Kilgannon: Today is March 19, 2008. I’m interviewing Marianne Craft Norton for the Women’s History Consortium in the State Capitol Museum in Olympia. Now first, let’s start with a little bit about your background and your education, and then we’ll lead the conversation into what got you started working on women’s issues.

Norton: Well, I didn’t start on women’s issues at all until I was married and my children were born. I grew up on a farm in Iowa, good farmland territory. Graduated from the University of Iowa with a bachelor degree. I received a Danforth Foundation Fellowship and spent a year at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst working with student groups. I was enamored with East Coast life. Spent the next year at the United Nations doing interesting jobs. And then went to Stanford University for my master’s degree in political science.

Kilgannon: About when was that?

Norton: I graduated from Iowa in 1952. So ’52, ’53 was the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. ’53, ’54 was the UN. And then ’54 to ’56 was Stanford.

Kilgannon: So somewhere in there it sounds like you fell in love with the political process.

Norton: I always liked the political process. A story is told about me that when we, as teenagers, had overnights, I would not go to sleep until I heard the ten o’clock news.

Kilgannon: Was your family political? Did you just grow up in this atmosphere?

Norton: I grew up in the atmosphere of cooperatives. My father was very active in forming cooperatives: farming, dairy, so forth. It was grassroots effort. And the first political connection nationally I ever made was when Wendell Willkie was one of the candidates and the crowd yelled, “We want Willkie! We want Willkie!” My grandfather, who was an immigrant from Germany, was sitting there with his ear to the radio and it was just very electrifying to hear the crowd sort of overriding some of the people in charge. I guess maybe that got me thinking I belonged with the grassroots and was interested in what they wanted to do.

Kilgannon: You identified with “the people.”

Norton: Yes. Right.

Kilgannon: That’s interesting. So it was almost a natural bent from childhood?
Norton: Then, of course, Henry Wallace was a big guy in the state of Iowa. He was on the Democratic ticket and had been vice president. And then he ran as a third-party candidate, but he was always interested in agriculture. My father and a neighbor would meet with him frequently.

Kilgannon: So you would have political people coming by and having conversations that you could at least overhear as a child, if not participate in?

Norton: Yes. And I was, for seven years, the only child. And then being the girl, you didn’t interrupt conversations. You just sat and listened. That’s a good way to learn.

Kilgannon: Certainly. Then you went off to Stanford to get a master’s degree in political science. And what were you thinking of doing?

Norton: Well, I was going to work in the foreign service, probably desk work or something like that. International relations was my topic. I had no real interest in political parties. My Stanford professor always indicated that “for women, the foreign service was the best job.” Now as I think back, it was probably a put-down. But I had no clear-cut career goal then. Fifty percent of the girls in my high school graduating class did go on to at least two years of college but the common denominator was: nurse, teacher or wife-and-family. My parents and I always expected I would go to college; the only discussion was “where?”

I have a story to tell here. May I tell it?

Kilgannon: Go ahead.

Norton: I wasn’t the first woman in the graduate school of political science at Stanford University, but that year I was the only woman. There were seven men graduate students. We each were assigned a professor. Pretty soon some of these young men came to me in my little cubicle and said, “You know, Marianne, you’re being discriminated against. You’re getting twice the assignments that we are. And we think you should complain about it.”

I don’t know what had happened before, but I wasn’t catching onto the point my colleagues were making, and also not catching on to prior such discrimination. I certainly did not recognize discrimination for what it was. But during the Christmas vacation, I had taken home a whole lot of books for which I had reports to give. I did all my work, as I did what I was told to—I was raised that way—and I came back with the reports. And the professor said as he slammed some of the books down, “Okay, you win. But you’re not going to be a political scientist. You’re just going to get married and have babies and you’re not worth my investment.”

Kilgannon: Was he challenging you, unbeknownst to you, to see if you could do it—setting the bar high?

Norton: Well, I guess so. Or else, I guess he wanted me to flunk—or to give up, I’m sure. And then of course, still being the dutiful student, I just sort of swallowed and just
kept doing my work. And then this all came back to me, early in the seventies here when I was in the Seattle area. I realized there were other times in my life, too, when I was, I’ll use the word “snubbed,” or “put in my place,” which maybe wasn’t where I was supposed to be. So that opened up a whole new life and I said, “Ah ha!” That phrase was used a lot in the women’s movement.

Kilgannon: Yes, I remember that saying, that moment of recognition. Was it true in those years that there was no real language available to you to analyze your situation? People didn’t really talk that much about discrimination against women?

Norton: Oh, no. No. I remember some stories, which I can’t tell. But there was one. I was very upset when I was a teenager because a neighbor girl was pregnant and she was not married. Well, you know what? Then she had to work for other people. And there was a lot of that in that time, because farmers—family people—would bring in nieces or nephews to help. But what bothered me was the boy wasn’t punished, but that she couldn’t have any further future at that time, and had to work for other people. And I remember other similar stories, where the man involved was never punished, but the woman had to pay the cost.

Kilgannon: Somewhere inside you were storing away some of these stories, some of these insights, even if you don’t yet have a big picture to put them into context?

Norton: Right. My mother was a farmer’s wife, but she was educated. My father just had an eighth-grade education, but my mother had, in those days, a two-year college education and taught school, first at a traditional one-room schoolhouse and then at an early consolidated school. She had a successful career and then married at age thirty-two. I saw how hard she worked. And I saw with all this education, she really did nothing but cook and clean. And I made up my mind a long time ago I was not going to go back to the farm. Well, I am back to the farm now, but I am doing it willingly.

Kilgannon: But maybe differently?

Norton: Yes.

Kilgannon: So you were building some feelings and thoughts about women’s interests even though there was not much happening yet in an organized way.

Norton: And then there was the Marian Anderson incident. Well, that was race; it was race and women. She came to what is now the University of Northern Iowa.

Kilgannon: Do you want to say what that incident was?

Norton: Marian Anderson was a contralto—a wonderful singer, one of the most famous in the world, and she was not allowed to sing at–

Kilgannon: The DAR concert hall?
Norton: Yes, the DAR concert hall, right, and had to sing from the Lincoln Memorial. And so then, when she came to the University of Northern Iowa, my mother and I went to hear her.

Kilgannon: You were aware of what had happened? That Eleanor Roosevelt had stepped in and said, “You will still perform.”

Norton: Oh yes, yes.

Kilgannon: A remarkable event of the times. So then, you did finish your M.A. You do “win,” in that sense?

Norton: Yes, and I do get married. Right after I received my M.A. degree.

Kilgannon: Was your husband one of these other graduate students?

Norton: No! [laughter] No, no. That was a fun story. Because then the professor—after he saw I was going to do my work—tried to fix me up with one of these fellow grad students.

Kilgannon: Oh, no!

Norton: I was an R.A., a resident assistant. That’s how I paid my tuition at Stanford. And this was a young man who lived across the street, in a fraternity. And the fraternity boys were not always very nice. So we had to report together—he was president of the fraternity—to the Dean of Women a couple of times. So we sort of got together.

Kilgannon: Right after graduate school, you got married?

Norton: Yes.

Kilgannon: And is that when you moved to Washington State?

Norton: We did not move to Washington until 1965. We went first to Boston, then to Hopewell, Virginia; to Duluth, Minnesota; then Moses Lake, Washington; Corvallis, Oregon and Westfield, New Jersey. Then back to Washington State: Mercer Island. My husband had grown up in Oregon, so he was happy to get back to the Northwest.

My husband worked on the national defense network. In those days, we were worried about the Cold War. He was a computer person. And so we traveled to different air force bases and stayed for six months to a year.

Kilgannon: That’s a hard life for you. And what did you do during this time? Did you do what your professor said you would do? You “just had children?” Or did you do some other things as well?
Norton: When we were first married, I had jobs. But then when we moved to Mercer Island, we had two children. I had joined AAUW earlier, but you couldn’t always find a branch, or you always didn’t have time to join. But then I immediately joined when we moved to Mercer Island.

Kilgannon: Your children, what years were they born? Just let’s situate you.

Norton: 1958 and ’63 and ’67. My plan was no sibling rivalry!

Kilgannon: I see. Obviously having three children, moving around a lot, being in new communities over and over, it was hard for you to join organizations. It would have been, I gather, difficult for you to hold a job.

Norton: Right. Right.

Kilgannon: How did you feel about that?

Norton: Oh, that was all right. I enjoyed my children and there were plenty of educational opportunities for them and for me. And we did vote. We were interested in political issues.

Kilgannon: So you could keep up on things. You were also really involved in your church, the Lutheran Church.

Norton: Right.

Kilgannon: You taught Sunday school, you were part of the parent-teacher league. And it had a private school, the Pilgrim Lutheran School?

Norton: Yes, it’s a church school.

Kilgannon: You were on the board. Is that a thread that you kept through the years, that kept you grounded and busy? And connected to other people in the community?

Norton: Yes. We sent our children there. First, when we were in New Jersey and my husband worked in New York City, we wanted our preschooler to get a good start and that church had a preschool, so that’s how we got started. In fact, when we came to the Northwest, we looked for the school before we looked for a house.

Kilgannon: So that was a very big part of your life. Would you have spent a lot of time doing that? Would that be almost like a job to you?

Norton: No, I don’t think so.

Kilgannon: But more like meetings and getting together?
Norton: Yes.

Kilgannon: But still, being in an organization and running things and responding to other people’s needs and being organized about it?

Norton: Right. Right. But then I could also see that all the leaders in the church were men. There was an effort at the beginning for women to be ministerial candidates. It was very difficult for many of them: Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal churches; they all have their stories. You read about the women and their pioneer beginnings. I had that in the back of my head and all of a sudden, when the seventies come up, you say, “Whoa!”

Kilgannon: Another ah-ha moment.

Norton: Yes. In our church, then, in Bellevue, women were not allowed to vote or even to be in a decision-making body. This was a difficult experience—hurtful on one hand and amusing on the other—with regard for my advocacy of women’s rights. We were active in this Lutheran church for almost twenty-five years, so a lot of territory was covered on the basic fundamental issues of inclusion or rigidity. During those years, divisive issues emerged regarding the John Birch Society, speaking in tongues, the environment, and women’s rights—basically the role of women in the church.

Kilgannon: That’s quite a range of issues! I can only imagine your discussions.

Norton: During those years we had ministerial changes five times, with some ministers being inclusive and some rigid. We stuck with the church because of the example the two “inclusives” set and also because we were very happy and satisfied with the school, the superintendent/teacher—male—and two other teachers—female. I was active, as were other women, with the right to vote in the “voters’ assembly,” more frequently called the men’s council. That effort took two years!

I’ll share some outrageous—but funny—stories. Old news, really; other members of the Lutheran women’s caucus had similar experiences, but some victories in this era were bittersweet. The caucus members supported not only the ERA and even marched for it, but were on the cutting edge of the choice issue.

I was the first woman to be president of the PTL, then the first woman to serve on the Board of Christian Education. Now, you realize men were on the nominating committee, so we did have friends in high places! Then I was the first woman to be president of the Board of Christian Education and therefore earned a seat on the Church Council. The ultimate trigger issue was at budget time—who was to receive a pay increase and how much? Minister, school superintendent, the two school teachers?

