local government, well, you’re involved in land use. If you get involved in land use, you get involved in environmental issues. And then particularly, and water quality issues, and Puget Sound issues, if you live around here. And then when I became a county commissioner in a high growth area on Puget Sound, and then you’re constantly making very difficult land use decisions, and decisions that affect growth, decisions that affect the economy. And economy versus the environment. And property rights: One person’s property right versus another person’s property right. And you’re always in the middle of those to the point—by the time I was finished being county commissioner, I was exhausted from those issues, because they’re so intense, so complex.

So I get into the legislature, and they ask me, “Well, what committees do you want to be on?” I put down education, financial institutions, anything but environment. [laughs] I was really worn out from it. But then the leadership calls and says, “Well, we need somebody to be on the environment committee, and you know something about it.”

Okay. So I was on the environment committee in the House, then I was on the natural resources committee in the House. But I was really interested in it. So then all of a sudden I find myself in the Senate by unexpected circumstances that I explained. And the year I got in, it was suddenly a big Democratic majority. The Democrats got the majority back, and the committee on committees that was working on organizing the committee structure in the Senate, you know, they decide what committees there will be, who will be the chair of each, how many members on each one, and when they meet, the meeting schedule, and all that.

So while they were meeting, they called and asked if I would chair the Ecology and Parks Committee. Here I was, a brand new member of the Senate, very rare to—Well, they said, “You know something about it.” [laughs]

So thus I continued as either chair or Democratic lead for environmental issues and water, and later added energy for many years. So now, the last three years, I have not chaired that committee, but I’m on it, and I love the issues, and I care passionately about them. Because I know so much about them, and I know the history of the issues. I don’t chair the committee, but I’m super active. I chair the Capitol budget now. But that has a lot of areas in it relating to environment and natural resources and outdoor recreation. So that’s something I care a lot about, know a lot about, and I’m still playing a leadership role on it.

So we need more people to do that, [laughs] to see the connections -- connect the dots, people!

Andrews: Oh, absolutely. From your perspective, how have women’s lives changed since the conference, and in what ways have they stayed the same?
Fraser: Well, women’s lives have changed hugely since the conference. And that’s the reason, for a lot of reasons, a lot of reasons in society. And that’s why I worked with others to get a state Women’s History Consortium established. Because it’s been both gradual and rapid. It’s been so comprehensive. And it’s so much a part of normalcy these days that women can basically do anything, and it’s not questioned anymore, like it used to be. Like, can a woman drive a car? Are you safe in a car that a woman drives? Well, nobody questions any of that anymore. And we are at risk of losing our memory of how much has changed if we don’t work to preserve the history and help people remember. So that’s why the consortium was created.

And one of the big ways we’re in danger of losing knowledge of this is just an example. I brought over all these boxes of materials from this major conference, International Women’s Year conference, which was both a reflection of what was going on, and probably a stimulus for more to go on. And, but that goes on with people all over the state. Boxes and boxes in attics and garages. And then people get older, and maybe they move, or they die. And their heirs have no idea these are politically significant. And the woman that was involved in making history doesn’t know what to do with these materials.

And Washington was and still is a national leader in advancement of opportunities for women, and respect for women. So when I go to conferences of legislators around the country, people ask me, “Well, why is Washington such a leader on this?” And I think we need to be able to answer the question, and that’s why we need the Women’s History Consortium, so we save these materials and make them available, so people can research the question.

I think the way I kind of answer it generally is that we started this state with a populist tradition. And a populist tradition, in spite of a lot of historical attitudes about women, begins with a respect for the individual. That’s kind of the foundation. So that kind of carries through, and maybe laid a kind of a philosophical foundation. And then the massive, just massive, massive, massive political action in our state, and people who were advancing the cause of women in all aspects of life without seeking any reward, recognition, or return on it. They just believed in it. They’d say, well, okay, there’s an appointment on the parks board in some county somewhere. Well, let’s get some women on it. And let’s make more scholarships available for women to go to higher ed. And let’s get more women in this profession.

And this was kind of a massive movement. That’s what a movement is. It’s not just people doing something because they’re asked. It’s something people believe in. And that happened in spades in the state of Washington. So here we are today.

Andrews: Here we are.

Fraser: Recounting history. [laughs] With more history to come, too.

Andrews: Well, I think we owe you a great debt of thanks for realizing the importance of this.

Fraser: Well, I’m one of many. One of many. A lot of fabulous, fabulous people who would, just flashing back for a second to getting legislation through the legislature. You
know, usually I didn’t testify. It was women who were really courageous. You know,
drive down, a lot of them from the Seattle area, who’d come down and testify to the
legislature. And back then, it’s hard for people to realize now, it took courage to speak up
for women’s rights. It took huge courage. Because people might look at you and say,“Well, what kind of a strange person are you?” Or you would feel like you were risking
your reputation, or that you would be verbally attacked. Or strange assumptions would be
made about you. So the women who made all this happen and all these different
organizations and efforts big and small across the state. People who even spoke up at
family gatherings, you know, it took courage. It took courage. But it happened.

