Andrews: The following interview is being conducted with Thelma Jackson, on behalf of the Washington Women’s Heritage Consortium for the 1977 Ellensburg-Houston International Women’s Year conference. The interview is taking place on January 30, at Lacey, Washington, in Thelma’s home. And the interviewer is Mildred Andrews. To begin, Thelma, may I call you Thelma?

Jackson: Please.

Andrews: Would you tell me briefly something about your growing up years? Your family, community, school. And how you developed your ideas about your role as a woman at home and in society.

Jackson: I grew up in the Deep South, in the segregated South. Went to all-black schools, Mobile, Alabama. I grew up during the time, in an era, when the likes of George Wallace would stand in the schoolhouse door at the University of Alabama and declare, “Segregation now, segregation forever!” That was the time in which I grew up, under Jim Crow Laws. Under separate and unequal. I escaped integration just by a couple of years, graduating from high school in 1963. And it wasn’t until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that the Brown vs. Board of Education decision was really taken seriously, only when it was mandated through federal law. So states like Alabama and the Deep South resisted very strongly Brown vs. Board of Education, and that Supreme Court decree that said, “With deliberate speed, forward.” So that was no speed; it took another ten years.

So when integration, desegregation, arrived in Alabama, I was already out of high school, and had gone to Louisiana, to Southern University in Baton Rouge. And in that era of civil rights activism, I was not in the direct line of fire, per se. But it did help to form some of my attitudes about equality, what was right, what was wrong, who should not be speaking for whom.

And when I graduated from college with a degree in biochemistry, I was recruited by Battelle Northwest that brought me to the Hanford project in the Tri-Cities in 1968. So what brought me north, to the Northwest, was employment recruitment. So I probably say that I am a recipient of affirmative action. Had it not been for Affirmative Action and the federal government mandating to those federal contractors that they shall have a diversified workforce, those many companies never would have been coming to the campuses of those historical black colleges, looking for those of us who were graduating in math, science, engineering, and the like. Those were the earlier days of Affirmative Action, and it worked the way it was supposed to work. It’s gone through a number of gyrations over the years, and doesn’t necessarily work that way anymore.

But it was all about access and opportunity, and part of that whole Civil Rights Movement. While it was jumpstarted by blacks in America, many other groups have
certainly reaped the benefits of the civil rights legislation and the whole equal employment opportunities, equal access, Affirmative Action, and all those things. And out of it grew the women’s movement, from the whole point of view of discrimination based on gender, based on sex.

And so growing up in Alabama, being a very strong girl, I was the first girl president of my student body of my high school, and just always played strong leadership roles in my own black community. So I got a lot of training, you know, my whole upbringing, my entire upbringing, was training for leadership roles. So when I came to the state of Washington, that leadership was silently entrenched from the point of view of community activism.

We first moved to the Tri-Cities over in Pasco, from ’68 to ’72. Those were some very restless years. These were years of outright police brutality and beatings and just really overt racist kinds of acts towards blacks. So living in the Tri-Cities, my husband and I were very active in the black community there. And Pasco did have a rather good-sized black community in the late ‘60s, a holdover from those people who helped build the railroad, who helped construct the Hanford project. So rather than going back South where they came from, they stayed. It was a community that really allowed you to exercise your leadership as far as working with people, trying to help them understand that there’s a better way, there are some options.

When we relocated over here to western Washington, my husband going to work for state government, I became involved with the YWCA here in Olympia. They had a very strong women’s commitment, a strong equity commitment against racism. And in the course of working with the YWCA on a nontraditional jobs program, I became more and more involved in educational kinds of things, the educational system, realizing how closed it was, not only to people of color, but to women. So the women’s job program. That was somewhat my introduction to the Women’s Movement, per se, because my involvement had been more or less along the racial lines of equal rights and civil rights.

When the IWY came along, the International Women's Year activities began, I was invited to serve on the coordinating committee. A friend of mine, who had left here and gone to DC, Gisela Taber, was trying to make sure that the Coordinating Committee was diverse, that a broad range of women would have an opportunity to be involved with this whole process. And that was my introduction, essentially, to the Women’s Movement. I had not considered myself, and still don’t consider myself, a feminist, as people like to refer to it. But I knew I had an opinion.

This was when we were trying to get the ERA passed in the state of Washington. It had failed so many times in the state legislature. That was the era in which IWY got its beginnings. So you had a number of women who had been very actively involved in trying to get the ERA passed, and those kinds of things, and it had somewhat divided women. You were either pro-ERA or anti-ERA, pro-choice or anti-choice, pro-women or anti-women, pro-family or anti-family. There was no middle road. You know, you were either one or the other, unfortunately, because that was very divisive. Very divisive.