Kilgannon: This is where gender comes in?

Norton: Yes. Our school goals were high; we wanted to keep salaries competitive with the Bellevue school district, no slouch regarding teachers’ salaries. The minister presented the Board of Education with the proposal that the minister and school superintendent each receive an increase of thirteen percent. When asked about the two
teachers, the minister replied, “Teaching the word of God to children is a reward enough itself. Besides, they each had a man to support them.”

The absolute correct decision would be to increase only the pay of the lower salaried employees. But, using the fact that churches should care for everyone…and the fact that church budgets were often challenging, the Board recommended that all four individuals each receive a three percent increase in pay. An explosion! But it stuck. Not pleasant after that! At the conclusion of the Church Council meeting when they approved the three percent pay increase, the minister did not come near me, but approached my husband who was on the Council—I was watching—and said to him, “Why don’t you control your wife?”

The minister even tried to take my Sunday School books away from me. Both my husband, Bob, and I taught classes all those years. My son, Rolf understood what was going on and, by his own decision, elected to transfer to Trinity Lutheran on Mercer Island to complete his confirmation schedule.

We were back to how it was in my mother’s day. Then, we women could put on the church dinners and we could bring lunch every Wednesday to the schoolchildren so they had a hot lunch.

Kilgannon: And certainly fund-raise and do bake sales?

Norton: And fund-raise, but “do not wear pants!”

Kilgannon: No, I suppose not. Not yet.

Norton: That was an issue with the Legislature, too, during the time I was active down there.

Kilgannon: Yes, I remember when that applied to staff and women legislators.

We are building a bit of a picture here. By 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. A little bit later was the formation of NOW, the National Organization for Women. There was a little movement there, different groups in different parts of the country—groups of women getting together and beginning to share their experiences and beginning to ask some of the questions that you had, some of the issues that you’ve posed, of things that maybe don’t have to be quite that way, or that you might question. Were you a part of any of those kinds of activities?

Norton: In AAUW, here in the Northwest, it started out we dressed up for the meetings. We wore hats and white gloves. Our little treats were on silver trays, and we had silver service. We did ultimately change to paper cups. And we changed meeting dates—morning, afternoon or evening—to fit schedules. Some branches offered babysitting. And about this time, there was not only the women’s movement, but the environmental movement. But AAUW always had a study purpose. We just didn’t go and gossip or have–

Kilgannon: No, you had a larger purpose. Didn’t you raise scholarships for girls, and do a lot of that sort of thing?
Norton: Oh, yes. We raised money for graduate and research scholarships for women. Local AAUW branches had the option of giving scholarships to local graduating high school girls. One year our whole study emphasis was on, “Should the United States recognize Red China?” That was our study program the whole year.

Kilgannon: That’s a hot topic.

Norton: It was. Then we began to get a little criticism. We were called the Pink Ladies!

Kilgannon: Even just raising the question was considered politically dangerous. Was the answer “yes?” [laughter]

Norton: Yes. But anyway, we were beginning to get a little acquainted with “two sides to an argument,” and having to defend ourselves.

Another big deal was tenure. And still today, many of the arguments in women’s sports are about tenure and resources. But then in the late sixties, women’s right to choose came up, and that was a controversial issue.

Kilgannon: Very much so.

Norton: I was AAUW State Legislative Program Chair at that time. AAUW called for a secret ballot. Every member could write down whether they believed in or supported this right, “yes or no.” The issue was before the State Legislature and we needed to know how AAUW weighed in. And the results were overwhelmingly “yes.”

Kilgannon: Was that a surprise to you?

Norton: Well, I was grateful. At that time, I had a baby in my arms, or a toddler. And I was very happy with him, but I realized a lot of people did not have those resources. A lot of people had no jobs and had no helpmates. So I could see the issue. And I remembered growing up when those young girls got pregnant, and they lost their right to a future. So then, I think AAUW made a big step. But I had not read Betty Friedan until after I was involved in the women’s movement.

Kilgannon: I want to step back just a little bit with AAUW. It’s a long, long historied organization.

Norton: A hundred and fifty years.

Kilgannon: Yes. Almost as long as women have been going to colleges, as far as I know.

Norton: Right. Right.

Kilgannon: In 1923—after national suffrage passed in 1920—Alice Paul, who was the head of the National Women’s Party, proposed the first ERA. Within two years, the
AAUW was studying the ERA. So they were right on top of that. They studied it and they talked about it.

But there was a lot of feeling back then, not just in that organization, but in many women’s organizations, that women shouldn’t have the ERA because it would perhaps do away with all the protective labor legislation that people had fought so hard to gain. There was a great concern for women working in factories and in other situations that there had been many laws passed that would help them not to have such a strenuous, exploited situation. So for a long time the AAUW studied the ERA and kind of sat on it, but as an organization, they were opposed to an ERA. At first they were just studying it, but then in the late forties and early fifties, they were actively opposed to it. There was still this notion that it wouldn’t really help women, that it was too extreme, or too bold somehow. It didn’t “provide for the general welfare of women.”

But then there started to be some movement in the early fifties when there was a group—a subcommittee—the Status of Women committee, who started to look at it differently and move it forward in a different way. The ERA was brought up in various conventions with hot discussions. Would you have gone to that convention?

Norton: No. No.

Kilgannon: But then no position was taken, but there was a lot of discussion, evidently, until 1971, when at the Dallas convention the membership—the general membership of the AAUW—voted to support the ERA. So that is a long evolution and a long consideration period. Did you have the opportunity to go to any of these later conventions? You weren’t at the Dallas one, either?

Norton: No. But you bring out a very good point. And that’s where I came in. AAUW always wanted to study the issues. But my point was, if you study the issues and you come to a conclusion, why not act on it?

Kilgannon: Then you should “do something?”

Norton: Right. And the legislative program in the state of Washington when I came was controversial because a lot of women still didn’t want to make a fuss.

Kilgannon: So study, but don’t take it to the next level?

Norton: Right. And the purpose of AAUW is, one, to provide equity for women and girls; two, to provide continuing education for women; and a third, at that time, was to better society. And I said, “That is our license to meddle.” So that was my whole effort in AAUW.

Kilgannon: And did you get much support? Or were you kind of out there on your own?

Norton: I was out on my own for a while, but yes, we had support. And we also studied the environmental movement, and then we got into open government, and so forth. But yes, now and then, there were little pockets in the state of Washington when we worked
on an issue where we received little support. But then there were other pockets that were very supportive.

Kilgannon: So your particular home group in AAUW, were they with you on this?

Norton: Most of them, yes.

Kilgannon: And by 1971, you were not still wearing hats and white gloves, I imagine?

Norton: No.

Kilgannon: That’s gone. So the national board came to this resolution on ERA. And then did they send it out to the state branches? How does it work? If the national board makes this decision that they’re going to be for the ERA, do the states, then, just go with it? Or do you have your own process?

Norton: No. The state would—the rule is that you can’t rule or speak in opposition to the national statement. But you didn’t all have to come to the same level at the same time.

Kilgannon: Just when you’re speaking as part of the organization, you’d take the agreed upon position?

Norton: Yes. If you were against it, you just had to keep still. As an individual, you could be against it. But not in the name of AAUW.

Kilgannon: Certainly. That makes sense. I wasn’t sure if decisions flowed from the states to the national, or from the national to the states. So when you first got the word that your organization supported the ERA, what did you think?

Norton: That’s fine!

Kilgannon: You were ready?

Norton: It was 1972, and that was a watershed year here. We had three issues on the ballot. There was the shorelines protection act, which was started with an initiative by the people, and the Legislature returned it as a referendum; open government, which was an initiative of the people; and ERA. We had a state ERA on the ballot.

Kilgannon: Yes. Because it’s a constitutional amendment it has to be voted on.

Norton: Right. And the AAUW was in support of all three.

Kilgannon: You had your hands full!

Norton: Yes. But we had this, what I call “the dog and pony show,” that went all over the state. There were three speakers. I did not speak on the ERA. That was Gisela Taber, who
was a very impressive speaker, and was the executive director of the Washington State Women’s Council. Joan Thomas was mostly the speaker on shoreline issues, although I did speak on that sometimes. And I did open government, along with a member of the League of Women Voters, on occasions.

So I’m sitting there listening to all this history by Gisela. And that’s when all the clicks came: Ah ha! Ah ha! Ah ha!

Kilgannon: Things you had felt or thought about, being said in public? And lined up as a program?

Norton: And the fact that we were taking the issue right on at the very basis of the constitution of the state, and the constitution of the United States.

Kilgannon: Puts it on a different level.

Norton: Well, that really is a heady project.

Kilgannon: Quite. So you were educated by going to meetings on other topics, but absorbing all these messages. From 1971 to ’73, you were the State Legislative Chair for AAUW. You were present and active in Olympia. Would you have also organized for the ERA? Or were you mostly involved with these other subjects? Would you have been part of the pipeline?

Norton: Well, I was, because I was a speaker, and I enjoyed speaking. But the other groups, we had quite a few leaders then and there was always somebody to step in.

Kilgannon: There were the Business and Professional Women. There were local chapters of the National Organization for Women.


Kilgannon: The YWCA, did they help?

Norton: Yes. And churches.

Kilgannon: Many churches?

Norton: Churches really got active, because it was an issue of justice. Peace and justice.

Kilgannon: Would you have helped your organization coordinate with all these other groups so that you weren’t getting in each other’s way? You were working towards the same goal?

Norton: No. We worked in coalitions. And we worked very nicely in coalitions. We would go to each other’s meetings and share.
Kilgannon: How old are your kids at this point?

Norton: Oh, that’s a hard question.

Kilgannon: Let’s see, they were born in the late fifties, early sixties. So they were still youngish.

Norton: Oh, yes. Yes.

Kilgannon: And did you have help?

Norton: No.

Kilgannon: A lot of meetings. A lot of travel! How did you manage?

Norton: The youngest I would bring down to Olympia in his Carter pajamas and set him down on a blanket in the back of the room while I had a presentation. That was mostly on transportation, because those issues came earlier than ‘72. So that’s how they were raised. And when Initiative 276 came along.

Kilgannon: That’s the one for open government.

Norton: We had to collect signatures. Helen Norton wasn’t too old— we gave her a little clipboard and pencil and said, “Go get some signatures.” This was at the Seattle Center.

Kilgannon: I’m sure it was very engaging for people to see a child doing that. I don’t know, did women wear child carrier backpacks at that time— put the baby in the back and off you’d go? I’m curious about your logistics.

Norton: We didn’t even have those. [laughter]

Kilgannon: I didn’t think they had been invented yet. I was trying to remember when they came in.

Norton: But there were also meetings at my house. Helen—she was older then— probably remembers Michelle Pailthorp. She’s no longer with us, but she was a great ERA supporter. And I remember my daughter was just in awe of her.

The other thing that came out at this time, which the women’s groups were pushing, but it later became a job of the Women’s Council, was we wanted women in government. We wanted women in places of influence where they could make a difference.

