

Narrator: Rita Shaw
Interviewer: Janice Dilg
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Transcriber: Teresa Bergen

[Begin Track One.]

Dilg: This is Janice Dilg. I'm with the Women's History Consortium Equal Rights Amendment Oral History Project, and today I'm interviewing Rita Shaw in her home in Seattle. Today is June 9, 2008. If you would begin by stating your full name and your date of birth and your place of birth.

Shaw: Well, name is easy. It's Rita Shaw. Date of birth, September 8, 1930. Place: New York, New York.

Dilg: Great. I would like to begin by having you just tell me a little background about your family, your growing up in New York, your siblings, what your growing up family life was like.

Shaw: I was the only child of both my parents, because it was the second marriage for both of them. Each parent in their first marriage had a child, a male child. So I have two half brothers. They were fairly close in age, which was about fifteen or sixteen years older than I was.

Growing up in New York, my parents were immigrants, my father basically from the part of Europe that was Austria when he came, and my mother from the part that was Poland when she came. They were both orthodox Jews. So I was raised in a very religious household, and studied biblical matters from the time that I was about three years old.

I ended up, though, disagreeing with a lot of my training. At about the age of twelve, and that's another whole story how that all developed, I suddenly told my parents that I was no longer willing to go to Hebrew school and to learn all the ritualism and practice it. Shortly after that, my parents were so upset by my behavior that I was sent

away to a private school and out of New York. For two years or a little more was in an all girls finishing school out in New Jersey.

My parents moved from New York to Los Angeles, California, while I was in school. They didn't really know anyone or have any family there. Which is why, I think, they moved there. In Jewish orthodox families, you don't have girls that do things like that, like say, "No more. I'm not going."

So when I was about fourteen, I rejoined my parents in Los Angeles. Of course by this time, and for many years, my brothers were on their own and adults and living their own lives. In Los Angeles, I was in high school and I still remember very vividly signing up for classes in high school where they told me I had to take social studies. I was going into the tenth grade. I said, "Oh, no. I'm not taking any more social studies. I've had it. I've had it."

They said, "No, no, you've got to. It's a required course."

I said, "I know. It used to be required for me before, too, and I'm not doing it anymore."

So they said, "But social studies. You know, you learn about the government and what goes on and everything."

What?! That's not the social studies I had. Our social studies classes were how to set a formal table, how to stand in a receiving line, how to send out invitations. [laughs] Anyway, I found social studies to be the most interesting class, because I ended up becoming interested in a lot of the politics of the day, and ended up meeting other students. this is in the midst of World War Two. I met other students who evidently came from families that were radical, communist, Reds. But I didn't realize that at the time. All I knew was that there were some interesting groups of people, and they had clubs that you could join and participate in. That started my political life.

Dilg: So, just to expand a little, what types of schools were you at in New York? Then what type of school were you at once you were out in L.A. for high school.

Shaw: Well actually I went to public schools for my regular education. But I also always went to what they would call little yeshiva schools. When I was very young, the

synagogue that my parents went to was actually a storefront. They didn't have a real building. So this storefront was divided with curtains where different groups of kids would be. You could hear the practicing of the Hebrew and the recitation that would go on.

But later, my parents moved. First to Pelham Parkway in New York, where there was a very large, affluent synagogue. I went to classes after my regular public school education, and participated to a great extent in the activities and productions. I still remember playing Queen Esther at one of the events. But anyway, it was [basically] public school. It was public high school when I was in Los Angeles.

The private school that I was in was a [posh, all-girl] school. I always remember that they made a point of the fact that I was the first student ever taken in on a scholarship. My father was a fur cutter, you know, while he always was very good at his work, and always seemed to have work, he wasn't quite in the same economic bracket as most of the parents of other kids at the school. I always knew that by how many clothes they had compared to the clothes I had.

But anyway, there were a number of students there also that were sent there from other countries because it was during World War Two and their parents thought they would be safer to be away in the United States. Probably, they were.

Dilg: What was the name of that school?

Shaw: Highland Manor. It's now a junior college. Monmouth Junior College. The [property originally belonged to] the family that owned Woolworth's, they had had those buildings built. The main structure was a copy of the Versailles gardens and buildings and great big marble staircases. We used to have to, Saturday nights, put on our evening dresses and learn how to walk down the marble staircase and eat properly. Knife and fork, knife and fork.

Dilg: You mentioned your father's occupation. What did your mother do?

Shaw: Well, after she married my father, she was a homemaker again. In between her divorce from her first husband and her marriage to my father, my mother worked at various things to try to support herself and her son. She worked as a lampshade sewer. In those days, they were silk and made of hand. Then she ended up working in the Jewish theater as a seamstress, making costumes.