And for ethnic groups of women, we were not intricately involved in that, because of those clear lines of demarcation – in a lot of instances, anti-men, anti-male. And for black women, our feeling was basically our men are not our enemy. They’re victims of the same racism in the society, more so than we as black women. So we are not anti-men. We are not anti-family. We’re very pro-family, which in one sense would cast us in on
the side with conservative ways of thinking, given those perceptions. But from a cultural perspective, we knew that within the ranks of women, that we were subjected to the same kinds of discriminations in the ranks of women as we were in the general ranks. There was nothing magic about being in the presence of white women. That was no different from anything else. We were still subject to the same kinds of stereotypes, from the same low expectations and minimalization.

It was very interesting to observe this Women’s Movement, and there we were, women ourselves, but didn’t feel as though the issues being advanced were the issues that were of most importance to us, because we were still trying to gain basic civil rights. You know, the Voting Rights Act had passed in ’64 as well. There were some things that were so much more basic than the female sides of us. Our children, our families, our economic plight, a lack of access to housing and jobs, those were the things most critical to us.

So the Women’s Movement had an agenda of equality, men equal with women. Well, our equality fight wasn’t along gender lines as it was ethnic and racial lines. So gender took a back seat. Not that we weren’t concerned about the differences between males and females in the society, but we knew that white females had many more privileges than females of color. So their fight was different. They weren’t gaining basic human access to society, like we were. We were concerned with issues like childcare, jobs and education for our children.

And so on this Coordinating Committee, we began to talk about the issues, and how we were going to organize our work, and these kinds of things. And it became very obvious that you had to speak up strongly. You had to speak up loudly. Because so many of the women felt as though they were speaking for you, you would have to say, “I can speak for myself, and I don’t agree that that is the sum total of the issues facing women in America, in the state of Washington.” You’d have to quote a few statistics and some data of how the ethnic minority women were, and, “Are you attuned to our issues and our plight and our agenda? Where does that fit into the Women’s Movement? We’re women, too.” So there was a lot of good dialogue and debate. A lot of warm, honest overtures to try to understand, “Where you coming from?” So a lot of education, a lot of sharing.

And so, as we were trying to develop the agenda for the conference, we had about a year to plan, to work on it, before it actually took place that July. It was very difficult to try to do the work of the conference that needed to be done, and at the same time, develop the degree of awareness and sensitivity within the ranks of the committee, I think it’s twenty-two of us or so that worked on that coordinating committee. And it was at that point that I decided, along with Dorothy [Hollingsworth], that we needed to form a black women’s caucus, if we were to have any kind of voice in that event, so that it wasn’t just one or two of us who could be marginalized and dismissed. We began to organize black women’s caucus chapters around the state, trying to make sure that women were aware of this event that was coming up, aware of the kind of issues that were going to be on the agenda to be discussed, to be decided upon. So in addition to working on the coordinating committee itself, here was this auxiliary activity now of Saturdays and weekends moving around Spokane, Tri-Cities, Yakima, Tacoma, here in Olympia, trying to raise the awareness level of black women and say to them, “We need to be present. We need to insert our points of view into this event.” Otherwise, the point of view comes across that others feel as though they can speak for us. And we have to let them know that we can
speak for ourselves, that we don’t necessarily share all their points of view about all of the issues. If we aren’t there with our voice, then the voices will go forward without us.

So that worked very well. While Dorothy was the chair of the overall [IWY coordinating] committee, I assumed the responsibility of organizing and chairing the Black Women’s Caucus. And while we were moving out in that direction, the other ethnic groups of women arrived at similar kinds of conclusions. Lilly Aguilar did a similar organizing thing with Hispanic women. Asian women, April West, some of these names are beginning to come back to me thirty years later. April West was organizing Asian women. Jacqueline Delahunt was organizing Native American women. Because as ethnic minority women on the coordinating committee, we met and we talked about the fact that it was vitally important to get our folk at this conference in Ellensburg. Otherwise, it was going to be a white women’s show about anti-men, anti-family.

And so the whole conservative part of it, the Blue and White, had not surfaced yet. We planned the whole year with them not being anywhere in the picture, until the weekend of the conference. So up to that point, it wasn’t a matter of pro-ERA or anti-ERA, pro-choice or anti-choice. We identified the issues of equal pay and education and childcare and job opportunities, and those kinds of things. Pro-ERA, for sure, feeling that this state and this country needed an equal rights amendment. So we worked that year very diligently, very hard. And we were very pleased with the numbers of black women that registered and were a part.

Andrews: Do you recall how many?

Jackson: Gosh. I would have to look back through some old papers.

Andrews: Not specifically, but just ballpark.