Kilgannon: You were establishing a roster of qualified women.

Norton: Right. Right. So we would have these meetings at my house to talk about candidates and raise funds. “Who’s going to work on whose candidate campaign?”
Kilgannon: May I ask you if you belong to a political party?

Norton: I was Republican then. And in fact, I ran for office in ’74.

Kilgannon: For the King County Council? Was it that time? Or a different campaign?

Norton: No. That time was for the Legislature, for the House. Yes, that was a good race. That was a tough race. And I lost.

Kilgannon: Was your district more Democratic leaning? Who won? Who was the candidate?

Norton: No, no, no. I lost in the primary.

Kilgannon: Oh, I see.

Norton: You know, you learn a lot.

Kilgannon: The hard way, usually!

Norton: That opened my eyes quite frankly. One of the caucuses was in our neighborhood. There were three issues. We had to vote by raising our hand. One of them was, “Who do you support for president, Ronald Reagan or Nelson Rockefeller?” “Nelson Rockefeller.” “Do you believe in a state income tax for Washington, yes or no?” “Yes.” “Do you believe in—do you support the ERA, yes or no?” “Yes.” My husband voted with me, and so did some other people. And at the end of the caucus, as we walked out, they said, “We think you belong to the caucus down the street.”

Kilgannon: Oh. Certainly, by the early Ronald Reagan years, it’s true that there had been quite a change within the party, but you were already seeing the signs? Interesting.

Norton: That change was reflected in this election, too. But that’s okay.

Kilgannon: You had a great experience, I’m sure!

Norton: That’s right. I received an “outstanding” rating from the Municipal League, so I was very happy. We ran a good campaign. It didn’t cost much money in those days.

Kilgannon: We’ve gotten ahead of ourselves, of course. Let’s go back to the state ERA and take it in steps: House Joint Resolution 61, put forward by Representative Lois North as the prime sponsor. Also William Charette, Hal Wolf, Adams, Charnley, Kilberry, Litchman, Martinez, Maxie and Smith. Members from both parties—I want to make sure that is acknowledged. The wording was, “Providing for equality of rights, regardless of sex.” Very concise. But perhaps open to interpretation? And then you’ll have to take it from there?
It was said again and again that the ERA was concerned with the law, with the letter of the law, how the law was implemented, and not with private social and family-type arrangements. Those concerns were in some other realm. And it didn’t mean that homemakers would have to get jobs, or it didn’t mean different things. With this really concise wording—did it allow you to argue broadly, or in a certain way? Was this fashioned for a particular type of argument?

Norton: Well, I think it starts generally in the role of people. What are people worth individually, and so forth. I remember I spoke to groups at the military bases. And I spoke to a lot of churches. I was accepted, you see, because I was an active church member. I think that got me in the door. But there were always people that questioned, because they saw this ideal family on TV: the husband works and the wife takes care of the children. And women weren’t supposed to talk in public, or so forth. You just have to tell your life story or tell someone else’s life story. Quote stories from history. Abigail Adams, that was always a good one. And you just kept talking. And you were good humored, even when your questioners weren’t. I enjoyed it, because I learned something each time out.

Kilgannon: Did it help your cause that you really did fit the profile of the ideal? You were a homemaker and a mother. You were married. You were a church woman, very involved in your church. Did that help?

Norton: Well, I have no idea if it got any votes. But at least it let people listen to me.

Kilgannon: It put a face on the movement that perhaps broke a stereotype? Were there already some of those stereotypes of what people called “women’s libbers?”

Norton: Yes. Right.

Kilgannon: You know: young, unmarried, very liberal.

Norton: And generally through the media, even those reflections were wrong. I remember I met Bella Abzug, and she was a soft spoken, gentle woman when you talked to her. I was on the national AAUW legislative program committee so we would travel to Washington, D.C. twice a year for meetings. And then while we were there, we would lobby and speak to our representatives as well as other people. So you got to know some of these people. They weren’t like the press said they were. The press would take things out of context. And so this was a good way to tell about your meeting with them.

Kilgannon: So you’d just keep showing up and being this public face of the ERA movement?

Norton: Along with other women with similar experiences.

Kilgannon: There were many kinds of women of similar type?
Norton: And we needed lawyers. We had lawyers speaking, too, because they would speak to the law, the legal aspects and the constitution. But it was really a massive effort in human involvement. Our resources weren’t necessarily that great, or that slick or attractive, but we really, I think, did the best we could.

Kilgannon: You had the people.

Norton: Yes.

Kilgannon: So when this bill is put forward, it has to go through the legislative process, which if a person is familiar with that, it can be somewhat arcane and confusing. It goes in and out of committees; it has to pass each one. The bill has to be “pulled” out of Rules; it has to be put on calendars. It has to make cutoff deadlines. There are a lot of steps. It has to go from the House to the Senate, and be reconciled if the language is not identical. It has to go all the way through the process. And there are many ways where it can trip and stumble, or just die on the vine, stay in committee, or not be heard.

Women activists organized a whole campaign of letter writing and showing up in legislators’ offices and hanging out in the gallery and buttonholing people. How much of that did you do yourself?

Norton: Well now, by ’72 my little boy is old enough, he goes to preschool some of the time. The other times he went to a babysitter. I’ll tell you a couple of stories. They mix up the issues here.

He went to one babysitter; there were just two little boys. The rest were little girls. The story goes that this other little boy says, “Where’s your mother today?”

My son said, “She’s out getting signatures.”

And the little boy thought for a moment and he said, “You must mean cigarettes.”

Kilgannon: [laughs] Not too familiar with “signatures!”

Norton: And then there was Initiative 276, which was the “open government” initiative. In state government, we learned early on you couldn’t miss one meeting. You always had to have somebody there because the other side could well be there and influence the process while you weren’t. So all of the meetings were covered. And, as we were leaving once, one of the senators on the State Government Committee, I think, went down the elevator with three of us, myself, the League of Women Voters representative, and I don’t know who the third one was. And he said, “Why don’t you ladies stay home and bake bread?” And we all went, “What?”

Then I went home and asked my friend to bake bread. And in two or three days, we brought bread down to the Legislature and gave it to him with a ribbon around, saying: “Vote for 276.” And of course that got in the press. It was effective, but it was also fun.

Kilgannon: It’s clever. You can be for these causes, and bake bread, too.

Norton: Things like that did happen. And that made it more relaxed and give-and-take. I liked that. Because there were legislators who probably never voted for anything I
worked for, but you liked them. And then some of the ones you liked disappointed you once in a while. But that’s life.

Kilgannon: In some of the newsletters and things I’ve looked at from the movement, there was a lot of instruction: How to approach legislators; how to write an effective letter; how to use the hotline; what not to do. Instructions like, “Don’t show your anger and frustration. Be patient; keep working; keep it together; be humorous.” Were there even instructions on how to dress and approach people, how to look? What was the impression you were trying to convey?

Norton: Well, there was in my church. But I know of none in the Legislature for women lobbyists. But remember, women lobbyists, yes, we were there in ’70. But there weren’t so many, and then when the ERA started, there were a lot of them from all these other groups.

Kilgannon: And you wore big buttons to identify yourselves, right?

Norton: Yes, right. And quite frankly, we started out with dresses. But then we had to run up those steps so often, and pantsuits came into style, so we did wear pantsuits. But the women who worked in the Legislature were not, as I understand it, were not permitted—

Kilgannon: I know there was a directive under Speaker Swayze not to wear pants.

Norton: You’re exactly right. But miniskirts were all right!

Kilgannon: That was the era. When you speak of bringing a legislator bread, I understand from different news clippings that there was a somewhat organized opposition, and they were bringing apple pies and cookies and bread and I believe preserves—jam jars—homemade type of goods. Now, their message, of course, is to preserve the home and the traditional family, and traditional family roles. Did you have much interaction with these other women who were coming to the Legislature as well, on the other side of the issue?

Norton: I didn’t then, but I certainly did when I was interim executive director of the Women’s Council. The Women’s Council was there to represent the women in the state of Washington. So when they wanted some information, we got it for them. They were always welcome.

Kilgannon: Both sides. Any side?

Norton: Both sides. Yes, absolutely. Susan Roylance, who was from the Tri-Cities area, and was sort of the leader of one of these groups, or maybe the major group, would show up frequently at the Women’s Council. And by golly, we helped her, and got her information. And we got along fine.

And during those years, I was asked to come to groups of Mormon women, and I was asked to be on radio programs, and that was maybe on the right to choose, with a
Mormon opposing. And they asked questions that were sort of attack questions, but they didn’t get angry. We just got along the best we could.

Kilgannon: So, it would be one of those “we agree to disagree” kinds of situations?

Norton: Right. And on occasion, when I’d have someone who was interested in discussing more, we would say, “Let’s list what we can agree on.”

Kilgannon: Finding common ground?

Norton: And agree to disagree on the major issues maybe of what to do about it.

Kilgannon: Well, of course, there’s a real range of opinion in women themselves. Different grounds for coming to those issues.

Norton: And the other effective thing we mentioned before was effective stories by women, other women, on their life. Muriel Rukeyser has that quote that if any woman told the truth about her life, the world would split open. And we found out that was true.

One issue we worked on, and this was after the state ERA was passed, was displaced homemakers. There was really no understanding of that issue.

Kilgannon: Could you explain briefly what is a displaced homemaker. I know the phrase, but–

Norton: Yes. It’s a woman who has done nothing of political or economic import outside the home, nothing that society recognized at that time, but has taken care of her family. Now, raising a family is a big job, but women don’t get any credit or productivity recognition. And so suddenly, if her husband dies, or loses his job, or walks away, then she has what’s left, which is the children or the home—and sometimes the mortgage on the home, or what have you.

Kilgannon: And no career.

Norton: No career. And no job experience. And maybe even no bank account.

Kilgannon: High and dry.

Norton: Because of circumstances. And we had a hard time getting that across until there were some ordinary ladies from Bellevue or Mercer Island or the eastside whose husbands left them. And they were in the same situation. Took the money from the bank and left her with the mortgage. Then there were names to faces, and people rubbed shoulders with these people. And that’s a sad situation.

Kilgannon: It’s not abstract. It’s Mary or–
Norton: But that’s really what happened. And then all of a sudden people realized that could happen to people in other status situations, too.

Kilgannon: I’ve certainly heard the phrase: being one heartbeat away from welfare for women. Of course, that’s very frightening if you don’t have resources.

Norton: And that’s when—the Women’s Council of that time—Gisela Taber, and Mary Helen Roberts was also urging women to get credit in their own names so that they could have—

Kilgannon: Build a little financial history?

Norton: Yes.

Kilgannon: There were several groups, of course, but the Women’s Council was very active. They began in ’71, was that it?

Norton: Yes, I think so. Because I remember Gisela Taber was there during that whole time.

Kilgannon: Yes. Founded in 1971. You were a member by 1974 to ’77.

Norton: Yes, appointed by Governor Evans. And then I was reappointed, or else just left on, by Governor Dixy Lee Ray.