But none of it as a woman working in those days provided much of a living, and my mother determined that she had to find a man again. She set about doing that consciously, I found out, by getting a job as a second cook up in the Catskill Mountains at a Jewish hotel where there were a lot of men [vacationing] like my father, who had come to the United States without their families to establish themselves. He became enamored of my mother. Not only was she good looking, but she was also a fabulous cook.

Dilg: So you mentioned that you had this introduction to social studies, and how that set you on a path to your political awakening. Were there other individuals? You mentioned World War Two. Or other events that built on that or started to influence you when you were a teenager about what you would be interested in?

Shaw: There were a number of things that happened that I remember. One of the main things that happened is that in this club, which it turns out that I learned after I left, was the youth organization of the Communist Party of the United States. There would be discussion about the situation of what was going on with the Jews and the Palestinians in the Palestinian areas in the Middle East.

That sunk into me, because my father's son was able to come to the United States by leaving the Austrian Poland area around 1937 with groups of young Jewish, male Zionists going to Palestine. He was there for a number of years until my father and mother were able to bring him to the United States. That was after World War Two had begun but before the United States was at war. So he came sometime in 1941 or so.

I remembered his stories of how they were clearing the land in order to set up a kibbutz. At the time, I was a youngster and he would tell it and he was our hero for doing these great things for the Jewish people in Palestine. Then afterwards, in Los Angeles, I

started to hear more detail of it. I began to realize that what my brother was telling us was that they were clearing the land by clearing it of the Palestinians. That they would go out on night raids to drive them out. I could no longer feel supportive of [how Zionism was being established]. That was one of the reasons that I became aware, also, of what was going on around me, and of people who were fascists in the United States touring around the country.

Dilg: We're going to pick up where we left off. So you were talking about being in L.A. and being aware of world situations through your half brother's, activities in Palestine.

Shaw: In Palestine, yes.

Dilg: I'm sure there were just a lot of things going on around Los Angeles during the Second World War.

Shaw: Right. This was towards the end of the war. One of the things that happened is that there was an American-bred fascist, basically, the Silver Shirts, Gerald L.K. Smith, I don't think I'll ever forget his name, who was scheduled to speak in Los Angeles for his beliefs. He was going to be speaking at a public high school auditorium. At that point, I remember there were discussions [about him raised by different groups and] going on amongst students and amongst this club that I was in. It came down to two questions. Should we call for organized, visible opposition to him? There were a lot of veterans who were out already of the military, and union people, and other people saying, we oppose his ideas, and nobody else has the right to use the public school auditorium, how come he got it? Or should we just keep quiet, and say that, well, it will go away if you don't pay too much attention to him. Nobody pays any attention to those ideas.

So there was a big discussion in this club that I was in. I took the position that we should have a big demonstration. Well, it turned out that at the next meeting, I was asked to step outside of the meeting group. They spoke and voted and I was called in and told that I was being expelled from the group. I asked why. They said, "Because you're a Trotskyite."

“What’s a Trotskyite?” I had no idea. Well, it turns out that the Trotskyist movement had been supporting the side of having the demonstration. The Communist Party movement was, you know, the Stalinist side, was saying, “Keep quiet!” I didn’t know that I had lined up on political sides. It took me the next year to realize and to find out what was going on.

I ended up agreeing with the Trotsky side, which was the Socialist Workers Party. Became an active supporter and member of the Socialist Workers Party for practically all of my adult life, until 1984.

Dilg: So you were still in high school, then, when you joined the Socialist Workers Party.

Shaw: Yes.

Dilg: Okay. So it sounds like you were pretty engaged in a lot of political activity from that time forward. Did you continue on with that? Or when you graduated from high school, where did you go with that? What was the next phase of your life?

Shaw: Well, a lot of what I did was driven, I guess that’s a good word to use, by my commitment to be politically active as a socialist. The Socialist Workers’ Party, in 1948, mounted its first ever campaign to put up candidates to run for president and vice president. I became active in that. Which meant, also, leaving Los Angeles, which I was happy to do to get away from my parents, who did not agree with me and, needless to say, did not approve of what I was doing. That’s how my life was directed.

I, at some point not too long after that, met the man in the Socialist Workers Party that I married. We both lived our lives focused primarily around being politically active.

Dilg: Who was the person that you met and married?

Shaw: That was Ed Shaw. So, yes, I did take his name, kept it when we divorced. He was a merchant seaman at the time and worked at that during part of World War Two. He

was trained by the Coast Guard to be a merchant seaman, and was on dangerous runs into Murmansk and being torpedoed and everything.