Jackson: More than a hundred. More than a hundred, a very, very good turnout. And when Ellensburg erupted like it did, black women, we black women, and some other women of color, played significant roles in the outcome of how things turned out. Because we parlayed the whole Christian front that the Blue and Whites were coming to us with, saying to them, “As Christian women, we appeal to you to consider some of the issues of women of color, all of us. Don’t paint us all in this category of white liberal, anti-male kind of things. We’re women, too. From a cultural perspective, we’re a Christian group of folk.”

So they could see where, you know, with a broad brush, they had this we/Them kind of thing. But over there on the “Them” side was this whole rainbow of folk that didn’t all just meet this one criteria in their mind. They had been led to believe it was a bunch of witches out to destroy family, out to destroy American values and that kind of thing, but there was a broad range of thinking going on.

But IWY came and went, and I know you’ll hear a lot about some of the intricacies of that, some of the challenges we were met with. But after IWY, it continued, let’s see, that was July, and the national convention was in November. So from July to November, all of the controversy about this state’s delegation, who was going to represent Washington in Houston, because there were two distinctly different slates of candidates. The voting and that whole process, tied up in court with locked up ballots.
And just, it was only ten days to two weeks before Houston took place that there was resolution reached on what delegation was going to represent the state of Washington.

So you had a delegation made up of your Blue and Whites, led by Susan Roylance. And then you had your delegation that came out of the main conference agenda, that the Coordinating Committee, the whole election process, had put together. The slate that resulted from the election process that the Coordinating Committee had designed. So charges back and forth about fraud, about whatever. And it was a very revealing and scary situation that developed, that opened my eyes, when I saw the Blue and Whites, as we later referred to them, just inundate, just inundate. Here we were on a Thursday, I think it was a Thursday, early afternoon on a Thursday. And we were wrapping up, we’re going down the checklist, do we have this in place, this in place, this in place.

Do we have all the copies? Do we have folders? Do we have childcare taken care of? Do we have food? This is the number that’s registered. Here’s the contingency plan for those that show up that didn’t register. Do we have parking under control? I mean, that last minute checklist.

And up appeared Susan Roylance and said, “I just wanted to inform you that you will have a number of women attending your conference that you have not anticipated.”

We have a contingency plan for— “How many?”

“Twenty-five hundred.” Or some number like that.

We said, “What? Who are you?”

So she goes on to say that they represent Mormon women, and on and on and on. Some of us just outright shut down, me being one. I said, there is no way that we can double everything between now, and the conference start the next day. The next day.

Susan said, “We’re bringing our own food. We don’t need housing. We’ll help you make copies.”

We thought we were finished copying everything. We were ready to go. Ready to start receiving women. Ready to start the conference the next day. So I said, “Well, you guys can work through the night if you want to. I think it’s grossly unfair for her to walk up here at the last minute with as much publicity as has been out there, as much PR. She and her folk have had as much opportunity to register and come to this conference as any other woman in the state of Washington.”

And as she was speaking, others would come in and say, “You should see all the motor homes and the campers and the trailers that are pulling in all over the campus.” Men with walkie-talkies. They had on armbands. They were just directing those women. And it was a scary, it felt like a take over. It felt like a take over.

So some people were, you know, said, “No, we promised any woman who comes.”

And I said, “Well, I’m not doing it all night. I’ve done enough of those to get us to this point.” So as far as I was concerned, my job was to get on the horn and make sure that black women were there, and knew that this on-rush had happened and looked like a different agenda that was coming down the pike.

So sure enough, they began to just inundate the campus first thing that Friday morning. By the time, because it started at one-something in the afternoon, if I remember. I don’t really remember. By the time the people who ordinarily register were beginning to come on campus, there was hardly any parking. I mean, it was just a nightmare. It was
just a nightmare. So you can imagine the contentiousness of the situation. Here they were trying to register. And we weren’t set up to do 2,500 on-site registrations. We had worked so hard to get pre-registrations so you just came through fast. So here we were, scrambling. We probably cleaned out the stationery stores that night, just trying to come up with materials and supplies to accommodate all these unexpected women that Susan informed us would be attending the conference.

And the thing it did was unite us, because for that year we had been trying to help, help each other understand different issues of black women, Asian women, white women, professional women, low income women, you name it. And so we knew we were going into the conference with some differences as far as what was going to be the adopted agenda, the issues, and all. But all of a sudden, all that just evaporated and went away. And all of our attention had to turn; it became us and them. It just had to evaporate. We were now women equally feeling under siege. Equally feeling under siege. (Begin new paragraph here) So our differences just kind of evaporated.

