Dilg: This is Janice Dilg. I’m with the Washington State Women’s History Consortium for their ERA oral history project. I’m here today with Georgie Bright Kunkel in her Seattle home. The date is May 20, 2008.

We always like to start with a little bit of background. If you would just state your full name, tell a little about your parents, where you were born, siblings, that will start us off.

Kunkel: That’s a long story. I’m the eleventh in my family. [laughs] But I was born a few weeks after women got the right to vote. I always say I wouldn’t have come out of my mother’s womb otherwise. I was born August 31, 1920, the eleventh child. I didn’t know one of my siblings because she died before I was born. my father died just before I was born. So my mother was widowed with ten children. But knowing that it takes a little while to have a baby, my oldest brother was twenty-one. My next brother was nineteen. They were gone when I came on board.

Nobody in my family had been named after my father. I was named Myrtia, after my mother, George after my father, Ardell, after my oldest brother’s girlfriend, and Bright for my last name.

Well, when I was in high school, I needed a birth certificate. In those days, you didn’t travel, at least in our—nobody traveled. So I didn’t need a birth certificate until high school for some reason, and I didn’t have one. My father had helped my mother with all the births. He was gone when I was born, so I had to have a doctor who make one out. I went to court and got my birth certificate. My aunt was asked to come along to prove that I’d been born. then I got to choose my own name. So I chose Georgie, because they called me Georgie Myrtia Bright. After I started writing, and just recently, I decided to use my maiden name as my middle name. So now I go by Georgie Bright Kunkel.
Dilg: You mentioned both your mother and father. Could you give us their names, please?

Kunkel: Oh, yes. My father was George Riley Bright. I think he was named Riley because they liked the poems of [James Whitcomb] Riley. My mother’s name was Myrtia McLaughlin, and then she became Bright. My grandfather helped to start the first cooperative colony in Port Angeles, and my mother then grew up in Port Angeles.

Dilg: You mentioned the date and the year that you were born, but mention the location you were born and then talk about growing up—family life.

Kunkel: Well, I was born in Chehalis. You may have heard of the floods down there recently.

Dilg: I did.

Kunkel: Chehalis floods again. They didn’t flood like that when I was a child. It was the fact that they had built up a lot of cement bulkheads and developed an awful lot in that area. In my youth it would come up only in our street. Prindle street was a dead end, and there was a little creek there and we used to go fishing. the water came up in the street. It never came in the house, but it came up in the street. this little friend of mine, this little boyfriend of mine down the street, [Percy Connick] would make a raft and we’d go paddling up and down in our street. My sister had hip boots, and she carried me out to the high ground to go to school when it flooded. I always thought it was fun. My mother didn’t, I’m sure. [laughs] I wanted it to come in the house. I thought it would be so exciting!

Dilg: [laughs] Children often do have a different perspective than their parents about those things. You mention that you were one of eleven, and the oldest age range. Who was the next oldest to you, and how many children were there in the house when you were growing up?
Kunkel: Well, as I say, there were two grown and gone. They were twenty-one and nineteen. then the next two were seventeen and sixteen. one of them was held back at a country school so they could both walk to school together. So they were both in the same grade. So they were seventeen and sixteen, and close to being gone when I was born. So I grew up mainly with six siblings after just a couple of years.

my mother left me with a neighbor, and the neighbor put me in a high chair in front of the window. I screamed a lot because she wouldn’t let me out. So my sisters came by one time and they saw me screaming in the window and they told my mother and she was upset. One of her good friends heard about it, and she said, “We’re not going to have this happen to her. I will come and live with you, and I’ll take care of her,” and mother hired her.

So my babysitter, was with me for eleven, twelve years, I guess. When it was about time for her to not be needed anymore, my sister Mary was up in Port Angeles, got cancer, and my other sister brought her home, and Mary died there. Her daughter was two. [Irene] stayed with us until she was six. So Mrs. [Abigail] Ormsbee got to stay another four years, and take care of both of us.

I was spoiled because the first few years, all of my siblings were in school when I was born. so I got her to myself all day. I have a lot to thank her for. She was precious. So I had two mothers. That was great.

Dilg: So what was your household like? It was a little bit different, since your father had died, unfortunately, right before you were born. So your mother was working. There were quite a few children. How did family life work?

Kunkel: Well, I remember we had a huge dining room and we had a huge table with a lot of leaves in it. That’s where we sat around after dinner. Mother would read stories out of the Saturday Evening Post for us, and we’d play card games. I didn’t realize it then, but I thought everybody did this. But I was kind of a manager from the time I was born. [laughs] I like to manage now. I like to create things and do things. When I was younger, I was the one that thought up the circuses, and thought up this and that, and the dramas
around the neighborhood. So I had a ball. All the kids came to our yard. We had a big
side yard, and we’d play and have a lot of fun.

My mother was approached by someone in politics to see if she would run for
county superintendent of schools when I was three years old. She, of course, thought that
was pretty neat that they would think she could do that. There was also a fellow
running—everybody didn’t really want him as superintendent, but he was a big bossy
kind, and he liked being there. They thought it was time for a change. So she ran, and
women got the vote just before I was born, and she was elected. Things changed from
then on. She had a steady job for eight years, and she was paid a hundred dollars a month
for managing an office. She taught herself to drive, and she drove out around the county
schools and visited all the schools. No superintendent had really done that really
regularly. She did her job.

The book sales people would come by and give her book samples, and when she
left the office, she got to keep them all. So I had a library, and all the kids would come
and check out books from me. [laughs]

Dilg: So, at some point you started school. Talk a little about your primary and
secondary education.

Kunkel: Well, everybody in our family was expected to try to go to college. If my father
had not died, probably I would have been a different person. I believe that fathers are the
ones that decide whether their daughters are going to be “feminine mystique” creatures,
or whether they’re going to be independent. I think my father might have been an
influence on me more than he was.

So my mother being widowed raised me to be very independent. My mother
taught each of us girls that you—she never talked about getting married. Never talked to
us about getting a man. “You have to be independent. You have to have an education.
You have to take care of yourself.” That was wonderful. Because then if you did find
someone, you didn’t have to worry about them taking care of you. You were equals. I
really appreciated that.
Kunkel: I went to Bellingham. My father had been the first male graduate at Bellingham. The first graduating class was all women. The second graduating class, I think, had two men, and my father was one of them. It changed names three times, or four. It had been Bellingham Normal, then Western Washington College of Education when I went there, because there were no doctorates. Now it’s WWU [Western Washington University].

I have to thank dear old Roosevelt for starting the New Deal and the whole thing. Because I wouldn’t have gone to college if I hadn’t had NYA, National Youth Administration.

Kunkel: Well, they provided money for all young people, and a lot of people, to have jobs to do something positive for their communities, and for reconstruction projects, and it was wonderful. I worked in the music department, and I was very musical, so it just fit me beautifully. I was right next door to where they used to play the old records in the music department for music appreciation. So I would sit and do my typing or my office work and I would listen to all the music. I heard every record that they ever had in the three years I was there. I can sing along opera and everything. It was wonderful.

Kunkel: Well, that’s what everybody in my family did, or thought about doing, a lot of them. My mother was a teacher, my father was a teacher and a superintendent. My mother became a superintendent. My oldest brother was a teacher. My second brother started out as a teacher, but he really didn’t like it so he got out.
I really wanted to be a scientist or a musician. But in my small town, there was no one who could encourage me into that career. I had no models for being a scientist or anything. I got straight A’s in geometry or chemistry.