He was originally from a small town in the Midwest, a very religious community called Zion, Illinois, where they were set up as a church town, and their basic belief is that the earth was flat. [laughs] That's what he was taught in school until the schools disintegrated when he was thirteen during the Depression, because the head of the church had invested too much of the church money in stocks that went belly up during the Depression. But they believed in things like faith healing also.

So we came, both of us, from a very religious family background. But totally different. Totally different. Except that it was interesting. His family, because they had a belief in support of both the Old and the New Testament, they did not eat pork, they didn't eat shellfish, they followed some of the old Jewish dietary laws. They really believed that because I had been born and raised Jewish that I had one foot in the door of heaven already as God's chosen people, and that I would influence their son.

Well, neither one of us was religious, and I've never taken on any other religion.

Dilg: So the two of you, then, ended up in Detroit.

Shaw: After many other moves, yes.

Dilg: Okay. I guess that was where some of the research I was doing, the records, showed you being active—

Shaw: Yes.

Dilg: In Detroit. it seemed like those were pretty important years.

Shaw: Yes, that was the years during the McCarthy period, right after. They didn't go away with his leaving the Senate or anything. Yes, those were important years. Those were important years in what was going on in the country, too. We moved to Detroit in

early 1954. It was just shortly after that that the Birmingham boycott of the buses occurred. That became one of the things we became very active in.

Being in Detroit, the center of automotive production, meant that you could get automobiles, used, fairly cheap. I still remember that we mounted campaigns to raise money and buy automobiles, like station wagons, that could be used by the boycotters instead of riding the buses. So that was a very active period. Then the whole Civil Rights Movement exploded. But we left there around 1963 and moved to New York.

But yes, I was politically active there, and running for public office for the Socialist Workers Party, as a way of raising ideas. Because people sometimes are much more willing to listen to them during an election period than otherwise.

Dilg: So what were some of the elective offices that you ran for?

Shaw: [laughs] Gee. I don't think I ran for dogcatcher. But that might have been the only one I didn't. I ran for the US Senate. I ran for governor. I ran for the state school board. I can't remember any of the others. But it was generally seen that I was not a serious candidate in the sense that I could win, although sometimes there were very close votes on smaller offices like the board of education for the state. But campaigns were primarily a propaganda tool, to be able to reach people with different ideas.

Yes, it was propaganda. That's not a bad word in my mind. That's something that there's probably too little of, because you don't get different ideas.

Dilg: So you were definitely learning about the political process, and what went into a campaign, or how to do public speaking, I'm assuming?

Shaw: Yes. Yes.

Dilg: In all of these?

Shaw: Yes. In all of these. Also, how to organize a campaign. For a minor party to get onto the ballot is not a very easy thing. In the state of Michigan, for instance, when we

got there in 1954, the state had passed a law saying that no one who was a communist can run for office and get on the ballot. We went there to reinforce the local group, in order to try to challenge that. Now it was primarily directed at the Communist Party, but they applied it to anyone who was a minor party candidate or a radical of any kind. Which meant that we, the Socialist Workers Party, couldn't get on the ballot, either.

So we went to try to contest this law as being unconstitutional. We couldn't find an attorney to handle it. [laughs] We finally found one person who had been educated and trained as an attorney and had passed the bar but was not functioning as an attorney. He was functioning, I believe, as an editor for the United Auto Workers in-house newspaper for their members. He was willing to take it on, and did. The Communist Party never would join the case. They just disappeared underground and kept quiet. But we beat that law, and immediately, in 1954, in the fall, mounted a campaign to run for office.

In order to get on the ballot, though, you had to go to every single county and you had to get a certain required minimum number of signatures of valid voters who say that you can be on the ballot. And that was not easy, because the time that you had to do that was usually during the middle of winter. I remember freezing in some of those cities, trying to get signatures.

So yes, the learning process, even the theoretical education that I received, that I absorbed, I think, in the Socialist Workers Party of how to organize, usually it meant organizing from the bottom up. We never believed in setting up top leaders and laying down the law. It was a very, in a sense, democratic, although centralized democratic, in its development of its program. But there were valuable lessons that I think I learned and absorbed over many years of working with people who were far, you know, much older than I was at the time, but who had been leaders in the labor movement or in various other political movements, from the Depression on.

Dilg: In some of your recollections that I had looked over, you became active in reproductive rights during your time in Detroit, and I know that became a very important part of your activism.

Shaw: Yes.

Dilg: So talk a little bit about what your experiences were like in that time period with those issues.