There were some tough issues that we were struggling, wondering how we were going to resolve them when we got to Ellensburg and adopted the platform to go into Houston and all. A lot of differences with lesbian women. A lot of differences with some of the Native American women and their sovereign nation kind of stand. And we were holding tight. This was when we were trying to get a national holiday declared for Martin Luther King. Okay, what’s in it for us kind of thing? Will we be willing as a delegation to go to Houston with the support for this national holiday? This is important to us as black women. You know, you want our support for gay rights. So this is what’s important for us. So we were bargaining the whole year. All of that just dissolved. Because we now had issues much bigger than any of the individual groups we had been working on. It was no longer an issue as to whether or not they would support Martin Luther King holiday. It was no longer an issue if we would respect sovereign rights of Native American tribes. So all of that just vanished. And it brought a togetherness and a union that probably would not have happened if it had not been for the perceived attack from the Blue and Whites. It was transforming.

There are women I met during the course of IWY that I’ve maintained friendship with all these thirty years, that I never would have known, that I never would have crossed their paths had it not been for this coming together of this IWY. It’s unfortunate that most, almost all of the Blue and Whites, you never knew them. Never really knew them.

So IWY was transforming for me from the point of view of saying, “Never again can I as a black woman afford to be silent and let others speak for me, because they don’t know what’s in my heart, what’s in my spirit, what’s in my soul, just because I, too, am of the female gender.” And that’s where it starts. Other than that, you know.

So the black women’s caucuses continued for a couple of years after IWY. They slowly became inactive. I just didn’t have the time, energy and resources to continue running around the state. But we did form a state organization of the Black Women’s Caucus of Washington State. And all of those city, local branches just slowly deteriorated due to lack of someone stepping forward to provide the leadership. But it was all due to IWY that everyone’s consciousness was raised. Everyone in the group developed a broader understanding of the differences among the women. Just because we were all
female didn’t mean that we all had the same agenda, all had the same needs, all had the same political issues.

And I know when I run into some of my cohorts from 1977, we just break into hugs and start crying all over again, because it left such an impact, such a mark on you. Then we went to Houston. So we finally got all of the legal stuff settled and the court finally ruled that – how were we calling the two slates? The Blue and White slate and the, maybe we were calling it the pro-choice slate, I don’t know. Because, you know, abortion rights was a huge issue. Roe versus Wade was settled on in, 19–

Andrews: I want to say ’74. Is that right?

Jackson: See, so it was still very hot in the minds of people who were upset over Roe versus Wade. So where a woman stood on pro-choice and abortion rights was an ink test as to what side of the issues you were standing on. And for black women, you know, our position was we definitely believe in choice. Now whether or not we believe in abortion individually and privately is a different choice. But why should our individual belief dictate to others what their belief should be? So we definitely believe in pro-choice. We debated that a little and were clear in our position on pro-choice. But that didn’t mean that you were pro-abortion, or anti-family, or that kind of thing.

So all of that, all of that was a part of that whole thing. ERA, Roe versus Wade, women trying to break the glass ceiling, or get equal pay for equal work. All of those things were very much in the limelight, on the discussion.

When we got to Houston, and, you know, by that time we had heard of a similar kind of onslaught in other states that the Mormons had targeted, and they had very similar experiences about last minute, large number of women, very similar experiences. All the Idaho license plates and Utah license plates on all these motor homes. Very organized, orchestrated kind of thing. And some of them prevailed, and were that state’s representatives to Houston. I’m trying to think. Utah, of course, had a Blue and White delegation. Wyoming? I don’t remember, but two or three other states, the tactics worked, and they prevailed. So the same battles there in Houston that we had seen in Washington. But they were way outnumbered, you know, when they got to Houston.

But to see that coming together, women from fifty states, the electricity was just magnifying, it really was. But those of us, those black women like myself, I doubted we’d ever be the same again. To come together with black women from all across the country. Lots of organizing efforts that went on.

Andrews: Could you say something about the national black women’s hook-up?

Jackson: It was wonderful from the point of view that you had black women in high places of authority in the government. I remember Libby Koontz, who was with the Department of Labor. You had C. Dolores Tucker, who was the secretary of state from Pennsylvania. Just women I had only read about in Ebony and Jet magazine. Coretta Scott King, black college presidents, any woman who was anything in America was in Houston. So we got a chance to come together as black women, and to meet all of these women, and hear some of the war stories in individual states. And you just got a stronger resolve to never let our absence, you know, lead to that kind of thing again.
We just had to stay involved in the politics of our community, not necessarily the women’s movement, per se, but the politics of our communities, and know that the voice of black women and other women of color was vitally important in political activities in our communities. So it was really great to see that coming together and to see how the proceedings in Houston went along. And I’m sure you’ve seen some of the documents and reports and all that resulted, that can tell the story much better than my thirty year-old memory is trying to.