Kilgannon: We’re going to get to that in a second. Let’s talk about the early years of the Women’s Council. You did say that they helped both sides. They were supposed to be a council for all the women of the state. And they sounded like they tried to be sensitive that not all women wanted the same thing, or wanted to go in the same direction.

They were part of the governor’s office. And there was always a move throughout those years to make them a statutory commission, which would have set them up in a different way. As long as the governor—Governor Dan Evans—was supportive of them, they had a home, an organizational home. But of course that leaves them vulnerable, I suppose. Was the move to a commission, was that to solidify their position so that they weren’t always kind of looking over their shoulder at the next state budget to see if they were in it?

Norton: Right. That was it for the finances. And then also there were other commissions for minority groups at that time. So we were not a minority in number, but we were a minority in intention, so that was sort of fitting.

Kilgannon: That is an interesting point; yes, women are a majority of the population, but they’re considered like a minority because of their status. It’s kind of a different set up. There was often a move to put the Women’s Council, instead of into their own commission, into, say, the Human Rights Commission, or some other commission. Mix them in with these other ethnically oriented commissions. There was one for Mexican
Americans, there was one for, I think, Indian groups, Native Americans. Would that have muddied up the process? What would that have done?

Norton: Well, I think the point was that we were representing all women, and we were representing the women in those groups, and maybe they weren’t being represented in the existing groups. So we just had a little different story to tell. And then remember, we were still getting some criticism because the vote for the state constitution—inclusion of the ERA in the state constitution—was a very close race. And I remember that I was told that it was decided by absentee ballots by the military.

Kilgannon: It was a real cliffhanger.

Norton: Yes. Yes.

Kilgannon: Didn’t it take days and days to hear the result?

Norton: Yes. And see, the other two issues were decided quickly. So there was that churning of people’s minds, why did it take so long, and so forth.

I think the women had a real sense of purpose in trying to make our points known, and to keep the legislators informed. And of course, one of the purposes of the Women’s Council was to inform the Legislature of women’s needs.

Kilgannon: Yes.

Norton: And also to see that they were included in administrative situations and amendments and so forth, that women could tell their stories. And to educate women.

Kilgannon: You had to take it to the women, too?

Norton: Yes. Then our purpose was to educate all women.

Kilgannon: I noticed the Council gave workshops and all kinds of talks all over the state.

Norton: For older women and working women and younger women, that’s right. And that came after the ERA and the fact that the ERA was sort of stymied at the national level. Or stalled, I guess is the word.

Kilgannon: When you were in that rather difficult period of the votes had been cast [for the state ERA] but they were still counting laboriously, I know that in the newspapers and in different places there appeared some analysis of “what went wrong, how did we lose?” There was that feeling that you could lose while it was so close. How did you assess your campaign, and maybe, would you have picked up and tried again? What were you thinking about doing at that stage, before you knew you had actually won?

Norton: I really can’t speak to that, because I had an emergency in my family, and I voted absentee and went back to Iowa. And didn’t come back until—
Kilgannon: So you missed the hand wringing and agony on the vote?

Norton: I did. I missed that.

Kilgannon: You must have heard about it.

Norton: Oh, yes. And I kept track.

Kilgannon: So we won’t address that, then. When you did come back, the ERA had passed? And then there was the implementation phase where they had to comb through the state constitution and all the laws, and change all the “he’s” to “we,” I guess you could call it. Go through and figure out okay, what does this mean? Were you part of any of that activity?

Norton: No.

Kilgannon: That was a kind of a lawyer’s job.

Norton: Yes. Yes. That was really done down here in Olympia. No, I was still out in the field, and quite frankly, I went to a lot of AAUW groups, too, and made this speech. Because it was part of AAUW’s purpose, and we had to gather everybody in now.

Kilgannon: And what was the response? How did people react, were they interested?


Kilgannon: It had arrived as an issue?

Norton: Yes. Yes.

Kilgannon: It was mainstream? Or still pretty liberal, do you think?

Norton: No, I think it was becoming mainstream.

Kilgannon: And almost immediately, of course, you have to start organizing to ratify the federal amendment. The state one applied only to state laws, obviously, the state constitution. But then coming from Congress came the resolution finally passed after, well, since the Alice Paul days. A long, long struggle, a long campaign. Sometimes muted, sometimes active. Finally the federal ERA passes and goes to the states for ratification. So you receive your next charge. By then, aren’t you the state–

Norton: President.
Kilgannon: President of the AAUW. So did you organize your state chapter—is “chapter” the right word—to mobilize for the federal ERA? Would that have been a high priority?

Norton: They were called divisions, as in the AAUW Washington State Division. And yes, the ERA was a high priority. But we were to lobby our legislators, and anyone we knew in other states. But to my knowledge, I don’t think we went to other states. But I think you’ll find that some of the other women’s groups did go to other states to talk. But here, that’s when we were having all these rallies and these marches.

Kilgannon: And candlelight vigils.

Norton: Yes, yes, yes. And so we were trying to get the publicity. Then in 1975, I think it was, when I was at the Women’s Council, I was asked to go to Arizona to be an expert witness as to how our state was coping.

Kilgannon: You had by then passed it here in Washington State. You had ratified the amendment.

Norton: And we had no problems with toilets and things like that!

Kilgannon: So you could speak to what it’s like to live in a ratified state?

Norton: Yes. And what we did in our own state, and what the nation’s ERA was going to do.

Kilgannon: So there were several parts to the campaign once it came here. The charge was the Legislature had to pass it—each house, of course.

Norton: Well, they did it. Do you have the figures? I don’t have the dates, but they did it here pretty quickly. I don’t think that it was such a long wait here. Some of the other states—

Kilgannon: Yes, here it was accomplished relatively quickly. But there was some agony back and forth, chiefly in the State Senate. There was an effort to not bring it to a vote, to “study” it, to simply put it in somebody’s pocket, basically. There were committee chairs who weren’t terribly interested in it. What did you do with those particular individuals who just wanted to stall it and make it go away? Did you come and talk to them?

Norton: Well, sure.

Kilgannon: Did you go around them?

Norton: No, you’d talk to them, make notes. And smile. And “good morning.” We had men, too, joining then, for these marches and so forth, for the federal ERA.
Kilgannon: It really affects everyone. There were more women legislators as the years went on. Still not very many at that stage—I don’t have the exact numbers. Did you work with certain women legislators to work on their colleagues and help you with the process from the inside?

Norton: Well, we received advice from them. Jeannette Hayner, I don’t know how she voted in the end.

Kilgannon: I believe she was for it.

Norton: Was she for it?

Kilgannon: She did occasionally vote against it in certain procedural things.

Norton: Yes. Because she was from the other side of the state and you know, was a “question.”

Kilgannon: Was it an east/west thing in Washington State? There were communities that were more conservative, say?

Norton: Yes, yes, yes.

Kilgannon: And were the anti-ERA people increasingly organized? You managed to get through the state ERA without a high degree of organized opposition. But over the years, I think their organization increased. Were they more prominent in the federal effort?

Norton: Yes, they were getting more publicity. Because it fit into the other states where there was more publicity. And it was obvious that the ERA was stalled, and then there was an extension. So all that fed into the media.

Kilgannon: Was the federal ERA harder to argue for because of issues like the draft and what not? Did that complicate the argument? The state ERA had a more narrow focus, you could say. The federal ERA had other dimensions that people found problematic to talk about.

Norton: I think so.

Kilgannon: Was that something you had to address?

Norton: Yes. And in Iowa, people were even suspicious of little phrases. I can’t remember the phrases, but they were really just legal phrases. And then eventually they passed their ERA after I got back to Iowa. It took three votes there. Finally, you take the little phrases out, and there’s no problem. So I think it’s thinking that it’s a conspiracy: “There’s something hidden in this that we can’t understand.”
Kilgannon: Well, people will vote ‘no’ if it’s controversial, or they don’t understand it, or there are too many words. That’s true for almost any initiative, isn’t it? If there’s a gray area, people, when in doubt, vote ‘no.’

Norton: A lot of help came when you made the point: “Your wife’s okay, but what’s the future for your daughter?” And that was always good when you were arguing in churches or one-to-one with people that you knew had a daughter.

Kilgannon: That did make a difference. I remember some legislators would begin their remarks with, “I have a daughter. I have two daughters.” Or whatever. They would see it differently. That was a bit different.

You had at least one daughter. Or did you have two?

Norton: No, just one. Just one.

Kilgannon: Two boys, one girl. Did you, were you able to look at it on that level, too? Would that be something that would resonate for you? Something you were doing for your daughter?

Norton: Well, yes. But she was very independent.

Kilgannon: She was going to take care of that one herself?

Norton: Yes. Take care of her self. But yes, and then when it came to Title IX, that was something that she was really interested in.

Kilgannon: The athletics.

Norton: And the states—Washington passed its own Title IX—because some of the legislators as well as some of us said, “I don’t know if we can always trust the Feds. We better take care of that here.” And that passed nationally as part of a title on the education section.

Kilgannon: Was it part of the Civil Rights Bill?

Norton: Or else the Education Bill. I’m not sure. It was in 1972, though, I think.

Kilgannon: Oh, later. So, not the Civil Rights Bill.

Norton: No. That was ’64, right.

Kilgannon: That was Title XI. I’m getting my titles mixed up. [laughs]

Norton: Yes, the titles do mix you up. And so that’s why the state of Washington passed its own, because we didn’t know how the Feds were going to do it.
Kilgannon: Well then, you still had to battle it in the courts. It wasn’t easy. It wasn’t over.

The bill for the federal ERA was House Joint Resolution 10 in 1973. Again, the prime sponsor was Lois North, but with a very long list of other co-sponsors’ names. Again, it went through the House fairly rapidly, but had trouble in the Senate. Your arguments for it were rational, legalistic, a little cerebral. But you did tell the stories of actual women. The people opposing it were described as offering more emotional type arguments. Would you also go that direction yourself if you thought that was effective? Is that part of the storytelling, is to really ground it in real experience, and come out of the sort of higher language of human rights and social justice and bring it down to “your daughter, your story,” that kind of thing? Was that a way to reach people and build that bridge?

Norton: I think stories are always important for the history and the personal connections.

Kilgannon: Puts a face on it?

Norton: Because then a person remembers. Clicks in and remembers. But I can’t remember anyone ever getting very emotional. We stuck to the facts, and we stuck to the story. Sometimes the stories could have been maybe a little emotional. I can’t think of one now.

Kilgannon: You collected a lot of data.

Norton: Right.


Norton: And when we told the people that if you have something to say, you say it. And the legislators are really interested in what you have to say rather than a representative from AAUW or another organization.

Kilgannon: So you spoke for yourself as well as for your organization?

Norton: Well, I probably spoke for the organization. But if I knew someone had an interesting story, I would ask them to please share it. And it’s true with any subject you have. I think that’s important. Because a person has a right to talk directly to the legislators. Some people are hesitant.