The school, didn’t have counselors, but they had advisors. My girls’ advisor came to my house one time and she said, “I could probably get you a special thing to go to business college, so that you could stay home and take care of your mother.” I thought, I don’t think my mother needs me to take care of her, my mother wants me to go to school.” I got a special offer to go to some school way off somewhere but I didn’t feel I could do that. So I went to Bellingham.

My mother belonged to the Business and Professional Women’s club, and they usually gave money to people that were going into business or professions. My mother got them to give me some money to go to Bellingham. I got seventy-five dollars a year from them, a loan. With my six dollars a month or something that I got for NYA, I managed to get through school. Eighteen dollars a quarter for tuition, and less than twenty-five dollars a quarter for books. Six dollars for a rooming house room. We made it. [laughs]

Dilg: What years were you in college at Bellingham getting your teaching certificate?

Kunkel: I graduated from high school in 1938. I’m going to go to my seventieth high school reunion this year. I thought I had to take as much as I could get for the money, so I took eighteen credits. I was going crazy because I have a very bad rote memory. I always have, my whole life. So it was awfully hard for me to have to read a lot. I think I was language disabled. I was way off on the other side of my brain, but I had an awful time if I had anything that required reading, it was hard for me.

But anyway, I stuck with it, and I had eighteen credits for three years, counting summers as well. I went straight through. I would have got my BA that way, but I was three credits short because I worked for the music department head extra when he was the head of the civic music association. He wanted me to take some time out to help him with that. I couldn’t take as many credits one quarter. So I was mad at him for that. But it was
fun, though, because I got to go out to all the concerts. I took the tickets and I did all the work for the concerts. I have an article that I’ve written about meeting Marian Anderson.

Dilg: Lovely.

Kunkel: Yes. I have some big old PR pictures, black and white glossies, of all of these people that came through town. I have them in my files.

Dilg: Well, that must have been a treat to meet all of these people at that young age.

Kunkel: I’ll tell you, I was so naïve, I don’t remember anyone in my family ever saying anything derogatory about anybody. I never saw but one black person, except there was one man that worked at the Chehalis railroad station, and I didn’t see him very often and I didn’t think much about that. But when I saw Marian Anderson, I didn’t think of her as black; I thought of her as a marvelous singer. But she could not stay at the hotel in Bellingham. My music director kept her at his house during the time she was there presenting.

He brought Anderson out with his wife and daughter and me after the concert to a milkshake parlor to celebrate after she sang, because nobody gave her any party. But I didn’t get it. In those days, I didn’t get why. I just thought isn’t that cool, I get to go out and have milkshakes with Marianerson. I was very naïve. Now as I look back I think she was so dignified. She lived in a time where you either—you didn’t complain. She didn’t complain about all that. She just looked ahead and did her very best, and was the best person she could be. She was something.

Dilg: So you finished with your teaching certificate in 1941. What came next for you?

Kunkel: There was a period of getting used to classroom teaching. I was hyper, and every little sound in the room drove me crazy. I got good ratings, but I was just a mess at the end of the day. [laughs]
So I decided, after I’d had four children, to go back and get my master’s degree in counseling. I really enjoyed that a lot. I enjoyed the children and everything, but twenty-five to thirty children in one room all day is not a picnic. [laughs] It wasn’t for me. As I look back, some of the kids were so wonderful. I was in a little school way out in Lewis County the first year, and then I was in Centralia for five years.

Then I started having children, which was a sore spot in my career. I was fired four times for having babies. when I tell that to people, they say, “Really?” They don’t get it. Every woman was fired when she was pregnant, unless they needed her so badly they wanted her to stay on. But there was no rule in my district, there was no regulation about it on paper. So women quietly disappeared. But I wouldn’t; I didn’t. I decided after my second child, I’m not going to do this. I tried to stay on. I went through some pretty rough times because I wouldn’t quit.

Dilg: Could you elaborate on that, what hat do you mean by rough times?

Kunkel: It just was amazing what they did to women. I was told that I should go to the doctor and have him tell me so I could tell the district how far along I was. Can you imagine? [laughs] So I went to the doctor and he said, “Well, I can go a few weeks ahead, as far as you want,” but we had to [tell the district when we thought I was five months pregnant.]

I said to the district, “I don’t think it’s any of your business how far along I am. I think that I do well in my teaching and there’s a woman down the hall who is 150 pounds heavier than I am and she won’t get over it. I will. So why should I quit?”

Dilg: What were the reasons given to you why you needed to quit because you were pregnant?

Kunkel: This was done forever, and every woman had to go through this because, in my district, they made money off of pregnant teachers. They would quit, and then they would hire a cheaper teacher in her place. But it was just a traditional cultural thing that women.
belonged to their husbands after they were pregnant. It was a touchy situation for them. The schools didn’t want pregnant women around.

I had an official come to me one time. When I wouldn’t quit, they kept after me. he said, “You know, the older children in the elementary school are beginning to laugh and tell jokes and talk about you.”

I said, “Well, that’s their problem. I think we need to educate these children.”

[laughs] I tell you! I went through a lot.

Dilg: What finally happened? You resisted, but how did it—

Kunkel: Well, the superintendent called me into the office to talk to me, asked me to bring my husband along, and he was in the district as well. He said, “Your husband wants to keep his job, doesn’t he?” I was livid. I was so upset.

I went to my school education association people. There was a woman who was the head of the committee. She had never married. She never had any children. She thought, why should you be the one who can work when you have a baby, or keep your job? She said, “There’s nothing that covers this. I went to my own gynecologist, and he said there’s no reason why pregnant women should have to have sick leave.”

I said, “No, I’m not sick, and I’m competent as a teacher.”

I finally got to the point where no one would protect me. I should have sued. But I had nobody to help me through that process. Nobody. So I called up and I said, “I’m quitting. Tomorrow.”

They said, “Oh, will you come back and help the new teacher for two weeks?”

I said, “No. I’m sorry. I’m out.”

Dilg: How long a period of time was this that you were resisting their efforts?

Kunkel: Oh, a couple of months. It was really awful.

Dilg: You said that was with your second pregnancy.
Kunkel: No, it was with my third. I’d had it.

Dilg: So I suppose we should backtrack a little bit, because we’re talking about pregnancies and children, which means you got married. So maybe we should backtrack a little and you should talk about how you and your husband met.

Kunkel: [laughs] In my second book I go over that pretty thoroughly. I love to dance, but I could not stand guys that couldn’t follow the music. I danced to my own drummer or whatever. This friend of mine I met in Centralia—they always had the new teachers come and visit together and get acquainted, and have a little party for the new teachers. This one person didn’t have anyplace to stay. I was living at home with my mother about five miles away. So she said, “Why don’t we get an apartment and live together?” So we did.

She got me going to Seattle to go to the dances. There used to be a Trianon Ballroom in Seattle, and they had the big globe with the mirrors on it and it would turn around. My brother lived in Seattle at that time, so I could always stay with him.

So I went to the dance. The first dance was with a fellow who reeked of alcohol and cigarettes. That was anathema to me, because I had a brother who was an alcoholic, and I couldn’t stand to get near anything like that. I went off in the corner. I thought to heck with this. Pretty soon this tall, gorgeous guy, comes over in the corner and says, “May I have the pleasure of this dance?” I thought, “Wow, anybody who can talk like that, I guess I could dance with him.” So we danced, and he was one I could dance with. Most of them were so clumsy, or they didn’t follow the music or whatever. We didn’t see each other too often, but once in a while.

One weekend I planned to go home to my mother’s to visit, but I didn’t go. He’s one who likes to give you surprises. He didn’t tell me, and he went clear to Chehalis to my mother’s place, but I wasn’t there. Guess what my sister did? She took him out to the ranch out near, a few miles from Chehalis, and entertained him and talked about me [laughs] showed him pictures of me as a baby. I thought that was so funny, but we didn’t see each other that weekend.