Andrews: I think your thirty year-old memory is great. [laughs] I hope I’m getting all of this.

Jackson: That was a long answer to a short question.

Andrews: Well, I think you anticipated almost all of my other questions. [laughs] My next one is both short and long term. You’ve touched on some of the positive and negative outcomes. Is there anything you’d like to add?

Jackson: Well, I think there were positives, as trying as it was. My eyes were opened to the broad range of points of view within women and to women’s politics, per se, so I got a good dose of just how broad that agenda is. And it became evident that I was going to have to really think through my positions on a lot of those things, because the times were such that you needed an opinion one way or the other. And if you had not given certain things much thought, you didn’t have much of an opinion. I was impressed by the resolve of all the women, no matter what side of the issue they were on. The Blue and Whites, it didn’t matter. The strength, the strength of women just really came through—the dedication and resolve to have some say-so in this country, in this society. So that was really, you know, this was during the time of Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, you know, those early pioneers back then.

And as I thought in terms of the future impact of all of that, you can only wonder what was going to come of that for future girls, for my daughters, for my granddaughters. What’s this world going to be like for them? So it’s up to me to struggle and wade through these issues and this process now. Because I don’t want them growing up to feel as though they are less than a woman, simply because they don’t share certain points of view, and that they have strong resolve about some issues equally as strong as everybody else’s resolve. And that they must speak up, and they must speak out, and they must be an active participant in this. Otherwise, you get relegated and silent, with no opinion. So that was a real positive, you know, in spite of all the other adversity. That was a real positive.

And where it all went from there, you know, you look back thirty years later on the part of women, women corporate heads and company owners. And a lot of strides, a lot of women of color have made, black women with a different degree of respect from white women that was not there before on the part of some. So by far, more positives than negatives. It was an interesting time, and a lot to be learned, and a lot to reflect on the whole thing.
Andrews: What kind of follow up activities did you participate in? And I’m thinking here, in part, about your career that’s been so devoted to education?

Jackson: Well, education evolved for me as a key issue because without education, we couldn’t fully partake of the civil rights we fought so hard for. Without education, we can’t access the jobs that’s going to lead to the economic opportunity to sit at the counters we struggled so hard to get a right to sit at, or to stay at a hotel. Without the means, the right was of no use. And so education, being such a vital part of my whole upbringing, my teaching, that, you know, if you just get an education, you have a chance to compete. But without an education, those chances are very slim, given the institutional racism that’s in this country.

And so when my children began school, I was very focused on their education, and the quality of their education, and was very interested in what was or was not happening in school. That interest eventually led me to the school board here in North Thurston [County], where I served for twenty years, again, feeling as though my point of view, my voice, was important. As a woman − I was the only female on a board of five – as a black female with four white males. Just different points of view.

So I served for twenty years on the North Thurston School Board. And during the course of serving on the board, I served as president of the state school boards association, the school directors association. With the whole issues of equity, the whole issues of access and opportunity in education, you can’t pursue everything. So what was going to be the arena in which I pursued those interests? So it just evolved into education as the area.

So now, as an educational consultant, a professional businessperson, that education has continued, advocating for the disenfranchised, advocating for the marginalized, advocating for a different kind of educational system that can be more inclusive, and not just structured for a certain group of people, but the broad range of students that’s in our schools today.

And you know, all those IWY activities, if I think back on them, probably did have a lot to do with my sense of urgency about working to change the educational system, as a key for all people, and certainly all females, and certainly kids of color.

Andrews: An interesting quote that I found in the October, 1977 Pandora.

Jackson: Pandora?

Andrews: Pandora was a journal, news journal, that was published in Seattle.

Jackson: Oh, I think I remember that.

Andrews: It was started by Erin Van Bronkhorst.

Jackson: Okay.

Andrews: And it was pretty much a feminist journal.
Jackson: Right. Feminist journal.

Andrews: Although they did, at times, include the conservative points of view, and interviewed conservatives, as well. Pardon me for calling liberal/conservative, but I don’t know quite how else to frame it. [laughs]

Jackson: Those were the words used.

Andrews: Yes.

Jackson: And I never considered myself either a liberal or a conservative.

Andrews: [laughs] But there was an interesting article about preparing for Houston in the October, 1977 Pandora. And here is, let’s see. It was about you and about Kay Regan in part.

Jackson: About me?

Andrews: In part.

Jackson: Oh, really? What did it say?