Shaw: Yes. Abortion rights. It's true, it's a very dear question to me. I recently held a discussion with my granddaughter's class on social justice and, I can't remember the title of the class. It was interesting because it was about my activities in the women's movement on abortion rights, on the Equal Rights Amendment. And a lot of it focused by them asking questions as an interview base.

One of the questions that they asked me took me by surprise. Because basically what they asked was, "What is it in your life that made you so interested and committed to the issue of abortion rights for women?" Believe me, in all of these years, I don't think that anybody has ever posed that question in that manner to me. It was always more of a political perspective, why is abortion rights so important to you? Well, it's so important because it's so vital, it's so essential to women's control of their own life, what they can do, etcetera.

This was posed, what in your *personal* life. I had to sit there and think. I think that what I answered them is probably a good answer to your question. To begin with, I always believed that women should have the right to control their own reproductive life. But next is, I was a very fertile person. No matter what birth control I used, where diaphragms were supposed to be ninety-nine percent sure, I always hit the one percent. [laughs] At one point, Planned Parenthood, or what became Planned Parenthood, the Margaret Sanger Clinic that I was using and reporting to about my menstrual cycle, sent me a card and said, "Oh, you're just a perfect candidate! You don't have to worry about using birth control during this period and that period right around the period of your menstrual cycle. You won't be able to conceive." Well, I did.

This went on in my life. At this point, when I moved to Michigan, I was only twenty-four years old and I'd already had like three or four abortions. They were not easy. They were terrible to have to get. They were expensive. They were scary. I never knew if I was going to come out of it alive or with my uterus intact, with some of the experiences I went through. So wanting to see something that we women needed and

used to be legal, to be safe, is what drove me into the activity in Detroit. Because there was a doctor there who performed abortions that were not as dangerous, and who went through follow-up care, who charged women on a sliding scale as to what they can afford.

But in order for the women to have the abortion, they needed to have someplace to stay. Because it was not just a surgical procedure of going in, going out, and sending them home with whatever problems. It was a different procedure. He would come by and check them out after they had aborted, to see that there were no complications.

So my house became one of the way stations where women could come. My husband even was trained to help. There was not much that we had to do except make them comfortable, and hold their hand and make sure everything went all right, and know the phone number if anything went wrong to call the doctor, and he would come. Having that doctor available and doing that is what pulled me into activity from then on the abortion issue. Because it became more than just a political issue. It became just the really total interrelationship of the personal and the political, which did not really get talked about until the late '60s and early '70s with the real rise of the women's movement. I had never heard that, even from the old feminists, that what is personal is political. But I realize it is very true, and that it's very true for most women if it's presented for them for them to recognize.

Dilg: You mentioned a moment ago as you started talking about your involvement and interest in abortion rights that you had gone to speak to your granddaughter's class. So I'm assuming that somewhere in there, there were children involved as well. Am I correct that you had your children while you were in Detroit?

Shaw: Yes. I had many abortions, and then decided to have children. [laughs] I had two children, two and a half years apart. Perfect normal delivery. No problems, no trauma, it was something that I had always said I would either have two children or none. So I ended up having two, and it worked out very nicely. Had a boy, then had a girl. They're still around and living here. We're very close. I'm very glad that I had them because I love them and we respect each other.

Dilg: Just for the record, their names are?

Shaw: Matthew and Wilma.

Dilg: So were your political activities separate from your work? Did you work during this time period, too, for wages? It sounds like there was a lot going on at that period in your life

Shaw: I always worked.

Dilg: How did you manage all of those activities?

Shaw: I had a lot of energy. [laughs] I always worked. For much of the time, I was the primary breadwinner. Because in spite of everything that I was doing, there were times when my husband was more a committed activist, politically, and could not put in time working for a job. I basically always worked. A lot of time while we lived in Detroit, I worked as a waitress. It was a period of time when it was Depression and jobs—it was the easiest job for me to find. The hours were more flexible.

The only difficulty was that when I became pregnant, I worked until I was about five months pregnant. My bosses finally said, “Rita, the tables are pretty close here. You’re starting to bump into the people sitting, you’re liable to spill soup. Who knows what, with your belly. It’s time for you to stop.”

I did. I applied for unemployment, but they wouldn’t give it to me. I had gone to other places. I was an experienced long distance telephone operator from New York. But they weren’t hiring when I moved to Detroit. I had done other office work and stuff. Nobody would hire me as a pregnant woman. So I said, well, they’re not hiring me, I deserve unemployment. Well, they wouldn’t give me unemployment because I was pregnant. I fought it all the way up! Now this, of course, became one of the issues in the ‘70s that the women’s movement took on. There I was in 1958 trying to fight the powers that be.