He had already signed up to go overseas with the [A.F.S.] Ambulance Corps. He hadn’t been called yet, but just before he had to go, he went to Yakima to get this things
together. We went out to an old home overlooking Seattle; they fixed it up as a restaurant. I had never been out but maybe once in my life to eat out. We didn’t eat out. I was so nervous! He took me out to this place; it was supposed to be a very fine place—seventy-five cents for tea! It was so cute.

That was the last time I saw him until he went overseas. Then we wrote back and forth for two years; I still have all the letters. He saved every one of my letters, rolled up in a can in the back of his ambulance. Luckily none of the shells that were on both sides, in front and back of him ever hit him, and he carried all the letters home.

Dilg: So you still have them.

Kunkel: Yes. I have all of his letters. He had carried back all of mine.

I thought, we’ll get married now. I had money in the bank. I had a job. I was a feminist then, but he wasn’t quite yet; he is now. He had to go get another job, go to Italy on a ship, because he knew a little about shipping. His friend got him into it, and so he got enough money. When he got back I thought if he’s in the mood and I’m in the mood, when we get the license, we better do it right away—three days, we were married.

Dilg: What year was that?

Kunkel: 1946.

Dilg: While he was off driving ambulances in the Ambulance Corps overseas, what were you doing during World War Two?

Kunkel: I was teaching. I had friends that joined the WACs and the WAVES. They were always after me, “Come on.” Somehow I knew I just wasn’t meant for that. I had a free spirit, and I just couldn’t do that lock-step stuff. I stuck with my job through the war. But I did go to war industries and offices that were working for the war for four summers. I worked in the summer even before he went overseas. I was at Boeing that summer. Then
I worked ’43, ’44, and even ’45. I worked in Seattle again after he went to Italy before we were married.

In 1945, was when he came home in the summer, I was in Chehalis, drilling holes on wing panels for the B-17 bomber. Other times I’d do office work or whatever, you know. So I became a Rosie because of that, Rosie the Riveter.

Dilg: What was the facility in Chehalis that you worked at?

Kunkel: It was just a great big place that they took over as a sub-plant. They had little sub-plants all over the United States. Boeing had a sub-plant there that made wing panels for the B-17 bomber.

Dilg: How would you characterize what those types of jobs, both for yourself and for women in general during World War Two, how did that change—

Kunkel: I didn’t really think anything of it in those days. I was always independent and I did whatever I felt like doing. But I have heard since from women that had these jobs—and I don’t blame the men for doing this—some of the men who were 1A, and would be drafted if they didn’t work for Boeing, and were afraid that the women would take their jobs and they would have to go to the front. I don’t blame them, but they were mean to the women. They would undermine them. It was insidious. It was either you lose your job, or they may get killed. I think I might do the same thing. It was rough. It was rough on people during the war.

But the home front people, I was a block captain one time during my first teaching job. We had to have shovels and all kinds of stuff, I don’t know what for, in case we had to dig foxholes. We had to have the blackouts in Seattle, and all of that. The war was everywhere. Every ad had something about it. You know, war bonds, everything. Not today. We don’t want to remind people about what’s happening over there [Iraq and Afghanistan].
Dilg: Being on the West Coast, you probably experienced more—you mentioned the blackout. Certainly there was rationing.

Kunkel: Oh, yes. I had a ration book. We had to have a ration book for almost everything. Butter and shoes and all kinds of things that were hard to get. I used to bicycle a lot. I would bicycle out around Bremerton, around those areas. They had balloon battalions out there that they’d put up to keep the planes from coming over. I remember one time, bicycling by one of them, and I stopped and talked to this one fellow. He said, “You want to come in and see our place?”

I said, “Sure.” I came in. He thought maybe I’d just be an easy one, you know. He found right away that I wasn’t the type. [laughs] Isn’t that funny? I never got hit on by people I didn’t want to be around. I had that an independent aura. It was really interesting. [laughs]

Dilg: You’ve talked a little about being influenced by your mother and her way of thinking and how she felt women should be. Were there other people in your life, or events as you were growing up, which influenced your thinking?

Kunkel: Oh, yes. I think it’s wonderful that I’ve had the people in my life that I have. Mrs. Ormsbee, for instance, my babysitter, was very gregarious. My mother was the intellect, and she was the gregarious one. She would always have the parties that went on, and would always do all those kinds of things. She’d take me out during the day to her women’s teas. That’s why I love teas today.

Then there was a woman who lived next door. I think when you get to be near teenage you like to get away from family and talk to somebody else and get their ideas. I’d go and let off steam with her and talk to her.

My aunt, Aunt Artie—Artametia was her name—was a music teacher. She had a music school, and she would come and give lessons to my brothers and sisters. When I was about three, I’d sit under the piano, and listen to them. Then when they left, I’d play from memory. I learned to play on my own when I was about three or four. So music was very powerful in my life.
Then my older sister was an influence, because she had to take care of things when she was home. She was an army nurse during World War Two, and she always felt like she had to take care of everybody, was always doing stuff for everybody. I remember when I became her power of attorney and I took over, just before she died in Seattle. I kept track of her and the appointments she had to have and everything. Her last time in the hospital I came to see her, and she looked up at me and she said, “I was supposed to take care of you.” She could never let me take over and take care of her. I did, but it was hard for her because she was very, very responsible, and a terrific woman. She had a lot of fun in her.

Dilg: When you were talking about resisting the order of the day in your professional life regarding pregnancy and how that fit—in the ’50s and ’60s?

Kunkel: Yes, the ’50s. Because my oldest son was born in ’47, second one, ’49. I’d quit and go back, and quit and go back to teaching. Then my daughter was born in ’55. that was where I really kicked up, and it wasn’t until fourteen years later a woman on the East Coast sued and got the right to keep her right as a teacher. So I was fourteen years ahead of my time.[laughs]

Dilg: You clearly had some early influences and some ideas. But there certainly became broader societal changes in the ’60s and ’70s, and changing roles of women. Talk about how those changing roles influenced your professional life.

Kunkel: I think I did more influencing than anybody influenced me. As a teenager, I was around all these young girls that were primping and chasing the boys and all of this, and I didn’t fit. I didn’t find myself until my mother, at age almost ninety-one, died. On her deathbed, practically, I was by her side, and she told me this story. She had never complained to me in her life. But she told me this story of this superintendent who didn’t like her being superintendent. All the superintendents in the county had this association, and they wouldn’t tell her when they met. She said, “I could deal with anything that came across my life, except the fact that I was a woman in a man’s world.”

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I tell you, I just went like a roadrunner from then on in the women’s movement. I wanted to change the whole world. I tell you. Yes.

Dilg: That was clearly a powerful moment for you, a turning point. What were the other events, either conversations you had, or books you read, that continued to influence you?

Kunkel: I think Betty Friedan’s first book, was just eye opening. It was mind opening. I didn’t realize how set your mind can be.

Dilg: Are you referring to *The Feminine Mystique*?

Kunkel: Yes, *The Feminine Mystique* was the book that just threw my mind open. I didn’t realize how much was in there that I couldn’t combat until I read that book. It was amazing! I realized then how set in ways your mind is. Certain set beliefs, and certain set patterns. You have to break that open to be free. From then on, I didn’t filter everything through what I’d been before.