Kilgannon: I understand that’s what actually works best. When I was thinking of you actually doing this work, I was recalling stories about Carrie Chapman Catt who was the famous leader who led the final years of the fight for women’s suffrage. She always dressed as a lady, and was very careful to do so and wear all the paraphernalia of the day. Was that a model; did you look at her story and think well, that was effective, we’re going to relate.
Norton: Oh, yes.

Kilgannon: I’m thinking of the time—I think it was for the state ERA—when there were a lot of women in the gallery watching the proceedings. And before the vote on the ERA was going to happen, there had been some kind of resolution honoring a returned Vietnam veteran, and there were two young women who did not stand. It caused a big blowup. A lot of legislators were very upset; this was disrespectful. It kind of put a monkey wrench in your campaign. Were you present during that incident?

Norton: I don’t think so—I wasn’t.

Kilgannon: It really hit the newspapers, of course. The women were able to repair that damage and get over that. But of course, in the women’s movement, there were radical women, there were lesbian women, there were women who may have been threatening to more traditional, status quo imagery that perhaps you were trying to create. How did you bring those women in? Did you coordinate with them? How did that work, with all the different kinds of women that were involved with this campaign?

Norton: Well, some of the other organizations could do this much easier than AAUW. Because with AAUW, you had to have a four-year graduate degree. So I think they were welcomed in with open arms and said, “We’re all in this together, and this is for all women, and we’re not leaving anybody out.”

Kilgannon: Big tent kind of approach?

Norton: Yes.

Kilgannon: And what about the Democrat/Republican aspect? Was that ever an issue? Did everyone just meet with their legislators and keep it bipartisan and not get into the party politics aspect?

Norton: Now, at that time, quite a few of us were Republicans. And quite a few Republicans did support it.

Kilgannon: Yes. Very strongly, actually.

Norton: But do you remember that Mary Crisp was on the national Republican committee, which does the long-range planning for the Republicans and because she supported the ERA, Ronald Reagan took her off the committee. She was a lovely, articulate, beautiful lady. And it was a big disappointment, because she was in a very good position. And it was an affront to her personally. She was one of the women that came down to Houston. I don’t know if she was on that planning committee or not. But I remember her story. And that rang a bell nationally because a lot of people respected her. Margaret Chase Smith and all those other women were furious.

Kilgannon: National figures?
Kilgannon: Let’s look at that. By the later seventies—certainly 1977 seems to be kind of a bellwether year—there are several movements. The federal ERA passed here, and, like you say, then things kind of bogged down nationally. There were little rushes of states ratifying, and then long periods of not a lot happening in that direction. And of course, as the easy states passed and ratified the ERA, that left the more difficult states. And as you got closer and closer to the magic number which was what, thirty-eight, it became harder and harder and the movement ground down.

And certainly by 1977 in Washington State—and this is when you’re still state president of the AAUW, and involved in the Women’s Council and probably several other organizations.

Norton: By then I was appointed interim executive director of the Women’s Council, because Mary Helen Roberts had resigned.

Kilgannon: You came in under Dixy Lee Ray, the new woman governor. There was a wave of activity on your side, and there was a countering wave coming on the other side. But Washington State has its first woman governor. Was that exciting?

Norton: Yes, it was. But again, you see two standards. There was a lot of fuss about how she dressed, and maybe her manner of dealing with people. But you know, men have little foibles, too, and you have to deal with them. So it was just business as usual. She was supportive of the ERA, although she wasn’t out on the stump or anything. Although she did appear at rallies. Yes, she did.

Kilgannon: She did give some speeches, I recall.

Norton: Yes, at Tacoma I remember an important one.

Kilgannon: How did you come to be appointed? Did you know her? Or were you just on this roster of qualified women?

Norton: I was on the Women’s Council. And I think Mary Helen’s resignation was surprising, and I just got a call from her office and said, “Would you take over?” Hopefully until the day we got to be a commission.

Kilgannon: Now, I noticed that Jennifer Belcher was the liaison person at the governor’s office, starting with Governor Evans and continuing under Dixy Lee Ray, which is a bit unusual for someone to be kept in that position when there’s a change of parties, let alone a change of governors. Would she have been part of recognizing you as a likely successor?

Norton: Well, she’s the one that asked me.
Kilgannon: So you had been working with her for a little bit?

Norton: Yes. And I worked with her when Governor Evans was here, yes.

Kilgannon: I wondered how that happened. This is a paid position. You came in; did you have to work in Olympia?

Norton: Yes.

Kilgannon: Did you commute every day?

Norton: Yes, I did. I commuted every day to that little white house.

Kilgannon: Yes, which is now the press house.

Norton: Because, see, the press shared it with us.

Kilgannon: Oh, interesting.

Norton: And we had one bathroom, so that was interesting, too. But we had a lot of fun about that.

Kilgannon: There are those unisex bathrooms after all! [laughter]

Norton: That’s right! That’s right. Look at what this world has come to!

Kilgannon: That’s funny. So let’s talk about the state Women’s Council. We’ve talked about them a little bit. At that stage, again you’re still trying to get the statutory protection of being a commission and not a council, just kind of a little, tiny thing, supposedly. That’s a long fight with a lot of odd little battles with different legislators. There was a sense that, well, the ERA’s passed in Washington, why do you need a Women’s Council? What was your answer to that?

Norton: Well, because we were charged with these things to look specifically at legislation to see that women were considered in projects and policies and so forth, and to increase the number of women in positions of influence. And then to educate the women of the state and to know what their rights and responsibilities were, and to help them understand where they stood under the law, and how we could help them.

Kilgannon: Certainly you had a long list of activities. The ERA was a huge step, but did not end the need for women’s legislation, as it was called. Day care, rape and domestic violence laws, battered women’s shelters, things to do with children: child abuse, childcare. Yes, and certainly getting women onto all kinds of boards, commissions, judicial appointments.

Norton: And part-time work, too.
Kilgannon: Oh, yes, part-time work. Now, why was part-time work such a big cause? I noticed that you worked for it specifically at one point, and also it was part of everyone’s list. Was it because it offered a flexible situation?

Norton: Yes.

Kilgannon: Some people have argued that when women work part-time, they’re marginalized. But was it just getting a foot in the door and being able to work at least sometimes?

Norton: Right, and take care of your children if you didn’t have day care. Flexible hours.

Kilgannon: So there’s a way. Was there job-sharing at that point? Did people think about doing that? That was the beginning of that conversation?

Norton: I think, yes, I think they did.

Kilgannon: Part time work for women is one of those things that people argue both ways on. So it’s interesting to see that.

Norton: It’s an issue today, too. And also—well, that’s today, and it’s different; it’s about having an office in New York and spending half your time in California. What do you do with your family, and so forth?

Kilgannon: That’s hard for men, too. I think that’s hard for everybody.

Norton: That’s exactly right. Exactly right. And some of these problems did affect men, too. Because sometimes a man could become a displaced homemaker, in a sense, if something happened to his wife.

Kilgannon: If something happened to his wife and he had children?

Norton: Yes.

Kilgannon: And that is actually one of the arguments for the ERA is that it’s good for everyone. That if you bring women up, I guess would be the phrase, that everyone’s position is improved. And that was one of the changes that I understand from the protective legislation, the work legislation, is that they weren’t going to get rid of protective labor legislation but include men. Was that a difficult concept for people?

Norton: Well, obviously it was for some. But what’s fair is what’s fair.

Kilgannon: Certainly, traditionally, labor unions were opposed to the ERA and not very interested in women’s issues because not very many women were unionized. Did that sort of language, that concern, help bring labor into your side of the column?
Norton: Labor was very supportive.

Kilgannon: That changes the whole concept. It’s not just for women, it’s for everyone. It’s a real watershed change, one of the bigger ones. Were you still going back to D.C.? Were you still on the AAUW Public Policy Committee?

Norton: Probably in 1977, no.

Another thing, in 1975, we had the national AAUW convention in Seattle. Governor Evans came and spoke. He gave the welcome and a keynote, but it should be mentioned that Dixy Lee Ray, as a scientist and head of the Pacific Science Center at that time, received an award of distinction because of her work in the science field, and she also gave a presentation. This was before her political aspirations.

Our whole emphasis was trying to get women involved in public policy. We did a cracker-barrel discussion about women running and so forth. And a moot court acting out issues. We visited the Seattle city government, then the legislative, judicial and decision-council areas. We had buses that would take people who were attending these meetings, and little talks were given to them so they could see how it all worked and get them interested.

Kilgannon: A lot of organization!

Norton: Yes.

Kilgannon: Now, Governor Evans was very supportive of women’s issues. He began the study of comparable worth.

Norton: Oh, yes.

Kilgannon: He supported the Women’s Council. He supported abortion rights laws. He was there for all those things. Did he also appoint a lot of women?

Norton: I think so. He started—yes, he started.

Kilgannon: There was a sense of recruiting women—many, many women, of course, worked in government, but more at the clerical level. So there were all kinds of innovations to create career ladders for women, where they could move out of the vast stenographer-type level and up into management. Was that about when they started to make some progress? Under Dan Evans?

Norton: I think so. And also, he worked both sides of the aisle very well.

Kilgannon: He was quite a centrist.

Norton: That’s right. And that helps.
Kilgannon: Did Governor Ray continue that work?

Norton: I think she did. Right. There were many people who were angry. But then after the vote of the people on the Women’s Council, we lost–

Kilgannon: Let’s talk about that.

Norton: Now, in those last few years, we were still doing all of our work. We prided ourselves, even though we were a skeleton crew–

Kilgannon: Tiny. Very tiny.

Norton: —with very little budget—there were three of us there regularly. Then we did get some money for a grant so we did have help there. But we prided ourselves that when some question or inquiry came in, then we got on it that day. And if we couldn’t solve it, we darn well had something to report. And that was true of whichever person called and whatever side they were on. And I felt we really did good work.

And then when this commission status for the council became an issue, there were some people that thought when I was made interim executive director that this would get lobbied and done. But you see, that put me in a different position.

Kilgannon: Yes, you were not a volunteer. You’re not a private citizen in that sense.

Norton: No, and you’re not a lobbyist. The lobbying had to be done by other people. And we just gave them information and anything they needed. And so then there was a little period after and in the midst of International Women’s Year that a sort of wave came in of negative information from the opposition.

Kilgannon: So right then—1977—let’s really look at that year because a lot was happening. You have the Ellensburg conference, and then those women who are chosen as delegates there go on to the Houston nation conference, and the international one for the UN Decade of the Women, and Year of the Woman. The Women’s Council was pretty involved, wasn’t it, in helping to organize the Ellensburg state conference?

Norton: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Kilgannon: If people like Susan Roylance were already accessing your information and what not, why was it claimed that the conservative women didn’t know about the Ellensburg conference and didn’t feel invited and included? What happened there?

Norton: Well, I think they did know. And I think people came in from other states. And for sure, there were men calling the shots at Ellensburg, because we could see them. And they, of course, were all marked, too.

Kilgannon: Yes, they had special ribbons.
Norton: Yes. Yes. So I’m sure that was it. It was an out-of-state deal to organize everybody in the state. And they did it in other states, too.