But even after my children were born, I generally worked. Because that was the period of time, also, that my husband was away a lot. So I worked and even after my second child, when Wilma was born, I ended up hiring a young woman to come in and to be with my children part time so that I could work, because my husband wasn't home.

Dilg: What was the childcare situation like in 1958. There clearly were many women who were working at that point in time. Either your personal experiences, or what did you know about how women were handling childcare?

Shaw: There was very little available childcare. It had to be worked out with family, friends, or you hired someone who, if they're good, you can have two or three kids, or four, maybe, together. I had my son Matthew in childcare, like two days a week, a half a day a week. But it was a special program from Wayne State University that they used for training some of their students in early childhood education or teaching. The waiting list was eons long, and would never suit anyone who had to go to work five days a week. It wasn't really childcare. It was, "Oh, isn't this nice, your child will have a nice little experience of being with other children." It's all very nice, and we tried to have it mixed racially and everything. But of course most people who were black don't know about this lovely little school and so it was all white. So no, there wasn't any childcare.

I was one of the people that was always aware that during World War Two, when they wanted women to go to work in the factories and do the welding and build the airplanes and the ships and everything else, they managed to throw up childcare galore, wonderful childcare, twenty-four hour, seven days a week, with medical care on the site. "Oh, you have to work overtime, no problemo!"

All of a sudden, World War Two ends, and it's gone! "Oh, we can't have childcare. It's too complicated, it's too expensive." Uh huh. It's just not convenient to have women having that possibility of being able to go to work or go to school. So back they went. Anyway.

Dilg: Well, your experiences do cover an interesting time period. You mentioned McCarthy earlier, and you were working on issues in the mid to late '50s that really took

on a whole different cant by the 1960s and '70s as those movements built momentum and things changed. If you can recall and just talk a little about what the evolution was like from when activism, the women's rights movement, civil rights, really came to the fore.

Shaw: What was it really like? It was *mind blowing*, it was *exciting*. It was, you know, I have never used illicit, illegal drugs, but I know the term "on a high." That was a period, for years, of being on a high. If you were political, that was wonderful. The Civil Rights Movement, which really sparked young people to give support, to learn how to respect each other, how to respect themselves, which society wasn't doing too good a job of building that self respect. But building a movement, participating with others in a like cause, builds a tremendous amount of, not only self respect, but a belief in yourself and your abilities to do almost anything. That is what in certain terms of either the labor movement or the political movement that you look for, to build that mass movement of learning, of power, and of people learning that they do have power, and that it's through that unity.

The Civil Rights Movement played a big role. Then right at about that point came a greater awareness about the war in Vietnam. It followed right on the heels of it. Some of the same people who had been active in the Civil Rights Movement carried over and translated their experiences to the antiwar movement of the war in Vietnam.

Those were most exhilarating times. They were times when the battle between different groups with different ideas of what shall we do now, what is our slogan now, is it going to be "Victory to the Viet Cong," or is it going to be "US Out Now." That was a big battle that went on over years, over dozens of national conferences of arguments and volumes of paper, and sometimes even fist fights, practically.

In the late '60s, with the Vietnam War still going on, Betty Friedan's book came out, *The Feminine Mystique*. It served as a catalyst to many, especially the young women who had been throwing their heart and soul and bodies into antiwar organizing, into the Civil Rights Movement, and suddenly read this book—and these were educated, intelligent young women, because they had been learning what their power is—and they read this book and they said, where are *we* in all of this that we're fighting for?

Plus, at the same time, especially in the New England area where a lot of this bubbled at its start, the fight was going on for the right of women to have contraception, which wasn't even legal in states like Massachusetts or Connecticut. So all of this just started to come together. '68 to '70 was the boiling point of everything. Of the radical movement, antiwar, the women's movement, civil rights movement, and with all of that, a lot of the early writings of women as new wave feminists. It just all tied together; it was so exciting.

The great culmination of what was going on came in 1970, in August, in New York. When NOW, the National Organization for Women had been formed not too long after Friedan's book came out, and they called for a demonstration of women on August 26, which was the date of receiving suffrage of the right to vote. New York City should come out and call for equal rights for women. The abortion rights issue was prominent there. Equal pay. In those days, the term was equal pay for equal work.

They expected four or five thousand women. We had over sixty thousand! Sixty thousand! It was just *unbelievable*. That was the real beginning in understanding that there was a movement that can win things.

That's where I was, in New York. I was part of that demonstration. I worked with the women's movement and other NOW people for a demonstration later in January. That was the one that Kate Millett was very prominent in, because I think it was *Time* magazine had said that she was a lesbian, and as a lesbian, she could not be a spokesperson for the women's movement. At that time I was still married. There was a group and we had a big demonstration in New York in January at the mayor's residence. Basically what we said is, if you think Kate Millett can't speak for women because she's a lesbian, then you should probably understand we're probably all going to be lesbians. We were all wearing these purple scarves tied around our sleeves and the whole thing, and made our point.