I realized that my husband was still back in the days when he felt he had to take care of the family, and you couldn’t work in those days when you were pregnant. Then the guy had to take care of you. But he became a feminist, too. He came through for me. One regret is that I probably went overboard in what I did during the feminist movement. I spent just every waking hour on it. I hope I didn’t deny my children my attention, you know, because I was in it so deep.

In the book [You’re Damn Right I Wear Purple: Color Me Feminist] I have a picture of Flo Kennedy, the famous attorney. She’s black, and she was one of the few black women that dared to work for the women’s movement as well as the equality movement in the colored groups. She came to town through this group that I had started, the Women and Girls in Education group. We had this big program downtown and invited her to come. Personally invited her, and I personally guaranteed the money for that Seattle Center, huge auditorium. I didn’t know if I’d get it back. We just broke even. With my friends, we put the word out: “You sell these tickets, you get them cheaper if you get them ahead of time,” We had eight hundred people. I can’t believe we did that.
She came and talked about equality, and for women, equality for everyone. my daughters, Both of my daughters and my neighbor across the street came down and helped. They were on the stage with her. They were in their teens.

Dilg: We should talk about the Women and Girls in Education group. Talk about how you started that group, and how that led you to invite Flo Kennedy to come.

Kunkel: I always just did things. I decided we needed to have a group that would talk and research about improvements in education for women and girls. I just started this group, Women and Girls in Education. I started a newsletter. I started influencing people every time I’d go anywhere, get their names out of a card file, and invite them all. I had a conference over at Seabeck for us to just mull over ideas, and how we could decide what would be the first things to change, to make equality. We sent that to all the school districts afterwards. It was just wild in those days.

Dilg: So you arranged a conference. Who did you invite to speak, and who came to that conference? What year was this?

Kunkel: Well, I had a woman from WSU [Washington State University]. It was an old friend of mine. She came as a guest speaker, and just offered her time.

Dilg: Who was that?

Kunkel: Now I’d have to look back and see who that was. But, I invited all the people that had joined the Women and Girls in Education, and key people around the area. It was limited to thirty people, and then we produced a paper on change, and what we thought could be changed right away to make equality.

Dilg: Do you remember what some of the points of the paper were that you–

Kunkel: It’s in the book. But I can’t remember right off hand.
Dilg: That’s fine. About what time period was this that you organized? It was called WAGE?

Kunkel: Yes. That was probably way up into the ’70s, almost. Yes. I did some research on my own through the continuing education department at the university. I knew a woman there that was in that department. I proposed this research that I wanted to do. I sent out things to every school. I designed a plan. I sent it to so many school districts around and so many in each district, principals, and compared them. I have the results in the book, too.

Dilg: The book you’re referring to is Color Me Feminist that you wrote.

Kunkel: Yes, it was reprinted in 2000. I did the research on this in the ’71-’72 school year; male and female elementary principals in Washington state, and what I thought I would find. Not many women wanted to be principals. They didn’t think they could do it. Most of the time, they had been chosen by some man in the principal or superintendent’s level, because they were so brilliant. I asked them to fill out a questionnaire, and I compared them with men. In almost all cases, the women had higher educational standards, had been longer in the business before they became principal. One woman had never married, and she said, “I needed a wife and I didn’t have one. So I did it on my own.”

Many women didn’t marry if they intended to be professionals, because they couldn’t devote their lives to their families as they were supposed to do if they were married. I thought that was so sad. That saddened me to think that women had to choose. I just didn’t think that was fair. Because their brains and their talents, of course they need to be with their children, but men need to be with their children, too. Why pick women to do it all?

Dilg: You talked about reading Betty Friedan’s book. Was that before you started forming WAGE?
Kunkel: Yes, it was. It was early on. I wrote a lot of letters to the editor. I wrote a letter about some fellow that had made fun of the women in the women’s movement. I wrote a letter in the *PI. [Seattle Post-Intelligencer]* Esther Campbell, who later became a friend, was in the Seattle NOW, and she called me up and said, “You belong to us.” I got into the Seattle National Organization for Women. I was a charter member there. I helped to start the Highline NOW, and I became president of the state NOW. I was the first one to last a whole year in office.

Dilg: So, so this would have been the early ‘70s?

Kunkel: Yes, probably.

Dilg: do you remember who it was that called you up and said, “You belong to us.”

Kunkel: Yes, she’s in the book. But I can’t think of her name right off. Isn’t that awful?

Dilg: Was that Esther Campbell?

Kunkel: Esther Campbell, yes! Esther Campbell. She’s dead now. She was a good egg. She asked me to come and get involved in the group. Judge Evangeline Star was wonderful. Of all things, she was one of the first female judges around. She gave her judges’ chambers over to us. We met there in the beginning. We couldn’t find another place to meet, she let us have her chambers, and we met there.

Dilg: So had you been aware of NOW before you got the call from Esther Campbell?

Kunkel: Not really. Not really. I think I was so busy with my family. Having the four children, and getting fired and rehired, and fired and rehired. Right now I’m trying to work on a deal where, now I wish I’d done something that I didn’t do. I never walked in my master’s degree graduation at the U, because I had to go through such hell to get the
master’s degree. There was no childcare, free childcare, at the university. I was fired. I was hired. Then I’d quit going to school. Then I’d have to get a job again. It was just years getting it. When I finally got it, they sent me this notice. “You have four tickets to graduation.” I had a huge family! My immediate family was my husband and four children. That’s five. I was so angry, I wouldn’t go.

Now I wish I had gone. I have petitioned now for the second time to be able to go and walk in my graduation, because I didn’t get to do it before. I felt, I had been treated so, what is that word – abominably – by having to be fired and hired, and fired and hired, and trying to get myself together, and trying to find time to go and get my master’s, that that just triggered something when they told me that. It was just so lock step. “You get four tickets.” I went berserk. I said, no way!

So sometime back, I went to the ombudsperson, I call it ombudsperson, and asked if I could get into the graduation ceremony. “No, you don’t qualify.” Every year they’ll have somebody who’s been in a concentration camp, or an internment camp, and they were dragged away from college. They’re getting to sit there and have their graduation. I think, why can’t I? I was dragged away from my profession four times. [laughs] So I’m trying again.

Dilg: Good for you. So clearly there were a lot of personal and professional events that were leading up to Esther Campbell saying, “You belong to us.”

Kunkel: Oh, yes.

Dilg: At some point you decided to go to at least your first meeting and see what the group was about. How did your involvement with the NOW organization, it sounds like a couple of different, the Seattle and the state and the Highline, and we’ll work through each of those separately. But maybe talk about your first involvement with NOW.

Kunkel: Well, I learned to be a public speaker through NOW. We had some wonderful committees, and I was on the speakers’ bureau. I wasn’t a very good speaker in those days. I don’t have a very strong rote memory. I never have. So I had a real difficulty
unless I just read my speech. I was trying to work on doing it without just reading the speech.

So we would go out in twos. One would have a tape recorder, and one would speak. Then we’d switch the next time. After I spoke, we would sit down with this group and listen and critique, very positively, what was detracting, what could I have done here, how did I answer that question, what to do when you had belligerent people in the audience.

We would have people who were very religious people who hated the feminists. They would sit in on the talks. They’d come to the talks that people were invited to, and they’d say, “What about the Bible? What about the Bible? The Bible says—so I learned that there are ways to work through that.

Whenever anyone would say that, I would say, “This is a public place and this is a public speech. It is not a church, and you are not going to take up church topics here. So we’ll just move on.”

Dilg: So I actually saw a speakers’ kit, it was in the state ERA campaign committee files, that was pages and pages. Did you get something like that, of how to address questions and how to form your speech and how to introduce yourself?