Andrews: Well, Kay Regan, of course, was a leader of the Blue and Whites, and was a delegate to Houston, as you were. It says, “Regan opposes many of the prominent issues that will be addressed at Houston, such as the Equal Rights Amendment, and lesbian rights. ‘Conservative women,’ she said, ‘seek community or state remedies to women’s problems, and not federal legislation.’ But Thelma Jackson, spokesperson for the Black Women’s Caucus, and Lilly Aguilar of the Hispanic Caucus, protested Regan’s band-aid remedies. They explained that relief for minorities and women had historically come from increased federal intervention, and not local government.”

Care to comment?

Jackson: Well, meaning that if local governments were the key to the solution, then we wouldn’t have the problems that we did. And only after federal intervention did things like the Civil Rights Act pass. Southern states never were going to give up their treatment towards people, and Jim Crow Laws, until the federal government imposed some federal laws on them. That’s the kind of thing I was speaking to. That if left to states, black folks would probably still be in slavery, you see. If there weren’t constitutional amendments and changes on a federal level, if the federal government had not stepped in with Affirmative Action, folk like me never would have had an opportunity to work, and to utilize my schooling as a biochemist. Those weren’t state decisions. Those were federal decisions, based upon states’ constant denial of human rights, of civil rights to certain groups of people.

Andrews: And how has that evolved to the current time?
Jackson: Well, a lot is still the same. And I’ll go back to education, if you will. The federal government has imposed the No Child Left Behind on states, because they look around at the data of the various states, and they see many, many states not educating certain groups of kids. And it’s a national issue from the point of view of this country needing to be able to compete in this global economy. And education is the key to that competition. And when they looked at the high failure rate of the kids of color, poor kids, and other disenfranchised kids, the federal government said, “That is not acceptable. We need all of our Americans educated and able to work and to contribute to a vibrant economy. And states, you are not doing your job. And here is what we expect you to do.”

So that’s federal intervention in education, out of a lack of states doing what they should do. Be it healthcare, be it, I mean, various issues that the federal government has to step in and not just leave to states, because of the outcomes of some of those state positions. States’ rights, you hear that all the time, more so in conservative states, and Southern states. But those are the very states that disenfranchise many, many people. And it’s all about maintaining the status quo, maintaining white privilege, maintaining society as we know it, setting the bar, setting the standard, that everyone else is expected to come up to. All of that is part of that states’ rights thing. And if it weren’t for the federal government intervening to say, as a nation, we have some values, we have some goals, whatever, and impose a national will on state will. So there’s always that rub between federal versus states’ rights.

So I don’t know what Kay was referring to thirty years ago when she said that, but that’s the climate in which Lilly and I were commenting. We saw too much going on, being permitted by states, that were it not for federal intervention. I don’t know what things would be like now in a number of those instances. I know I would not be in the state of Washington were it not for Battelle Northwest’s Affirmative Action program. That was a federal imposition on them as a company who did federal contracts, them and thousands of others all over the country. That was federal intervention. So that’s essentially the point of view I was taking against Kay.

Andrews: And taking that just another slightly different direction in terms of women’s rights and federal intervention, I was thinking about, you mentioned Affirmative Action.

Jackson: Yes.

Andrews: But advancements that women have made in general.

Jackson: Because Affirmative Action was originally addressing the issues of blacks.

Andrews: Yes.

Jackson: And then other minority groups tagged on. Then women tagged on. Then handicapped and disabled people tagged on. And on and on and on. But it grew out of the Civil Rights Movement of ’64, trying to get equal rights for black Americans. That’s what it was about. So the way the constitutional amendment was written, it didn’t just limit itself to blacks or minorities based on race, gender, that kind of thing. So that’s why
the other groups have been able to parlay for some changes in American society, based upon that same act.

But when it came to the actual blood, sweat and tears, that got the act passed, many, many, many of those groups were nowhere to be found. Nowhere to be found. It was blacks that were jailed in holes and bitten by dogs and hung and lynched. That blood, sweat and tears led to the Civil Rights Act. Once it’s established and earned, then everybody’s lined up at the water trough, wanting their drink of the thing. So all of those kinds of emotions, you know, went through IWK, women’s rights. Well, where were you? You’re always quoting the Civil Rights Act of ‘64. Well, where were you?! Where were you when our folk were on the front lines, being stampeded by horses?! Now you’re ready to reap the benefits. Where were you, kinds of questions.

So it was those kinds of dynamics that would yank back and forth in those ranks of women, even before the Blue and Whites made their presence felt. So those were the kinds of dialogues and conversations and sensitizing kinds of things that, or side things, that took place during IWY, in addition to the stuff that’s written about and talked about.

Andrews: How about the Equal Rights Amendment? Would you say a few words about that? Such huge controversy about that.