Then shortly after that, I moved to Seattle. [laughs] All enthused about the women's movement and its campaigns and its issues. I moved to Seattle after my husband had moved here ten months before because I said in New York, "I don't want to live with you anymore." [laughs]

He said, "Well, let's try moving to another city." So he was here with the children and actually working a job. I moved out here, and for the first time in my life was unemployed and able to collect some unemployment insurance for a short while. That gave me a chance to get familiar with Seattle.

The first place I looked was in the papers and found where the NOW meetings were. I think within the first four weeks that I was here, I went to my first NOW meeting, which was held, I still remember it, at a red brick house in the Wallingford area that wasn't too far from where I lived. That became the beginning of my activities in the women's movement in the Seattle, Washington area.

Dilg: So you mentioned that you looked up NOW fairly quickly upon your arrival in Seattle, and that one of the first meetings you went to was at someone's home. Expand a little on what, whether this was Washington NOW or Seattle NOW, and what the organization was like, and who you met and what these meetings were like.

Shaw: Well, I had worked with NOW in New York, and I had considered NOW, and I think rightly so, to be the primary organization to be able to encompass the women's movement and its various issues and demands. I was fortunate that they had a little notice in one of the local newspapers or somewhere that there was going to be a meeting or the address, or you had to call. I don't remember even. I remember some of the people were some of the ones that had been around, I remember Helen Sommers was there. For the life of me right now, I can't think of some of the other women. Eleanor Bilimoria, that's another woman I remember that was there.

But there must have been, probably, about ten to twelve women there. It wasn't overly crowded. They obviously were what I would call professional women. Well dressed, well spoken, capable, organized. It turns out that this was Seattle NOW. It had been in existence for just about a year. After the first or second meeting I started going regularly, and they were pumping me about what was it like in New York, you know, here's someone who was there for the big demo. Of course I'm happy to share, it was so exciting.

It turns out that they did not have a task force in reproductive rights, but this was the big issue that was going on around the country. This was the big issue in Washington State. This was 1971. I'm trying to remember the year now that they had the state initiative.

Dilg: Are you referring to Referendum 20? That changed the—

Shaw: —that changed the laws in Washington State. But still had restrictions. So that was—

Dilg: 1970.

Shaw: Right. So that was already passed. But it still had restrictions. We knew that it would be affected by the case going through the Supreme Court. Plus all of these other states that you can't get an abortion, even with restrictions. Where in some states you can't even get birth control information or supplies. So they had said that they wanted a task force on the issue, and, at this time, there wasn't too much else outside of Seattle for NOW.

So I agreed to head up and to initiate the reproductive rights task force at that point. And very shortly it became the state task force, just because other cities in the state that were becoming organized around, for NOW, were relatively new and starting out, and his would give it some perspective.

Plus, in 1971, basically through the New England/East Coast area, around the issue of abortion, had an organization had formed called, the acronym was WONAAC, Women's National Abortion Action Coalition. I had learned of that and was supporting it while I was still in New York. New York had passed an easier regulation, but still with restrictions. At that point, with my husband and children were gone, and I was working my regular job, it was also then I started working at a clinic that would help to screen women that were coming in for abortions, like a little bit of counseling and screening and help.

So this WONAAC had taken on a national perspective. It was the only really national visible campaign on the issue. I felt that NOW should hook up with that, rather than trying to create another wheel. So we did. So the task force from NOW just ran over into the WONAAC.

We were able to get a lot of support, especially from Dr. Franz Koome. Dr. Koome had his offices in Renton. He was trained in Holland, and he was a supporter of the basic concept of a woman's right to control her own reproductive life. He supported the idea that abortion should be legal and available, and as such, we were able to approach him and other people, but he was the primary fund source for giving support to the abortion movement here, abortion rights movement. So that WONAAC was able to rent a house in the university district. I think it was on Brooklyn. I'd have to look at the old stationery still around. But we had a house as our offices, and we were able to function out of that. We set up one of the front rooms as safe childcare so that women could come and be able to do work or read or talk about it or whatever.

We connected with the University of Washington and other universities to connect up with young women. Started to build a very large visible base of support amongst many different groups and layers of people. WONAAC, in the meantime, was calling for national demonstrations, I think, in November of that year. We helped to fill buses, I can't remember, I think four, that went—the West Coast demonstration was San Francisco—so we had people going down to that.