Kunkel: Well, I’m not sure we got all those particular things that were printed out, but we did have a procedure that we would follow, to learn how to deal with the audience and make our speeches more clear, and how to present without mannerisms, and just all that. people come up to me when I say I’m still giving talks. “How can you? I never could do that!”

I said, “I thought that once.” I’ve helped a lot of women who say they can’t give speeches. I say, “You can’t until you do it. You’re not good at first.” Good, I don’t like the word good. “You’re not as competent at first. But it takes practice. You have to know your subject, and you have to discipline yourself. It will come. But you can’t do it without doing it.”
So, I was president of the West Seattle Democratic Women for four years, and then helped them get onto the next stage for a few years. One woman who is a Rosie the Riveter, she said, “I can’t talk. I just can’t talk in front of—”

So, we had a smaller group then, in the beginning. I said, “We’re going to take turns talking about our lives, to get acquainted with each other. So, will you be next?”

“Oh, I don’t—”

“Oh, you can do it. It’s okay. It’s just us.” She came and she did a really nice job, and she’s been speaking ever since! She’s wonderful. She’s the head of the state Rosie the Riveter group. It’s just terrific.

The one that’s president of it now, always was the power behind the throne. She would be the treasurer, and she would pull the strings. But finally, when I stepped down and the one that was the chair of the group for a while when we didn’t have a president, she finally decided she’d run. She has been a power in the group ever since.

Dilg: So, when you were part of the speaker’s bureau, what kind of groups would you go and talk in front of? Or how did that work?

Kunkel: Anybody that asked us. We were a novelty, I’ll tell you. There was one group downtown, it was the Italian Businessman’s Association. [former governor] Albert Rossellini belonged. I was asked to give a talk to that group. We were supposed to entertain them, the visiting feminists. But I’ll tell you, we awakened them. They didn’t realize what they were in for, you know. We would talk about equality. Some, they were threatened; some of them were threatened. They thought about their own wives doing anything like this. Oh, we can’t have this!

I talked one time to the School Principals Association. I had a slide program that I’d bought personally from a group back East that had prepared a group of slides showing sexist pictures and language in the readers, and analyzed all of the books as to whether they were sexist or not, counted how many women went out of the home to work. In all of the Dick and Jane books, there were only two women who went out of the home to work. One was a clown, and one worked in the school cafeteria. Can you believe? Even then, there were a lot of women who worked outside their home.
So, yes, we were freaks at first. “Oh, have you had a feminist talk to your group yet?” Then, we really let them have it, you know? We let them have the story. But we went wherever we were asked, if they wanted to hear about it. so we got our message across.

Dilg: So how many years were you part of the speakers bureau for the–

Kunkel: Oh, gosh, I couldn’t tell you.

Dilg: Was that the Seattle NOW or the state NOW?

Kunkel: Seattle NOW, I spoke as president of state NOW. I spoke at groups around the state. I helped to organize chapters with Zelda Boulanger. She was the state president. She’d ask me to go along, and we’d go to different locations that they were starting groups. So, yes.

Dilg: So were you chair of the education committee at one point?

Kunkel: Yes.

Dilg: What did that role entail?

Kunkel: Well, I didn’t do an awful lot in that. I was a teacher, and I tried, that was when I had Women and Girls in Education. I got started with that. That was mainly my thing that I did during that time. Yes.

Then Zelda Boulanger, when she was president of the state, organized the, helped to organize the Highline, what was called the Highline National Organization for Women. I became their first president. We were there for quite a few years. But–

Dilg: What was the difference between like the Highline NOW and the Seattle NOW? How did those groups function?
Kunkel: Well, we functioned pretty much the same. We had speakers and we worked on issues that came across on the legislature and anywhere about women’s issues. Yes.

Dilg: So you were president of Highline NOW?

Kunkel: Yes.

Dilg: Talk a little more about what that involved, and what you did as the president?

Kunkel: Well, we tried to speak different places again. We had committees, and we worked on issues. That was about the time that I was working on getting teachers to be able to keep their jobs. At that time, I took a day off without pay to go to a hearing in which they were trying to work out whether they should have some kind of regulation about that. My boss, he was the, let’s see, the personnel director of my district, he took time off, he didn’t have to lose his pay, to see what I was going to say there. [laughs] He went to that meeting because he knew I was going. I was so happy that we could get that across, and it finally happened.

While I was in Highline NOW, and in that mode, I helped to coordinate a full day conference on women’s equality in education. I’m most proud of that, because it was wonderful. I have all those materials I hope I can give to the history museum. I have the first signup sheet of all the women who came from all over to that. We had about eighty-five to a hundred people came out to that. I had all my friends in high places that would come and talk about equality there.

Dilg: Where did that happen? Do you remember what year that was?

Kunkel: It was at Highline district. it was, I wish I’d known you were going to ask these things, because I don’t have dates, and I don’t have all that right in my head.
Dilg: That’s okay, we can fill those in.

Kunkel: I was just looking through my files recently on that, and found this huge file on that. Let me see if I’ve got something in here that could relate to that. Because I think, I listed a lot of the women who came to that group. [flipping through book]

Dilg: So you’re looking in the appendices of your *Color Me Feminist* book.

Kunkel: Yes. Where is that? I had, I put in here a section on female trailblazers. We called this meeting, “Woman: Her History, Her Status, Her Sexual Image and the Law.” It was sponsored by the subcommittee on women’s rights at the Highline Education Association, which I chaired. It was 1971.

We announced all these women’s names that we knew about who had gone out of the usual and gone ahead. Judge Evangeline Starr, and all these people. Dixy Lee Ray, unfortunately, didn’t turn out so great in politics. But she was a great head of the Pacific Science Center. Many of my friends who had gone beyond the call. Barbara Fithian--who is still in the south end--was in the Highline Council for Racial Equality. Jody Aliesan was a poet and musician, too. Zelda Boulanger was the head of NOW. Janice Niemi became a judge. Lee Kraft, my friend, was King County Council administrator, and on and on. Anyone that I knew that had gone ahead in administration or done some pretty great things, I thought.

Dilg: So you organized this conference. Talk a little about who came, and what the outcome was.

Kunkel: Well, I had arranged for it to be at one of the high schools. I have the original flier that I sent out about it. After I had the flier all printed, I was told by the high school principal that something came up and the students had to use that room, or something happened, and I couldn’t have it. The superintendent didn’t want anybody outside of their circle doing anything of this kind, starting anything new like this, opening up doors.
So I went to my principal at Valley View Elementary. I was a counselor there. I said, “Can I use your building?”

She said, “Yes. The superintendent hasn’t gotten to me yet to tell me that he doesn’t want me to have it.” She said, “I have the right to open my building to whomever I wish.” So she let me have it there.

It sounds like what happened to my mother when she had eight years of superintendence under her belt and had to look for another job. She was a giant. She was intelligent and brilliant. She could not find a job in education. That principal, that superintendent, had told all his buddies, “You’re not to hire her.”

One fellow came to her and said, “He hasn’t gotten to me yet. I have a little school out in the country you can have.” Here she was the superintendent of a county school. She could have been the superintendent of a city school. She took this job out in the country, a little country school.

So this happened to me. Kind of the same thing. So I had it there. I had to take all those 150, 200 fliers, and cross out the high school and put in Valley View School before I sent them out. But I got it done.

Dilg: But it came off.

Kunkel: I have posters yet that I made for that conference. I added to them over the years. But they were really hot. Little statements about women’s inequality, and what’s happened to girls over the years. I spread them all around the gym in that building. It was one huge room. They were just astounded, the people that came in there. They said, “We didn’t know it was this bad. We didn’t know.” I tell you, people talked about it for a long time. It was an eye opener.