Kilgannon: It was a national movement. Every state had its women’s conference. And Washington State, for whatever reason, had theirs a bit later than some other states. So there was talk of this kind of growing wave, state by state, of more conservative women organizing and going to the state conferences in opposition to what was thought to be the point of those conferences. Which was what? Could you say in a nutshell what the conference was about, besides electing delegates; there were a lot of other activities.

Norton: To set an agenda for the women of the United States. We, the attendees, were charged with discussing twenty-four issues.

Kilgannon: Twenty-four. Quite a few.

Norton: I think there were twenty-four.

Kilgannon: Now, if you’re setting an agenda for the women of the state, was it assumed that that was a certain type of agenda, or was it inclusive of more traditional points of view? Where did all that fit together? How did that fit together?

Norton: They were really very basic topics. And every one of them, you could probably argue pro and con. And the point was to have discussion groups and let people talk and see if they could come up with a statement of maybe agreement or disagreement, pro or con, and report that back. But it was such a—people were everywhere.

Kilgannon: You had thousands of surprise conferees.

Norton: Yes, yes. So it was difficult to even have order in some of those meetings.

Kilgannon: It seemed like they overwhelmed your space and your organization.

Norton: Right.

Kilgannon: Were you surprised by the polarities? It did seem to be a sort of an “us and them” kind of situation, at least in the descriptions I’ve read. Was there any middle ground? How did you deal with that?

Norton: We hoped there’d be middle ground, because—

Kilgannon: It seemed like almost a feeling of hostility.

Norton: Yes. And some of these things were being worked out. I mean, some of these projects, like displaced homemaker and so forth were going ahead. And the women had the right to abortion for what, seven, five years–
Kilgannon: Seven years by then, because it was passed in 1970.

Norton: So that shouldn’t have been an issue. But see, they jumped on the two. The one was ERA, and the second one was the right to choose. And I think they really didn’t care about the others. I’m just saying this now in retrospect. Because I think we were surprised to see all these cars. And the Women’s Council, we three were late getting there, because we were sort of a support group bringing supplies, and of course we were hearing back and forth. But I remember when we got there, the lines were just tremendous.

Kilgannon: You weren’t prepared for that. What would have been your role?

Norton: Every woman in the Women’s Council, every member of the Women’s Council, and I’m sure every member of all these women’s groups that had been working in coalition, all had a job that day. So there was work for everyone. And Judy Turpin and some of those people that worked the floor know the story better than I do. And of course, Jill Ruckleshaus was the keynote speaker because she was chair of the initial commission that planned this. She was appointed by Gerald Ford to work out this International Women’s Year. And then when Jimmy Carter came in, he just picked right up. But he did change some members. And he put Bella Abzug in as chair of this commission. So we did have a lot of federal help, and did have a lot of Washington leaders in their right positions to work this. So yes, it was just a phenomenon that swept through the United States.

Kilgannon: Were you present there for the discussion of the ERA? Do you know what happened with that? Although you were probably busy!

Norton: You know, I’d pop my head in a lot. We were also busy trying to find places for people to sleep.

Kilgannon: The mechanics.

Norton: Whether people had to go home, and we worried about that. Because by then it was a contest. We were concerned about votes. And also, we were helping some of the other people find places to sleep. That’s for sure. And gyms opened and churches opened.

Kilgannon: It must have been a mad scramble.

Norton: It was.

Kilgannon: Wasn’t it very hot, also? In that Central Washington way.

Norton: Yes. But you know, you just worked through it; you just worked through it. I remember there were funny stories. And “it’s not over ‘til it’s all over.” Well, then the delegates had to go to Houston.
Kilgannon: And you went to Houston?

Norton: Yes. I went to Houston. I was one of the elected delegates. And it was just as bad down there, except they weren’t—the hotels and so forth weren’t even as organized as good old Ellensburg was. We had to wait hours before we knew whether we had a room. And we had to double up and take turns sleeping in beds and take turns sleeping on floors.

Kilgannon: Did you even get any sleep? Maybe use your hotel rooms just to change your clothes?

Norton: It was the same story repeated. And lots of outsiders lining the streets, and then saying very vicious things.

Kilgannon: There was a counter conference.

Norton: Was there? I’d forgotten that.

Kilgannon: I’ve read quotes from it. Phyllis Schlafly was–

Norton: Very vicious.

Kilgannon: --was one of the keynote speakers of that. And yes, they characterized your movement as rather–

Norton: Very hurtful things.

Kilgannon: Very radical. Maybe you were used to it, but to be attacked by other women, that was hurtful?

Norton: I was used to it because, going back to my early days, everybody picked on me because they said “teacher’s pet.” I was very shy. I wasn’t teacher’s pet, because there were quite a few people that got good grades. I guess I just didn’t fight back. Maybe that’s why. [laughs]

Kilgannon: But does it get under your skin? There was some pretty interesting name calling.

Norton: Well, I went to college, and I was still shy. I had an emergency appendectomy and got there after everyone was registered and so forth. And I had to live in a Quonset hut because we had a lot of returning veterans in those days.

Kilgannon: Yes, that was a pretty busy time.

Norton: And you just learned to cope. And I got active in college. Then when I was a senior, I took a class in public speaking and I really enjoyed it.
Kilgannon: Found your feet?

Norton: It gave me, yes, some feet to stand on.

Kilgannon: I wonder if you could have ever seen how much you would use that.

Norton: I never knew. And neither did my Stanford professor know. And neither does he probably ever know what happened in the state of Washington.

Kilgannon: You never know where a degree’s going to come in useful. Did your studies in political science help prepare you for this activism? Give you the theoretical framework, or the philosophical grounding?

Norton: The framework, yes, yes, I think so. But you studied men’s lives. You didn’t study women’s lives. You know, presidents, the Federalist papers, all those things.

Kilgannon: Well, you can take men as models, I guess, although how they do it can be different.

Norton: When I was young, my mother gave me a book, *Girls’ Stories of Great Women*. And I read the book. And then I did say to her, “Mama, do you suppose I could read *Boys’ Stories of Great Men*?” And so next Christmas, she got me that one.

Kilgannon: Did you ever compare them?

Norton: I never compared.

Kilgannon: But you could tell the difference? Your mom was supportive of you.


Kilgannon: But she did things?

Norton: Yes, she did things.

Kilgannon: Interesting. So, to get back to Ellensburg, you’re at Ellensburg, you’re supposed to be the Women’s Council of all the women in the state of Washington. Were you pulled in different directions? Or you were so busy maybe nobody–

Norton: No, because we had worked all these things for all the women. And the women were always invited to our meetings. And this was just a political maneuver to stop the federal ERA.

Kilgannon: Coming out of that conference, there was a Referendum 40 that was filed in 1977 by Susan Roylance who was, at that time, the head of what was called WIN,
Women for Integrity in the Nation. It was worded, “Shall a state women’s commission be established by statute?” So if you were pro-women’s commission, you voted yes. If you were the other side, you voted no. Their arguments were: Should we be using tax dollars for this? Is the women’s commission considered pro-family enough; that kind of approach. What did the women’s commission, or Women’s Council at that stage, do with this referendum? Could you respond to it? Or, as part of the government, were you not allowed to campaign? Did other people campaign for you? How did that work?


Kilgannon: You could give informational type talks?

Norton: Right, right, right. Oh, yes.

Kilgannon: Just who you were, what you did?

Norton: Right. And really, we had heard that something like this was going to happen. But then when we came back, for about the first ten minutes, we were sick. But then we just said, “Well, we’re on the defensive now.” So we just had to get together. And then we did work closely with legislators, both men and women. And there were a good number of them. “Do you know how best to approach and what to say?” and “Can you help?” All the members of the Women’s Council worked. We provided support the best we could. But yes, we all went out and talked: radio, TV, print interviews.

Kilgannon: There was a change within the Legislature itself by then. Governor Dan Evans is out of office. He’s finished his third term. There were changes within the Republican Party itself, which shifted the party away from the center, shall we say, and there were new legislators coming in who were not considered to be what were called “Dan Evans Republicans.” They were a new kind of look and emphasis. It is said that there were a sizable group of Republican legislators who were unhappy with Evans’ tax policies—his support of the income tax and some other things. There was a shift there. And could you feel that as you went to the Legislature and tried to find your way?

Norton: Well, I didn’t go, I didn’t go in there to lobby. I would contact people.

Kilgannon: For your budget and what not? Did you have to lobby for money?

Norton: No. I didn’t have to, I didn’t lobby for money.

Kilgannon: I wasn’t sure exactly what your role would have been.

Norton: No. No.

Kilgannon: Because that was one of the sticking points—the money, getting in the budget.
Norton: We supported the governor’s office figures. Members of the Women’s Council may have gone over there.

Kilgannon: But not you as the staff person?

Norton: Not to lobby for specific things like that. I asked people that supported the Women’s Council for advice as to what they could do. We sure needed the help. I could certainly discuss the budget.

Kilgannon: Susan Roylance and her group—

Norton: And she still came to the Women’s Council, and we still gave her information.

Kilgannon: Certainly. She was able to get the proper number of signatures to put the measure on the ballot. It was on the ballot and it passed. Two hundred fifty-nine thousand, seven hundred sixty-one voters supported the formation of a women’s commission by statute. Six hundred and sixty-four thousand, nine hundred and sixty-two were against. Those are very big numbers.

Norton: Money.

Kilgannon: Money: “Should tax dollars be used for this purpose?” And again, since the ERA had passed and a lot of people thought well, you know, “we’re done with that.” Was there that sense of “women don’t need a commission?”

Norton: It goes back to the beginning of this whole issue about the women don’t need all this help. You just stay home and mind your own business and get what you want done, you work for it.

Kilgannon: Well, there was one small—not really a speech, but at least remarks—by Senator Jeannette Hayner, who said, “We shouldn’t have a women’s commission, we should have a people’s commission. Women have made it. They don’t need this.” So some women who had supported the ERA, some women legislators now moved and said, “The council’s day is done.”

So when this initiative passed, the council was disbanded. Not immediately. But Governor Ray said that, quote, she’d “heard the voice of the people,” and she phased the council out. You were still the director. So what did you do, how did you wind down? Did you take your work and spread it to other groups? You no longer had a voice, a specific voice in the government.

Norton: I’m going to back up a little bit. Besides the members of the Women’s Council and other women’s groups working on this issue, I don’t want to forget Gisela Taber who as long as she was here was a wonderful voice, an effective voice, as was Mary Helen Roberts. Mary Helen is now in the Legislature. So they had backgrounds that could speak to this issue very professionally.
But this was also a time of spreading seeds for a new statewide organization, Washington Women United, whose purpose was to pick up where the Women’s Council left off. There was no vacuum regarding women’s issues here. Women were revved up to organize and continue the efforts. Washington Women United played an important role for the next—many—years.

But what did we do at the time? We just sucked it in.

Kilgannon: That must have been a low moment.

Norton: Oh, yes. Yes.

Kilgannon: Where were you when you heard? Were you at home?

Norton: No, I was probably over there at the office. Of course we had proximity to the press, so we could always check in.