WONAAC became the umbrella for all of the various groups on the abortion rights issue. It functioned statewide. It became the organization, also, that picked up on the Yvonne Wanrow case. A Colville Indian resident woman that was being accused, I think, of murder. I can't remember the exact incident. She had some incident at her home. She called like 911 or the police, to call them for help. Whatever happened, somebody was injured or killed. They determined that because she was so calm on the telephone that she must have been guilty. Because otherwise, she would have been hysterical. I mean, she was a woman, so she would be hysterical. She wasn't hysterical, therefore she was guilty, because she was suppressing her natural hysteria. That's the only way we could interpret it. So we built support for her for that case.

You know, I think I'm confusing the timing. I think Yvonne Wanrow came later. I think what came in the earlier period of WONAAC was this case from Florida, the woman's name I can't remember, where she had a boyfriend, she'd become pregnant. She went and had an abortion. The boyfriend sued in the courts about aborting his child. She was told in the courts that she should never have had that abortion, and that she was guilty of having an illegal abortion, because it was illegal in the state. Part of the sentencing was that she had to marry him— [laughs] and go live with him wherever he was, and, I guess, immediately make a baby again. So that became an issue.

But through 1972, WONAAC was the group that NOW, other women's groups, women professional groups, all worked on the reproductive rights, and it wasn't just that abortion was the issue. It included the right to contraception. It included the right that no woman should be forcibly sterilized. It included that there should not be the restrictions as some areas had, like we did, about approval from two doctors and everything else. California eased their laws. They had to get approval from a psychiatrist that they weren't crazy. You know, making the assumption that if you want to control your reproductive life, there's something the matter with you mentally. They had to get a clergy person to approve it. Plus your husband, if you're married, had to give his signed approval.

Well in those days I still remember, if the husband or man went to have a vasectomy, they tried turning it around and saying you had to have a woman, you know, your wife sign for it. I had tried to convince my husband at the time to have a vasectomy. We'd been talking about it for years, and he had always said, "Oh, of course! Of course!" I had tried to get him to have a vasectomy out here. He went in, he made the appointment for the interview and to get it set up, and he came home, and I said, "Well, when are you going? I'll drive you in."

He said, "I'm not doing it! They expect me to have you sign for it?!" He never had a vasectomy then. [laughs] But it was okay for women to have to get all these signatures and approval.

Oh, well, I digress. But that was all part of it.

Dilg: Sure. So when you talk about "we" at the WONAAC clinic by UW, who was we?

Shaw: Well, there were primarily three of us who put the majority of our time into it. Beside myself, it was Gloria Albee and Georgiana Schuder. Now Gloria was also a member of the Socialist Workers Party. She had moved out here just about the same time I had, or just a little bit later. Probably a little bit later, in '71. She was from the Boston area. She was married, moved out here with her husband, and had their child that was very close in age to my daughter, and it was a girl, so they got to know each other and be friends.

Georgiana had been living in Seattle for a number of years. She was married. Her husband was in a doctoral program on some esoteric English project, *Beowulf*, I believe, and had been at it for many years. She had two daughters, two children, that were younger than mine. She worked. She was a fabulous typist. But she also was a wonderful writer, had a brilliant mind. She has since, by the way, become a top educating doctor specializing in women's breast cancer, oncology.

But anyway, the three of us were the primary activists in the organization, although there were many, many people. We really had a lot of things always going on. There were always women that were eager to come and do things, especially since we tried to make it so convenient, so that having a child didn't mean that you can't do something. We made a point when we had public meetings that we would have childcare set up in the next room or in the area someplace.

I don't know why, but we weren't as bothered then by this whole business of insurance and liability. We just all knew we were working for a common cause. We were not going to have people who were going to abuse our children. They loved them and cared for them as much as we did, because we were all in this together. We didn't sit and worry about what amount of money of liability insurance was there in case the kid fell down and had to have a Band-aid. If the kid fell down and had to have a Band-aid, then the person there would pick them up, clean them off, and put on a Band-aid. So that was it.

So that WONAAC basically said that women shouldn't have to exist with those restrictive conditions when we got the 1973 decision—which was early in the year—of *Roe v. Wade*. All of a sudden we got this wonderful ruling. Abortion is a woman's right to choose through the first two trimesters. In the third, the state can have some concern

and set some limits for safety and health, etcetera. But it's a decision between her and her doctor. Hallelujah. Hallelujah.