We had four speakers that spoke on the legalities. One spoke on sexist language, and I’ve never gotten over that one. I still correct people for sexist language. People don’t realize that language is the tip of the iceberg. If you are using sexist language, it’s just the tip of that sexism that’s prevalent. They say, “Oh, that doesn’t matter.” But it does.
Young children are hearing that. They hear it for the first time, they think ah, that’s how it is.

Dilg: So you said earlier that you just gave yourself over to women’s equality and the women’s movement.

Kunkel: Oh, yes. I tell you.

Dilg: So if I’m understanding correctly, you’re involvement in these different organizations, branches of NOW, WAGE, were all happening concurrently in some ways?

Kunkel: Well, pretty much. Yes. It was just a continuous thing for me. I was head of, oh, it was different names, different times, but I was head of the committee for human rights in my Highline Education Association.

I coordinated another big program. It was the first time they had ever honored Martin Luther King [Jr.] in Highline. I had the library and I had a big program. It was really exciting. As a result of that, our Highline Education Association was given a special award for their human relations that year. My president of the Highline Education Association got them to let me come along with him to accept the award back in Minneapolis at the national [National Education Association conference]. That was exciting.

Dilg: So when you were going out with the speaker’s bureau, and you were talking to groups, it sounds like you were talking about women’s equality issues in general? Or were you talking also specifically about legislation?

Kunkel: Oh, over the years, I have talked about numerous things. I sent, from my hard drive, about eighteen pages of the names of all of the things that I’ve talked about. If something comes up and I think it needs to be talked about, I make a speech about it and I go out and say, here I am.
So I was doing a lot of different types of speeches. I was talking about the Equal Rights Amendment. Especially I showed these slides to groups. I ended up being on the state superintendent’s commission, on Women and Girls in Education.

How that happened, well, you may have read about it. I heard that the state superintendent was going to talk to, oh, what was the name of that group. It was a group that doesn’t allow women. So I heard about that, and I was very upset. So I made some posters. I always made posters round, because that’s women’s egg shape. [laughs] I had these round posters I’d bring.

So my husband and I, after everyone got in that room, and we were out in the hall, we went and put these posters all around the outside of the room, and it said, “This group doesn’t allow women. What’s our superintendent doing talking to this group?” Then we left.

He never knew who put those out. But he was talking to a former superintendent that I knew real well. She had been superintendent, one of the first women state superintendents, and he asked her one time, “Do you know, somebody didn’t like what I did there. I think I’m going to have to do something about this. I think we’re going to start a commission. Would you head the commission?” She did. He appointed me on the board. He appointed me on that commission. [laughs] I think it was great. He never knew who did that.

Dilg: So when you were going out talking on behalf of like Seattle NOW, for example, was that more looking at women’s general equality and issues relating to–

Kunkel: It was just awareness. Opening up their minds about the things that happen. The wage differences. The difference in expectations of women, and all of that. We tried to just open up their minds about it, yes. That was the main thing. I have a lot of them on tape, talks that I gave. I still have the tapes, old tapes. Have to be transcribed sometime.

Dilg: That’s good to know. You commented in your book, when I was looking through it, during the founding of the Seattle NOW, that there were really a broad spectrum of
women. You mentioned what might be considered more mainstream groups, like the League of Women Voters—

Kunkel: Well, it started out with Zelda Boulanger and her friends were in the Toastmistress, that’s sexist, too, but anyway, they were in that group. They had just decided they had to do something. So they decided to start a chapter. They didn’t know that Evangeline Starr, the judge, was a national NOW member at the time. They said, “My goodness, we have—” They were going to start a separate group and they said, “My goodness, there’s a group already there now.”

So they decided to start a Seattle NOW group. Zelda worked really hard. they were more, I wouldn’t say conservative, but there were a lot of issues there that were really breaking people apart. Abortion and homosexuality, a lot of things that were coming along. There were differences in whether we should really focus on some of these things. We didn’t want to turn everybody off. Well, see, that’s the problem. When you have a new opening of the mind you don’t want to make people mad. So there was a group that didn’t want to even support abortion. So that was divisive at times, see. You’re walking on eggs because you’re talking about something people aren’t comfortable with. First they get mad, then they laugh, then they get information, then they change.

See, we had to go through all those stages to get this across. Gloria Steinem once said in one of her talks, “I have been criticized for changing my garb that I wear in certain places. When I go to certain places, I wear certain things.” She said, “My message is the important thing. What I wear is to soften my message. What I wear doesn’t matter a bit. What I say.” I never will forget that. You have to make people as comfortable as possible before you hit them with something they’re not used to. [laughs]

That helped me a lot in my speaking. Because to start something out, I always say, “We door openers, sometimes we were trampled by the people who come behind us to go through.” You open the door, you’re not respected because you’re irritating people. You’re opening minds that don’t want to be opened. Yes. At first, the more conservative groups were not on board.
The early feminists—and I had my children about that time, so I wasn’t in the early movement, they were pretty militant, some of them. Then when so-called middle class got involved, and the NOW group came along, it was a little different from the beginnings. Because anybody who starts out, they have to make a noise, they have to get attention and they have to break loose things. It’s not comfortable for the ones doing it and the other ones listening or watching. But once that’s done, the mainstream can get on board. So I’ve been in both camps.

Dilg: You mentioned a little in your book about some of the early meetings with maybe some of the more militant groups, like the Radical Women.

Kunkel: Oh, yes.

Dilg: How did that relationship develop or evolve over time as issues came up and campaigns moved forward?

Kunkel: Well, you know, the government always has somebody spying on any new group that forms. We had a district—some kind of a police fellow that would stand in the back of the room whenever we’d meet. He got the membership list and everything else. We knew that we were being monitored, because we were a brand new group. Society doesn’t like to change. They don’t want radicalism. So interesting that we were considered radical at the time, you know.

When I was an elementary school counselor, and, of course, you read about it, I started a career fair in elementary school. That was unusual, because mostly they were in high school. That’s another thing I’m very proud of. Because I brought women and men to the schools to demonstrate, not to talk, but to demonstrate what they did. I tried to get as many men, equal amount of men and women, if I could, in every profession. It was difficult to get women in certain ones, and men in certain ones. But I had a male nurse, I had a female nurse.

I had a woman helicopter pilot that you may have read about. She landed on the playground. That’s my famous story. The children all went around outside as there was
a—the P.E. teacher put the line thing or whatever, a line around there. The helicopter landed in the center. The children all came out. This plane had room for one person. The person got out, the pilot, the woman, and a little boy said, “Where is the pilot?” That is my most famous story, about how your mind can just turn yourself around. Your mind is blocked. That boy knew that there was only one person in that plane. But he couldn’t accept a woman getting out of it as a pilot.

That, little girls have been denied models. If they don’t see someone doing it, they don’t think they can do it. So that was important to me, to get those women in there. I had a woman engineer who used to climb up on bridges and check things. She brought, and once I had a woman letter carrier, before many women were letter carriers. She came into a kindergarten room that I was counseling there with them. A little boy said, “Well, she can’t be a letter carrier. Only a man can be a letter carrier.” Because mailman. Of course.

Dilg: Sure.

Kunkel: That’s why language is so important. It’s just real interesting. One little girl in the circle, I had a little circle of kindergarten kids, and talking about what they wanted to be. One little girl said, “I want to be a doctor.”

This little boy said, “You can’t be a doctor. Only boys can be doctors!” Just think, kindergarten. So it’s a heavy, heavy pall until you can lift it. The expectations, and what you think you can do. It’s really something.