Kilgannon: With numbers like this, I imagine you heard pretty quickly. None of this cliffhanger stuff. Did you kind of know it was going to go that way?

Norton: Well, we knew what we were up against. And with some of our hands being tied, and the time shorter than many election debate periods. So we sort of knew. Then we just had a plan, we got a plan together.

But it taught me about the importance of adequate budgets. We used to get the revised codes by picking ours up out of wastebaskets, because a lot of departments got new ones every year.

Kilgannon: Oh, you had to wait until somebody else was done with theirs?

Norton: Yes. [laughs] So we’d wait until we’d find them in the wastebasket and bring them back.

Kilgannon: That’s resourceful.

Norton: Well, maybe it wasn’t even—some areas we knew, but it looked good up there on the shelf.

Kilgannon: You were “official.”

Norton: Yes.

Kilgannon: We talked about how there was a change in atmosphere in the government in how the Republican Party, under Ronald Reagan, for the first time since Dwight Eisenhower, had taken the ERA off the Republican platform. There was quite a backlash going on, and a sharp turn to the right, as it was described.

During this era, this opening of a new wave, a Washington State lawyer, Michael Ferris, filed a court case in 1979 against the extension of the ERA ratification on
constitutional grounds, because he said the extension was not properly worded and you could not use the extra three years. He demanded that Washington State therefore retrieve its vote of approval because yours had included the 1979 deadline in the wording. That issue simmered. And during all this time, you were dealing with this much sharper turn of events where the opponents of the ERA and abortion rights and some other women’s issues that had been long-fought and considered to have been won, started to go backwards on you. I wondered if you got tired, if you felt discouraged and frustrated, and how you dealt with your own spirits and keeping up this very long battle on this issue.

Norton: Well, I don’t even remember, I probably got—I’ll think of a nice word. I probably got a little disgusted sometimes. I really can’t remember feeling down. Because you know the history of a lot of movements. Jack Robertson from Seattle at one time said, “If you believe in something, you’ve got to be ready to spend ten years of your time working on it.” We changed that around and said, “If you believe, really believe in something, you’ve got to spend your whole life working for it.”

Kilgannon: Did you think of Susan B. Anthony? Her whole life given to the cause.

Norton: Yes, yes, yes.

Kilgannon: Did that story help you?

Norton: Oh, yes. And the story of the people being chained to the White House gate—during Wilson’s administration, I think. All those stories. And then, of course, you begin hearing more stories about your contemporaries. And it just keeps you going.

Kilgannon: You certainly had a great network of women of like mind. So you weren’t alone. But did you begin to feel that your society was leaving you adrift? That you were no longer the cutting edge voice? You were being ignored, or marginalized in some way?

Norton: Well, it got to be old news for a while, but I don’t think that hurt us. In a lot of respects, we were still on the cutting edge. I mean, look at this election. And a lot of other issues on the cutting edge. So I guess we just have to keep plugging.

Kilgannon: So in that kind of movement, if one area hits a snag or a plateau or whatever, do you then just work around and find another aspect of it and make some progress there? And the issues are all connected, of course. So if you can’t, maybe, get the ERA—because eventually, of course, it did fail—do you then think well, we’ll just work on these other things? Is that what you do? You take the same energy and just go at it from a different direction?

Norton: Well, every once in a while news comes from Washington that somebody’s going to reintroduce the ERA.

Kilgannon: That’s true. You can always start afresh!
Norton: But then there are so many issues. For example, women in athletics and women in education; that was one of the things that AAUW worked on and is making a little noise now. And so you get the Title IX, and then you have to see that it’s enforced and funded.

Kilgannon: There’s always something to do.

Norton: Right. And so in AAUW, it’s not just athletics in Title IX. It’s the whole spectrum of education. And then AAUW set up a third part of their organization, which is a legal advocacy fund. We raise money to help women who want to pursue what they think is a wrong. And it can be every place, from tenure, to salary, to girls playing sports, or not getting enough basketballs compared to the boys.

Kilgannon: Equal access.

Norton: Yes. And so that’s one thing I’m working on right now, is to raise money. Then we study the class action suits and the individual plaintiffs, and get the stories there. And see that even with the laws on the books we haven’t won.

Kilgannon: That’s true. And so in a sense, ERA, no ERA, there are still battles.

Norton: And the right to choose, that’s one that gets a little bit testy when you involve it with politics.

Kilgannon: Well, that’s a perennial issue.

Norton: Right. Right.

Kilgannon: That seems to be still with you. Here is this newspaper article from 1979, the Seattle Times, December 30, end of the year. They interviewed a whole lot of different women of every point of view, including yourself. I’m just going to read a little bit from this. It says, “The seventies have shown that women are able to fill many roles,” quoting you, Marianne Craft Norton, executive director for Planned Parenthood Affiliates of Washington. That’s the hat you were wearing at that point, “who volunteered as a past state president of the American Association of University Women, and was the paid executive director of the now defunct state Women’s Council. Ms. Norton said that while some may be impatient with what remains to be done for women, they should reflect on what has been accomplished in such areas as childcare, domestic violence, equal pay for comparable work, insurance, educational opportunities, medicine, religion and law, during what she believes will be one of the most influential decades in history.”

Do you still feel that the seventies was a breakthrough decade?

Norton: Oh, absolutely. And before I came in here [for the interview] I went down and visited David Ammons.

Kilgannon: An old state press person.
Norton: And he said, “I knew the decade was magical, all that time.” And I said it took me a while to realize.

When we left Mercer Island, the editor of the Mercer Island paper, Peggy Reynolds, asked me why I thought the 1970s was such a progressive decade. I didn’t answer right away. I answered from Iowa and I said primarily for four reasons. One, it came at a good time, because we had Earth Day, and we had Vietnam. We had McGovern. You know, a lot of clashes, but some projects coming out of all of those.

Kilgannon: Were you still a Republican?

Norton: No.

Kilgannon: But I mean, at what point did you change over? I hear you saying good things about McGovern, the Democratic presidential candidate.

Norton: Yes, his message.

Kilgannon: So you were inspired?

Norton: Well, people were. People were inspired. And younger people.

Kilgannon: It was a big movement.

Norton: Yes. So it was timely, I felt. Things were moving, and people were churning up in their--

Kilgannon: In lots of areas. Every area, practically.

Norton: And the second one was, oh, gosh, can I remember four? The second one was we had, in the Legislature, what we called the Seattle Ten. They had all been elected for their first term. There was one woman, Peggy Maxie, and the rest were men. But they were Democrats and Republicans. They sat in the back rows of the Legislature and they decided that on as many issues as they could they wanted to get together and talk about what was the best for the Seattle area, the eastside, and that corner of the state. And we had a governor who could work with both sides of the aisle. Okay, that’s two. And the third one was, oh, yes, the media. The media--

Kilgannon: Very important. I was going to ask you about that.

Norton: The media was so good. Because those people, they didn’t wait just to get a press release from an agency and then just print that. They studied issues, and they knew the issues. They did their own research. They were professionals who cared about the state of Washington.

Kilgannon: So much more activist?
Norton: Right. And that was very important to me.

Kilgannon: Is this more the post-Watergate period, when the media is more investigative? The new stars?

Norton: Yes, yes. Right. And that’s when open government came here. Right. They were doing their work. And I was telling David that I miss that. I miss the give-and-take with the media. Because if I was prepared for the media, I knew I was prepared. If I wasn’t prepared, then, in some questions, I knew I had some more work to do, because I talked to the media a lot.

Kilgannon: You were well reported in the newspapers. There are a lot of clippings about women’s issues.

Norton: I enjoyed that. I enjoyed being a public voice on many occasions. That was three, and the last one was the women were emboldened during that decade. All of a sudden they said, “By golly, we have opinions on this, too. I have an opinion and I’m going to go down there and express it.”

And that’s another thing we did. We started a lobbying day and got all these women to come in by busloads, and talk to their legislators. We became lobbyists. Because it was all silk-suit men with nice ties, and here we were in pantsuits and scribbling and having little meetings in the corridors.

Kilgannon: You did have Pat Thibaudeau and Judith Turpin and some women who became professional lobbyists, in fact, who started in this volunteer mode.

Norton: There were professional lobbyists during that time, too, and we included them. We were all women. We knew that sooner or later they’d care about our issues, too.

Kilgannon: What I find really fascinating is the more liberal women were certainly organizing, but so were the conservative women. They were in the newspaper. They have groups. They have organizations. They have a voice and agendas and run meetings and have almost a parallel experience, from a different point of view, as your own. So it was galvanizing for both kinds of women. I don’t like to polarize like that, but things were a bit polarized, so I guess that’s all right to say that.

Norton: I don’t know what it’s like now. In Iowa, all they did was change a little phrase in the ERA language, and all opposition stopped.

Kilgannon: Removed the stumbling block?

Norton: I got back to Iowa just in time to work on two ERA campaigns there.

Kilgannon: I’ll bet they were glad to have you.
Norton: Yes. The first time I really got excited again. I said, “You guys just have got to get out and start working.”

Kilgannon: You’d been through it all. You saw what was needed?

Norton: Right. Right. I hired a caterer and I did all this planning “stuff.” I said, “You’ve got to make a splash! You can’t just sit here and gripe. You’ve got to get out there and make a splash. Get speakers.” We invited two women, one an Iowan legislator, the other the lieutenant governor, to speak at a public meeting, as well as to a Luther College class.

Kilgannon: And did you pass it then?

Norton: Yes, the third time. By changing that one little sentence. It failed the first time, it failed the second; the third time was a success.

Kilgannon: It was quite a long, drawn out effort, but you were there when it passed?

Norton: Right. And they have a women’s commission. They have their agenda every year, too.

Kilgannon: Still?

Norton: Yes, still. I get their newsletter. And as Washington’s Women’s Council interim director during that time, I did attend one national meeting. And of course, our most popular contribution was to tell the story of Ellensburg and the demise of the Women’s Council!

Kilgannon: Well, instructive.

Norton: Yes, right. Everyone learned from it. And the quote I used was one that the Seattle Sonics were using in those days: “Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean that they’re not out to get you.”

Kilgannon: Oh, no! Well, I think it was organized. You weren’t making it up. And then the eighties come. Was that such a different decade that you had to work differently? You were up against different kinds of issues?

Norton: No, I—in a way—backed away. I was still doing speeches on all these subjects on my own, just volunteer work. But then, when I was at Planned Parenthood as the State Public Policy Director, John Anderson asked me to be state director for his presidential third-party campaign. Again, a grassroots effort.

Kilgannon: Yes, very much.

Norton: The signature drive to get his name on the ballot in Washington State was done by the time I joined. It was run by very smart young college students. They wanted
somebody to put it all together and have an agenda ourselves. That was the Mary Crisp situation. She was out talking for John Anderson. Because, after all, she’d been kicked off the ERA committee for the Republicans.

Kilgannon: She had somewhere to go, at least.

Norton: Right. Right. So that was another ERA issue. John Anderson was a feminist and supported the ERA. The Republicans did not.

Kilgannon: Yes. He had a lot of interesting platforms. So, was that part of your transition out of the Republican Party? That campaign?