Jackson: Well, it never passed. Never got enough votes to—

Andrews: Not federally. Washington state, of course, has one.

Jackson: But it took years and years before Washington state approved the Equal Rights Amendment. It was introduced as legislation for, I think, almost ten years before it finally passed. But there never were the thirty-nine states needed nationally to make it a federal thing. And I think a lot of it had to do with a lot of the fears that were conjured up from the conservative persuasion, if you will, about what it would do, how it would turn America inside out if women had equal rights. You know, just some absolutely asinine fears that had no basis for it.

But without the Equal Rights Amendment, women have marched on. Women, for the most part, have achieved a lot of what the ERA would have opened the doors for. They’re in corporate America. They’re business owners. You know, the state passed equal pay for equal work. Not that it’s a full reality, but at least, you know. So, for ERA, I have not heard anyone mention it in years and years, come to think of it. It’s dead.

Andrews: For the minority caucus, or at the plenary session of the [Ellensburg] conference, that was a huge issue. And the Blue and Whites were actually ready to affirm your resolution. But they wanted you to back off the ERA, and you refused.

Jackson: Mm hmm. And two things were going on during all that. First of all, we were running down the clock. We now had the Blue and Whites talking, me and Susan Roylance, down on the floor, trying to negotiate. There’s this half of the gym with the Blue and Whites with their cards, with a yes and a no, and waiting for a signal from her as to which direction they were supposed to go. We had called for a question asking to
amend the agenda to allow resolution number, I think it was twenty-three, which was the women of color to come on the agenda, because we were only at resolution two.

And it was like four-something in the afternoon and I was just saying, “You all talk about yourselves being such Christian women. Where do you find it in your heart to let those of us— we are not anti-family, we are Christian women like you,” you know. “Can you find it in your heart to vote for this motion to allow our resolution to—”

And so, it was the first vote that we broke their ranks. And she [Susan Roylance] motioned to her folk to vote yes, to vote yes to allow the agenda to be amended. They had a stronghold up to that point. With those ranks broken, the other folk had not been able to break it, and they saw, maybe this is the way.

So women of color, all of a sudden, we were calling the shots. We got that motion passed, to let our resolution come on. And the people, the Blue and Whites were crying. They were confused. The men were looking at Susan like, “What are you doing? We told you everything is no.”

So I said, “Susan, This is important. You have to understand. Where’s your consciousness in this? What’s it going to hurt your folk to allow this issue? You’re only voting to change the order of the agenda, to let this item come next, because we’ll never get to it.” I said, “It’s historic that this number of ethnic minority women are here at this conference. We have worked so hard organizing women all around the state. And we’re getting close to the end of the day. And our resolution is so far down the agenda, it won’t even— so what would it hurt to change this agenda to let this resolution come forward? That’s not saying you support the resolution. You’re just supporting letting the resolution come earlier.”

And she gave in; gave the signal for the “yes.” And oh, man. That was the turning point. So we killed the clock. We killed the clock, before that resolution, which would have been the Blue and White platform could come to the floor, because they had the votes. They outnumbered us. So that was the maneuver. So hardly none of the platform was voted on. But certainly theirs wasn’t, either, so that Washington state’s platform would have been anti-ERA. They weren’t even supportive of childcare. Their position was women should be at home with their children. They shouldn’t be out of the home, needing childcare to start with. And on, and on, and on.

So their platform, and I don’t know if you’ve come across the Blue and Whites’ official—

Andrews: Oh, yes.

Jackson: Okay. But that didn’t get to the floor, either. And so it took some parliamentary maneuvering to keep their platform off the floor for vote as well. So just driving a wedge in their solid position as ethnic women of color, was the turning point. By the time the discussion ended, and of course you could hear the signal, [whispering] “Get to the microphones.” And get the resolution, once it was voted on to advance. And then a whole different debate begins on that resolution. Well, we knew the clock would run out before a vote was taken on it.
Jackson: But a vote wasn’t taken on their platform, either. So it was pandemonium. Absolute pandemonium. But it was the turning point. It made the difference. Otherwise, regardless of who would have been the delegation to Houston, we would have had to go with the platform voted on at the conference. So, it was gut wrenching. I tell you. It was gut wrenching. We came that close to having a Blue and White platform for the state of Washington.

Andrews: Oh, my. And that close is about a quarter of an inch, according to the gesture you just made.

Jackson: Yeah. And then I said, “Thank God we spent all these months organizing black women, Hispanic women, Asian women, Native American women, low income women! Thank God! Otherwise, I don’t know what the outcome would have been.” Well, I do know what the outcome would have been. There were probably 250 to 300 women of color. I really don’t remember the numbers, but the largest number of women of color were black women that we just got out of every nook and cranny we could. It really made a difference when it came down to it.