Dilg: So at some point, just the general push for women’s equality and change started to coalesce around some legislation, both in the state and in the whole nation at that time. NOW was certainly very involved in HJR 61, which was the Washington state ERA.

Kunkel: Yes. The Equal Rights Amendment, yes.

Dilg: Can you talk a little about your experience with when that shift happened and how that evolved?
Kunkel: Well, it was interesting that when I was on the Women and Girls committee for
the state school superintendents’ commission, what came out of what we produced was
the model for changing all the laws to erase sexism. It was real interesting. So all of the
laws had to be changed to eliminate any sexist thing. In fact, men gained in some ways,
because the men had to have stricter rules in some cases than women. Then they have this
thing that women, women only, could not lift over a certain amount. That wasn’t true of
men. They should have had a standard for any person not being overloaded, you know?
So it changed for both sexes. Then there were some tests that men had to take or women
had to take before they were married, and this kind of thing. So there were quite a few
changes that came about.

Then Title IX came in. people always think it was just about sports. My
goodness, it was nine or twelve, nine, ten or eleven topics in education. But because the
men were so threatened by Title IX, and their focus was on sports, everybody still thinks
Title IX had something to do only with sports. That’s not true. It’s equality on every level
of education. Every level.

So I know one of the women that I listed in the book there, she was on some
special committee. She was on the school, no, she wasn’t on the school board, but she
attended every school board meeting in Highline. She was one of those parents that was
most involved. She said, “We have got to have equal money for the girls.”

The school board said, “Well we just can’t do that. We don’t have that much
money.”

She got up and she said, “Okay. You’ve got a budget. Cut it in half. Give half to
the girls. You don’t have the money to give the girls the amount you give the boys now.
Just take the whole amount, cut it in half, and give that to the girls.” [laughs] They didn’t
get it, see? They had so much more money in the budget for male sports and boys and all
that kind of thing. They didn’t see how they could, no, we couldn’t add that much more
and give it to the girls. “We’re just asking for our half,” she said. It was just amazing.

Dilg: So what do you remember about the campaign for HJR 61?
Kunkel: Well, it was really a mind blower. I helped to organize about, I don’t know how many meetings throughout King County. Invited people to come in to hear about it. I lined up the speakers. That was quite a job to influence the people about it. We didn’t think it was going to pass. In fact, the night of the election, we thought it had failed. I’m such a hyper, I had to write a letter to the editor right away saying oh my goodness, we shouldn’t do this, we failed. Then the next day, it passed. That morning I got up, I was teaching at Boulevard Park School, I think, was I a counselor then. Yes. I came to school and there was a rainbow in the sky. I prayed to Susan B. Anthony. I said, “Let’s win this one!” I never will forget that. I pray to Susan B. Anthony all the time now. [laughs]

Dilg: So what made you think that the campaign was going to fail? That the legislation wouldn’t pass?

Kunkel: Well, because it went to a recount, almost. The night of the election, they didn’t think it was going to pass, it was so close. Here we are, supposed to be a rather liberal state. But of course, the east side is not as liberal. So if it was just the west coast, it would have passed. But it took some more counting of the absentee ballots and so on, and it finally passed. That was how close it was.

Dilg: So what changes did you see in the state, either immediately or over the next, we’ll start, just the next year or two after HJR 61 passed.

Kunkel: Well for one thing, when that regulation came through that we could work after we were pregnant, all the women didn’t have to worry about it anymore. They could keep their jobs. I was a teacher for so long that I could remember signing a contract where I couldn’t be married. Then there was that unspoken thing that you couldn’t keep your job if you were pregnant. You’d have to rehire somewhere. You’d have to rehire at the lowest level again. You couldn’t keep on the salary schedule. I always say, if women got reparations for everything they have lost in their lifetimes, it would break every bank in the world. They don’t think of it that way. They don’t think that women deserve reparations like people in internment camps and Blacks. You know, it’s just not
considered. But we have, I have thousands and thousands of dollars I could have if we had reparations. Because I had to quit four times until the law stated that you couldn’t dump someone off the salary schedule when you rehired. But then they’d hire new teachers over experienced ones after that happened. So that’s hard to get somewhere when there’s a way to get around it.

I remember sitting in a school board meeting when the one who did the hiring got up and gave his report. He said, “You know, we went over budget this year.” He said, “That’s because there weren’t so many pregnant teachers this year. We couldn’t replace them with new teachers.” I was so angry at that meeting! Oh, I was upset.

Dilg: Things change slowly sometimes. So you became president of the state NOW.

Kunkel: Yes.

Dilg: HJR 61 passed in November of ’72, and went into effect in ’73. It was 1973 that you became president. Do I have my dates correct?

Kunkel: See, I don’t know those dates. I can’t remember stuff. [laughs]

Dilg: I’m pretty sure that’s true.

Kunkel: I don’t know. I’d have to look it all up. I didn’t know I was going to have to think about that. Dates. I didn’t know this was just about the ERA people.

Dilg: Yes, that’s a big focus of it.

Kunkel: I don’t know.

Dilg: Certainly the larger equality issues that you’re talking about were very instrumental in changing people’s views about that. But I am pretty sure that HJR 61 had
passed by the time that you became president. I recall that you did a couple of interesting events during your tenure as president of Seattle NOW.

Kunkel: Well now, I wasn’t president of Seattle NOW.

Dilg: I’m sorry. Of the state NOW. I’m sorry. I misspoke.

Kunkel: Yes. We had, during my presidency, we got the governor to declare Women’s Day at the World’s Fair in Spokane. I got our senator, [Ruthe Ridder], to go and speak there. In fact, I paid her way personally, can you believe? [laughs] To go and speak at that first Women’s Day at a world’s fair. Now that was exciting. that was in 1974. Yes. Governor Evans declared Women’s Day, I don’t know, well, it must have been the same year, 1974.

Dilg: That’s the date I have is August 26, 1974.

Kunkel: Yes. Right. once, oh, I have to mention, this one time when I was a school counselor and I was, I gave a talk to a girls’ club that met, they said the reason that they had started was because all the boys were competing at football, and then there wasn’t anything for them to do, so they started a girls’ club.

So I asked them to do a survey, and that’s here. [looking at appendix in Color Me Feminist] I asked them questions about things in their lives and wondered how they would approach certain ideas as far as equality. Whether they thought there would be a woman president, and what did they think about if they were married, would they move with their husband if they were married, if he had to move somewhere? Or would he move where she wanted to move? all these kinds of things. It was really interesting what they came up with. There were, let’s see, out of 113, only fourteen agreed that there would be a woman president within the next twelve years. Well, there hasn’t been one.

Then asked why girls do not usually become doctors, lawyers, electricians, plumbers and mathematicians, fifty-five said that girls do not plan on being in these jobs when they grow up, which is probably true. Then sixty-one felt that adults do not
encourage girls to try for these. Thirty said that men usually do these jobs and girls think there is no use trying. Four said that women were not capable of it, and thirty felt that men are better suited. Fifty-two thought that girls are encouraged to get married and raise children rather than spending time training for jobs. Now that was in 1970, the mid 1970s. God, it doesn’t seem possible.

Dilg: So what changes do you think came about? You mentioned a few, about some legal issues. But it sounds like when you went out with the speaker’s bureau, and just in your own life, you were talking about sort of broader issues? What role do you think that state legislation ultimately has played out? It’s clearly still ongoing.