Norton: Yes. Yes. That was a nicely done switch.

Kilgannon: A middle ground? Were you politically homeless for a while?

Norton: No, because we were always invited, we had friends in the Democrats. Karen Marchiaro was one of the best tough feminists. And Chris Smith from Bellevue, and all those people that were on the city councils.

Kilgannon: It just was sort of a natural progression?

Norton: Yes. We just “kept trucking.”

Kilgannon: Did your husband change as well?

Norton: Oh, yes. Yes.

Kilgannon: You were a team!

Norton: We finally realized, “We started out okay, but they’ve changed. So maybe we should change.” And the Democrats always had more fun. And that was easy to do, too. Although Republicans are pretty organized, whereas Democrats are fly-by-the-seat-of-their-pants sometimes.

Kilgannon: There are differences. Was it hard for your family?

Norton: No.

Kilgannon: They were ready to see you change?

Norton: My family, my family–

Kilgannon: I mean like your siblings and parents.

Norton: Oh, no, no, no. They were probably way ahead of us.
Kilgannon: Well, the Republicans in Washington State—I don’t know about other states—but they were some of the most progressive people in the state.

Norton: Exactly.

Kilgannon: So like you say, you didn’t change, but maybe the party did.

Norton: No, exactly right. My parents, I never knew how they voted.

Kilgannon: And by then, of course, you are terribly involved in many other things. The environmental movement—the Washington Environmental Council, certainly open government issues, transportation issues, land use planning. Help me out with this list. I think it’s quite long.

Norton: I think that’s good enough.

Kilgannon: I don’t think you ever sat around. I get that impression.

Norton: No, no, no.

Kilgannon: No moss growing on you. When you decided to move back to Iowa, was that difficult?

Norton: No.


Norton: I always knew I’d go back. Because when you have a feel for the land, you just can’t give it up. This is emotional. Because right now, there’s so much agricultural land being used up for million-dollar homes, and for box stores, and to increase the tax base, things like that. So we had our hands full back there. But our children—we loved it here in Washington, because our children had really the best of both worlds: in education and in the environment and in politics. Even on Mercer Island, a big issue was should our dogs be on a leash? And of course all the kids had an opinion on that!

Kilgannon: I think that’s still a very hot issue!

Norton: So there were demonstrations and things like that. They all grew up that way. There were racial things in Seattle at that time. And the children were aware of that. It was hard to leave our home. We had an older home. And it was a very lovely home in a nice spot on the south end of Mercer Island. An acre and a half. And our kids for many years could have their lemonade stand out in front, plus room for a soccer net. For a while we had deer and quail, but that disappeared pretty soon.

Kilgannon: Things got too built up?
Norton: And soccer. All my kids became soccer fans. They’re good soccer players. Helen played soccer; she was on the academic all-American soccer team when she was at Stanford. And she still plays soccer. She’s now a lawyer and law professor at the University of Colorado.

Kilgannon: So is she living out what you worked for?

Norton: She is. She makes several trips a month to Washington, D.C. to speak to issues on civil rights and labor law. Helen served in the Department of Justice during the Clinton administration, and as legal counsel for the National Partnership for Women and Families, formerly the Women’s Legal Defense Fund. And she worked on the Family Medical Leave Act. This is still an issue today with an effort to extend it and include pay. Others say the cost would be too much.

Kilgannon: So she’s still fighting some of these battles?

Norton: Yes.

Kilgannon: It goes on. Are all issues perennial, in that sense? Where each generation has to pick up the torch and fight it out? Is it a constant case of vigilance and paying attention and working, that you cannot take it for granted and say, “Well, we’re done here.”

Norton: Thomas Jefferson said, “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.” And I have said, “Eternal vigilance is the price of everything.” There’s always that friction.

Kilgannon: There’s a kind of a tension, the creative tension?

Norton: Tension is a better word, right, right.

Kilgannon: Of different points of view.

Norton: And different times.

Kilgannon: You need to stay at the table?

Norton: Because look at now, the economy, and that’s going to hurt more people and so forth. And wars.

Kilgannon: I remember you said that every issue is a women’s issue. That there can be no separation.

Norton: You follow the string and it comes right back home. My husband almost got in a fistfight once.

Kilgannon: [laughs] I’d like to hear about that.
Norton: At a business meeting he was attacked by a Mormon coworker who said I was anti-American, a Pink Lady! That’s how the story goes.

Kilgannon: There certainly was red-baiting attached to women’s issues, as it was labeled.

Norton: And then my kids…

Kilgannon: Yes, your sons, where are they with all this?

Norton: Well, my sons, that’s an interesting question. I have some stories. Kurt, our firstborn, attended the University of Iowa in the late seventies. While visiting him in his sophomore year, he reported, “Mom, thanks for the ERA tee-shirts. They are a big help. I wear them to the campus mixers and the girls ask me to dance!”

And Rolf, our youngest, when entering Mercer Island High School was questioned by the school newspaper sports editor on his goals. “My goal,” Rolf replied, “is to be as good a goalie as my sister.”

Kilgannon: It sounds like you were successful in passing on your values of equality and respect.

Norton: I have another Helen Norton story. After Helen was accepted at Stanford and during the freshman orientation, she and her Dad walked around campus and visited the sports department. On the bulletin board was an announcement of the women’s soccer tryouts. She had never checked to see if Stanford offered soccer. I’m not certain about the status of the national Title IX at this time, but Stanford had “club soccer” which included some of the other colleges and universities on the coast. They did play games, they did travel, but they had no university support and no uniforms, etc. But during that year Stanford did address Title IX. And therefore, Helen received an extra year of eligibility because the first season did not count. The next year I had a little, bright-blue Datsun B-210 which I would drive straight down I-5 to visit her and watch some of the games. I remember the first game they came out with their uniforms, all in a line, during their “athletic stuff.” The tears rolled down my cheeks! They had a big audience, lots of student support.

Soon after this, the team decided they would host a soccer tourney and invite a nice group of colleges to participate. This was their first tournament. The girls on the team planned it all, they did all the invites, etc. Helen Norton then said—this was a story told to me by the captain of the team—“We need a program, with the games and players.” So they did a nice cardinal red program with all the names of the players, records, etc. They even had advertisements in it to earn money to produce it. Someone asked Helen, how did she know how to do this? She replied, “My mother and her AAUW friends do this all the time in our kitchen.”
Kilgannon: Equity issues are everywhere; the struggle touches every activity. The ERA, at least nationally, is still a live issue even if rather muted, but the underlying issues that drive it are still here?

Norton: Right. But some states now have an ERA and can pick up the work.

Kilgannon: When you look back, what do you think were your highlights, your biggest accomplishments? Things that you say to yourself, “There, that was good work, I did that.” In this area—your life’s work is very broad, of course.

Norton: The biggest one was, I think I provided energetic leadership. Because I wasn’t involved in anything I didn’t believe in, or anything I didn’t enjoy. And I did enjoy it. I enjoyed the camaraderie after legislative hearings, even with the “bad guys.” The specific little things, really funny things—one was about bringing the bread to the Legislature. And most every time I was about to give a major presentation, I’d get a phone call from one of my friends saying, “Now, is your hair curled? And is your pink pinafore ready?” [laughter] That sort of thing.

Kilgannon: Well, you need some humor to keep yourself going.

Norton: Here’s one story from the Women’s Council days. Some of the feminists—the gutsy ones—decided that the Seattle Rotary...they have their meeting and I don’t know how often they have it, but they are very visible. They have a speaker and they speak to these hundreds of men.

Kilgannon: Then, it was only men as members.

Norton: These feminists had a little mischief—and determination as well—in them and decided they needed a woman to speak to the Seattle Rotary on women’s issues. At that time, women were just becoming more entrepreneurial, vocational people. First, they had to get permission from the Seattle Rotary. Of course, they knew enough people in Seattle, and they got that. Then they had to have approval of the speaker. So they decided they’d ask me to do it. And, of course, I said sure. Well then, they even decided what I should wear.

Kilgannon: Oh, what did they want you to look like? What did they have in mind for you?

Norton: A pink pantsuit!

Kilgannon: What was the message? They wanted you to look feminine or what?

Norton: Well, they wanted me to look feminine and feel comfortable.

Kilgannon: Two things that are not always one and the same.
Norton: Right. And the men to feel comfortable, too. But they did it big-time. They scheduled a press meeting before and then I had my speech.

Kilgannon: What did you speak on?

Norton: The Women’s Council and women’s issues. So I went, and there even was a corsage at my table. [laughs] Geez, with these people! But I arrived and was very comfortable, because I recognized a good number of the members, you know, the mayor of Seattle. I knew some of these people.

Kilgannon: You were a good person for them to pick.

Norton: Right. But I knew it was important.

Kilgannon: Were you perhaps the first woman speaker there? Ever?

Norton: No, I’m sure. But on women’s issues, I’m sure.

Kilgannon: It was a breakthrough talk in some way, then.

Norton: So I went to the press conference and a press person was there, a woman—well known, and a good friend. She whispered to me and said, “This is all old news.” And I knew it was to her. I think she was even at Houston.

And then I gave my speech and there were questions afterwards. And one of the questions was, “Why should I want a woman to compete with me for my job?” There was a button that we used to wear that said, “A man of quality is not threatened by women of equality.” So I just—it was not original—but I spoke it. And it really was effective.

And then they asked more questions, and everything was very familiar. And then after it was all over, I had a note from the press woman and she said, “You knew better than I did.” Because we’re all on different levels and you had to repeat some of the good old stuff.

I walked to the elevator with a group of men and they all said the same thing. “Well you know, I don’t think my wife cares about this, but I bet my daughter does.”

And I thought, “Oh, gosh, all that worry.” Getting prepared, I had to buy glasses—pink, to match the pink suit.

Kilgannon: You were a complete picture!

Norton: The top is plain, you know, so I could look out at the audience, and the bottom is so I could read my notes. Because I didn’t want to keep going “like this.” [looks through her glasses] So that was a prepared performance, which went well.

Kilgannon: Quite a performance! Right down to the costume.

Norton: Yes, that was interesting.
Kilgannon: It was a way of reaching out. Visually decluttering—if I can use that term—or perhaps disarming—the situation to make sure your message was heard in the way you would like rather than throwing up challenging barriers so that people can’t—they’re not free to hear you; they’re too distracted by appearances.

Norton: Right. Right. And Virginia Gregson—who was president of AAUW just about when I came in, I think, or soon after, and was also appointed to the first Public Disclosure Commission, because AAUW was really behind that issue—told me, “Remember, there’s always a freshman class.” And then somebody else told me, “Never get too far ahead of your congregation.” And those things sort of stuck with me.

I did enjoy the experience and the education. We, Women’s Council supporters and ERA advocates, worked hard and took risks. We also “kept on trucking” after some disappointments. And we contributed—with energy and conviction—to an important movement in Washington State and the nation.

Kilgannon: Well, good work.

Norton: We’re still working, aren’t we? Yes. Yes.

Kilgannon: There’s always something to do. I want to thank you for this interview.

[End Interview.]