Now, I don’t know how history is going to tell the story. Some of these articles you pulled, I don’t know if acknowledgement is given to how pivotal a move that was.

Andrews: To some extent. But when you tell it, it comes across much–

Jackson: A pivotal move that was to determine the outcome of that conference.

Andrews: I’ve read it in articles, but when you tell it, it’s much more compelling.

Jackson: Well, it was so draining. It was emotionally draining, I tell you. But that’s the way it turned out.

Andrews: I understand some of the Blue and White women, a few of them, anyway, broke ranks.

Jackson: Yeah. They broke ranks, because we made sense. You know, not all of us have the privilege to be home with our children. We need quality childcare. We need jobs. We all don’t have husbands and spouses. We need to be able to work. And they can understand that, as women. And it’s like, that makes sense.

And they were so man-lead. I don’t think they had thoughts of their own. They were just told what position to take. And I think they had been really frightened into thinking just how bad women’s rights were, without thinking in terms of they’re a woman. And I heard later on that Susan Roylance became, continued to be, somewhat of an activist to the point where she was excommunicated.

Andrews: Oh, really?

Jackson: She left the Mormon Church or something. I don’t have any factual knowledge of that.
Andrews: I am supposed to interview her later, so maybe she’ll tell me.

Jackson: And divorce or something that was very non-Mormon kind of. It will be very interesting to see what she’s been up to—

Andrews: I haven’t heard anything about that.

Jackson: —since 1977, and what turns her life took. And I don’t know how scolded she might have been as a result of making a decision to go a different way than what the men were telling her to do. Because you had a guy that was perched on one position on those bleachers that they looked to him, and he dictated the yes or the no. And he was telling her no on that. And she signaled yes to the women. Now I don’t know what consequences she might have suffered for that internally. I’d be interested in knowing. I’d really be interested in knowing what turns her life has taken.

Andrews: She lives in Utah now, and I’m looking forward to talking with her.

Jackson: Oh, wonderful. Wonderful. I’m glad you’re going to be interviewing her, because I’m sure she has some very poignant things to relate.

Andrews: It sounds like you and she developed quite a rapport.

Jackson: No, just for those few minutes. That’s all, and I don’t remember any contact after that.

Andrews: Well, those few minutes were pivotal.

Jackson: Well, I remember, because we had these court issues. We had to go to court. Judges had to decide on ballots and slates. So they’d show up, and there would be Susan, but there was no talking. You know, us on one side of the courtroom, and them on another side, and all that kind of stuff. With their lawyers, you know. Creepy, just creepy. Yeah. But there was no conversation between us. None. None.

Andrews: Were there quite a few court sessions?

Jackson: I think there were two, if I remember. There was a court session to rule on the ballots. The ballots were ordered to be put under lock and key. Was an injunctive order granted, something like that, and was there some kind of investigation? I don’t remember. I think national women’s year thing [International Women’s Year] out of DC came into the state to investigate. And then the court had to rule on which slate of candidates would represent the state of Washington in Houston.

I’m drawing a complete blank, because we were able to prove fraud. We were able to prove folk outside of the state of Washington were here voting. We had photographs of Idaho license plates and Utah license plates. We had sense enough to take pictures of all these motor homes, and all these men. So we made the case for fraud.
because only people in the state of Washington were supposed to be voting. We made the case of fraud, and won in court. So our slate of candidates were declared the official slate to represent Washington in Houston. So it was dicey. It was dicey.

From July to November. Right before time to go to Houston, it was dicey all the way. Yes. Accusations flying left and right. Oh, man! And so after Houston, things just kind of died down, and people went their merry way. Like I said, the Black Women’s Caucus continued as a statewide organization for, oh, six or seven years following Houston. And then we essentially dissolved, too. No resources. No time. It was just consuming too much of me, given the intense year. But it’s interesting. It’s interesting.

Andrews: It certainly is.

Jackson: I saw evidence of things like League of Women’s Voters, AAUW, Business and Professional Women, BPW, reaching out to black women, reaching out to other women of color. They now had a heightened consciousness about the fact that they were lily white, you know. There are other kinds of women in the world, too, that they never noticed before. So those kinds of little changes as an outgrowth. And who knows? Who knows what other kinds of changes actually manifested as a result of, some dynamics one would never know about. You know?

Andrews: Well, this has been absolutely fabulous. Is there anything else that you would like to touch on? I think you’ve answered my questions. Most of them, before I asked them.

Jackson: Well, not really. Not really.

Andrews: Well, thank you so very much. I enjoyed meeting you and hearing your perspectives. You’re extremely articulate.

Jackson: Thank you. Thank you.