Kunkel: The Title IX, of course, too. Schools got grants to make the thing work. You had to educate people. I was part of one of the grants from the Office of Education to all the fifty states to have a state trainer to go out and do conferences and train counselors, mainly, on equality counseling. I arranged for five workshops throughout the state. invited, and teachers could come to it, if they wanted. But this was through the counseling association that this was administered. Nobody knew how to start one. Nobody knew what to do. In the men’s world, if something is going to go happen, they talk to their male friends and they say, “Hey, I’ve got to go to your district. Set it up.” Nobody was about ready to do that, because this was so new. We had some guidelines and some little awareness things to do. But we had to create these. So that was really quite an order.

Then you sent out word to the districts, and they signed up for it. But there was no money involved, so people didn’t feel like they had to come. So it was awfully hard because you couldn’t have more than thirty. But if you tried to have just thirty, some people might not come because they didn’t pay. So it was hard to get this done.

But that was really exciting. I had four or five people that would come with me to do different things. We had some men that talked about the equality, and how it would involve men, and what they would do to increase their equality as well as women. It was pretty, pretty heavy stuff, you know. But when I think of the awareness that people got in that.
At the same time, I bid for putting on a three-day conference for the Region 10 of the government on equality for women. I just did it from whole cloth. I mean, I had to just develop it. There was no plan that I could draw on. So I had to produce it myself. Write it, produce it, get the people to be in it, and put it on. It was really something! I had my charts out in the hall. The FBI was coming, looking at them all to see if they were acceptable. [laughs] It was an officer came down to see if it was okay, because it was down in the government building. I thought that was so funny.

Dilg: So, as we’ve been talking about, more of the state issues that you were involved with, organizations and the state campaign, there was also the federal ERA campaign that was going on at the same time, and these issues being discussed nationally.


Dilg: Can you talk a little about–

Kunkel: You know, gosh. That was so frustrating. Only thirty-eight states, well, thirty-eight states were needed to ratify the federal. Only thirty-five ever ratified. So the ones who didn’t want this to happen, and there was an article in the Wall Street Journal or, anyway, the big business journal, that if the ERA passes, you’re going to lose your big, low paid work force. They knew that. They didn’t want women to get full time jobs. They were a great resource in part time jobs so they didn’t have to pay health care and the whole thing. So that was really terrible. Anyway.

Dilg: So what was your reaction when the deadline passed and the federal ERA had not gotten enough states to ratify it?

Kunkel: Well, I was really upset about it. The women who were working against it, you know, men never wanted to be out front against women. They always supported these women like [Phyllis] Schlafly and all these women that came out against it, you know. They preyed on the religious aspect of it all, that women in the Bible were not supposed
to do this and that. You can’t be taking care of your families and get out and do all these things. It was really a shame. All they had to do was focus on a few senators to stop it. I was really disappointed.

Today, anywhere you talk, people don’t understand the difference between our state and the federal and all of this. Only twenty states have passed any form of an equal rights amendment. I swear I would never live in any one of those other states. That’s thirty states that, yes, don’t have any form of an equal rights amendment. That’s pretty bad.

When you have a corporation that proliferates all over the whole United States, they still require the husband’s name, the husband, you know, because so many states the husband rules the money. They call me up and I give them what for. I say, “I am in an equal rights state, and your company may not serve just equal rights states, but you better know that I am in an equal rights state, and I have the right to be boss of this money as well as my husband.” It makes me upset when they act like they have to go, they have to make their rules accordingly, because there’s so many states that don’t have this equal rights, you know.

Dilg: So do you see differences in what’s happened in the state of Washington over the last thirty years–

Kunkel: Oh, yes, of course.

Dilg: –Thirty years with having the ERA versus–

Kunkel: I couldn’t even get a credit card without my husband’s permission, unless I was single. A married woman, see, belonged to her husband. He ruled. so I remember having a credit card in my own name before I married. But afterwards, it was my husband who had to approve everything.

So one time, I made it work for me. I went to my high school reunion. I had bought this embossed cotton cocktail dress with a poofy back. I sat down in it, and it was
this hot place in Chehalis that didn’t have air conditioning, and it all wrinkled. I went and took it back and said, “They said it wasn’t going to wrinkle.”

Whoever came out to talk to me said, “It wasn’t a sit-down dress, it was a cocktail dress.” [laughs] You stand up at cocktail parties.

I said, “Did you know that I used a credit card that only my husband can sign for? He doesn’t want it. So you take it back. I didn’t sign for it. It’s my husband. He didn’t sign for it. He’s supposed to.” So they took it back. [laughs] Ah, it’s terrible! I used the system to help myself.

Dilg: So were you aware that in 2007, the ERA was reintroduced into the House and Senate?

Kunkel: I’d heard inklings of that. But you see, I’ve been taking care of my husband for three years, and I’ve gotten away from politics. I was in the Raging Grannies, and I’m still helping them a lot and I’m on their email list and everything. But I can’t rage anymore. It’s too hard on me. [laughs] I don’t even listen to the news. I can’t bear it. I can’t bear to see the body bags—they don’t show them very often, but I can’t stand the whole thing that’s going on. So I just try not to be that involved right now.

Dilg: So, the Raging Grannies sounds like an intriguing group and that perhaps has some grounding in your earlier activism.

Kunkel: Yes [laughs]

Dilg: Can you talk about that group a little and your association with them?

Kunkel: I tell you, they are all individualists, and all high-powered people. The thing is that I am most interested right now in working for early childhood education that is free. Family centers in every neighborhood so that we can teach and work with and mentor young children so that they don’t have to go out and make war and decide that’s good. The Raging Grannies have a place, but they’re most interested now in what’s going on in
Myanmar and this and that and the other thing around the world. I want it to happen here first. My theory is, get your own oxygen mask on first before you help anybody else. You have to be secure first. So until we have healthcare and help a situation like I’m in, and have early childhood education and college education free for all those that qualify, we have no business running around the world telling people what to do. We have to do it, get it done here. Then work for a strong world government that can be there for the people.

Our country doesn’t want a strong world government, because we want to rule the world. We’ve just about bombed part of it away. We’ve got to stop doing that. But I’ve got to think about where it starts. Being an educator, I want to see young people taken care of.

I just went in the basement the other day and found this stack of cards that I had years ago. Each one has a skill level on it. We would take those and we would work with kindergarten children as they first came in to see how many of those skills they developed, and then we would map the curriculum to suit. Now I don’t think they do that anymore, but that is so necessary. You can’t start school and have a gap from birth to kindergarten. I don’t care if you’re a genius as a mother. You do not have the resources to educate a young child alone. As Hilary Clinton said, it takes a village. You do not, your home isn’t set up to teach and do all the things you need to have done for that child to learn. Until we do that, we’re not ready to tell the world what to do, and boast about being the best.

Dilg:  Well Georgie, I’ve finished with all the questions I had for you. This has been a wonderful interview for me to participate in. But I’d certainly like to offer you time for any last reflections or specific comments you have, or what you plan to do next. It sounds like maybe you’ve just told us that.

Kunkel:  Well, I’ve already done, in the last month, I was going to do my third book. Where is it now, in my file here, is about this thick of all the articles I’ve written that’s ready for the book. Then I got going on this filmmaking. I did, as I told you, I think, I just completed a DVD about my husband’s and my care-giving experience. I call it my
husband’s and mine because we care for each other. It’s been a wild, wild ride. I wanted people to know how to manage it, and how they might manage it, and what they need to do to manage it. What we do to have fun, and what we do to replenish ourselves. I have seventy pictures in it. now I’m going to work on that third book, which is not that journey but articles that have a little bit of humor in them about the care-giving experience. That’s my next book.

Dilg: Great. Well, on behalf of the project, thank you very much for your time.

Kunkel: Well, your time, too.

Dilg: You’re welcome.

[END SESSION.]