Andrews: Okay! I just have one last question. And you may have covered this. If there
were specific issues that concerned you in Ellensburg or Houston during the IWY, how
have these issues been resolved? Or are they still being debated?

Fraser: Well, my focus has always been the law. And the laws should treat women
fairly, and assure they’re treated fairly and equally. And so I guess I’m still working on
that as a legislator, because I’m very oriented toward what should the law be, and I still
am. And there are a lot of us in the legislature who were always watching for this. And at
the national level, there still needs to be particularly a lot more, and trying to assure equal
women’s representation in political affairs. So that’s continuing. Huge achievements.
More to come.

And in recent years, I’ve been more active in trying to work on issues at the
international level. And I’ve hooked up with a wonderful organization in Washington,
DC, the Center for Women Policy Studies. And they do a great job of connecting with
women legislators around the country, and helping us become educated on what’s going
on in the United Nations, and what’s going on around the world, and how can we use our
positions to try to improve the status of women around the world.

And in fact, I’m going to another conference on this in May, back in Washington,
DC. And you know, the United Nations has been women’s best friend in the world.
They’ve held conference after conference, effort after effort, resolution after resolution,
to address the status of women around the world. And in fact, the immediate past
secretary general, Kofi Annan, among his final statements as he left office was the need
to improve the lives of women around the world. I mean, how can you have half the
people in the world live under such terrible circumstances that go on. No right to inherit
property in certain countries. There’s articles in the paper all the time. So I’m taking my
experience and commitment from this, my work in domestic politics, to see what I can
help do around the world, too.

And others are doing it. It’s not just me. I mean, it’s a lot of people. And we need
to build more awareness about what people in this country can do to help women in other
countries. So that’s another big frontier.

Andrews: Oh, absolutely. And a lot is happening.

Fraser: Yeah. And we need to get more entities of the federal government to do more. I
think that’s one thing we can do is lobby Congress and agencies to do more. And there
are a lot of foundations that have money to put into this effort, and to spread information
and connections and awareness and help bring people together to figure out strategies. So I’m excited about that.

Andrews: Is there anything else you’d like to add, in summary?

Fraser: Oh, I appreciate my husband’s patience. [laughter]

Andrews: So do I. Yes, it was very nice of him to wait to go north to Vancouver so that we could have this opportunity to talk.

Fraser: Oh, I’m thinking about–

Andrews: Oh, from way back.

Fraser: Yeah. Even planning our wedding was all involved with this. And then the first several months of our marriage was all involved with this lawsuit, and dealing with all that. And then the time it takes to work on these issues. And not maximizing my earning potential so I can work on these issues, and so forth. [laughs] If I were, having two incomes helps, because mine, as a legislator, is not very healthy. [laughs]

Andrews: Well thank you so very much, Karen. This has been a pleasure. And thank you, too, for all you did to get the Women’s History Consortium established.

Fraser: Oh, thank you. And I’m glad you’re working on this project.

Andrews: I am, too.

Fraser: I’ve long thought somebody should write this up. And I’m very eager to hear from other participants what I didn’t have time to learn while I was there. [laughs]

Andrews: It’s been fascinating. And I’m sure you realize that not everybody sees it exactly the same

Fraser: Yeah, that’s right.

Andrews: The different perspectives make an interesting kaleidoscope.

Fraser: Yeah. That’s why I’m so eager to see what all the interviews come up with.

Andrews: Well, I think we’ll close at this point.

Fraser: Oh, maybe one other thing to close with. Until the Women’s History Consortium was formed and the advisory board to it was appointed, most of the appointees are gubernatorial appointees. But there’s one legislator from each of the four caucuses. And Senator Roach and I are the two senate appointees. And on a lot of these issues, we come from different places. But we get along very well in the senate, work on a number of
common issues. But on some of these kinds of issues, we vote differently. And it was at an early meeting of the consortium that we both found out we each had been at Ellensburg. I was just astonished. And when I was looking through the records, I could see that she ran for delegate from the blue and white caucus. But anyway, so here we are.

Andrews: There’s a photograph of her in the Seattle Times from that.

Fraser: Oh, really?

Andrews: Yes.

Fraser: Oh, great. But anyway, here we are, thirty years later, we were both at Ellensburg. Now we’re both senior senators. We still think differently, but we get along just fine.

Andrews: Beautiful way to end the interview.

Fraser: Yeah.

Andrews: Again, thank you so much.

Fraser: Okay. My pleasure.

[End Interview.]