Almost immediately came the rush in different states to throw impediments, blocks, and conditions in the way of it. Make women look at pictures of aborted fetuses! They would come, you know, around the clinics, waving these giant posters of aborted fetuses. We would have pictures of dead women who had had illegal abortions, whose wombs had been perforated, and who lay on a bathroom floor and bled to death. In a way it was silly to try to counter. Because in my mind, you're taking a fetus that cannot live or exist outside of the woman's womb until it is far more developed, and you're taking that and comparing that to a life of a human being that is already in existence and connecting with people, doing things, ideas, and hopes. [sighs] We didn't use those photographs too often, but we certainly had them. I think just posing the issue of the value of a woman's life, that that is a human life, has to have some value.

But of course, if you give women the right to control their own reproductive life, then you're acknowledging that they do have some other value besides being child bearers. There are a lot of people in this society that never would acknowledge that, and work to deny it.

In that talk that I did with my granddaughter's class, I had written down some quotes. I don't think I ever got to use them, but this one really just got me. The idea, abortion was not illegal until about 1860 in the United States. Of course, about that time it was getting to be that way because some of the science had advanced, that they had begun to question the development of the fetus, and all of a sudden religions became alarmed because they had accepted abortion up through quickening, which is usually like five, six months. If there is life, and they're conceived, then there's a soul, so they have to save the souls.

So they started restricting abortions. The American Medical Association, in that period of time, in 1859, came out with a denouncement of abortion. This is basically what they said. I excerpted part of it. "The woman who aborts becomes unmindful of the course marked out for her by Providence and overlooks the duties imposed upon her by the marriage contract."

So there. That is what women's role is. That is the argument that is still being used, that having reproductive rights available for women at their request breaks up the family and the whole role of the family model. Because the family model is a man and a woman making babies that the woman stays home and takes care of in order, so that they can be raised to make more babies.

So that is the model that we're all supposed to adhere to, and it's fairly restrictive for women. Here we find that even women who support that model can do a heck of a lot more than just stay home and raise babies. They get PhD's in college. They write tracts and pamphlets and books, and travel all over and speak like Phyllis Schlafly. I don't think she was ever a stay-at-home mom! I don't know, maybe she was. I'm exaggerating.

I was a stay-at-home mom for years, until both of my children were in school. I tried to stay home to be with them as much as possible, because I felt that those early years were important. But by gosh, if I had had decent childcare where they helped to educate them as I would do when I was with them, I would have been happy for them to be there part of the time. Because one of the things that I realized after staying at home for several years with my young children is that I began to sound like a young child. [laughs] I'd lost my vocabulary. I sounded like a three year old!

But anyway, that from the American Medical Association is the standard today that is still being argued and fought for. That now instead of trying to turn back *Roe v. Wade*, what is being done is to try to throw as many brick walls in front of any woman being able to get a legal, safe abortion.

Of course, you get me started on that, then I'll get started on the question of the rights of minors. Because after 1973 with *Roe v. Wade*, so many people just said, "Whew! That's over with. Now we can move on." It was interesting because it was 1973, later in the year, that Dr. Koome performed an abortion on a sixteen year old woman at her request. She was not living at home with her parents; she had been removed from her parents' home and was the ward, I believe, of the Catholic youth family services, I'm not sure of the name.

Dilg: It was Catholic Family Services.

Shaw: Catholic Family Services. After the abortion was performed, these agencies, plus, I think, some others, got the city prosecutor to prosecute Dr. Koome for having performed an abortion on a minor. Well, at that time, there were still some restrictions that were assumed, that minors have to have parental consent for contraceptives, for abortion, for medical care, everything. Some of that had been struck down as far as medical care. There had been a little few chinks in the question of minors' right to contraceptives. But the abortion issue was a new one.

Dr. Koome was found guilty in the King County courts. There was a lot of support in the court room for him from women's groups. We had already formed—we meaning a lot of the people who had been very active in WONAAC, in NOW, along with Gloria and Georgiana—a group called the Feminus Amicus Brief with the idea of not only supporting Dr. Koome through his first trial in the county courts, but of building support for the challenge of his conviction to the Washington State Supreme Court.

And, that's what we did. There were a lot of organizations initially. NOW was one of the first that started it and helped to reach out to other groups. There was a lot of discussion. A lot of discussion amongst women in the groups about the question of the right of minors. It was a very difficult decision for many groups, many women to make. Because the concept, I believe, of protective laws, that are supposed to be protective, especially of women, or of minors. If they're both— [laughs] that's even doubly protective. You throw in a word like “protective,” and then if you say well, there shouldn't be any law restricting their right to make a decision, then what you're doing is saying, “Take away their protection!” People just panic.

So then you have to start questioning, is it really protective? What is it protecting? What is it keeping out? What is it protecting them from? Are they really better off with that wall around them? Basically that wall meant, in this situation, in my opinion, that it could not acknowledge that minors were sexually active, that they would choose to be sexually active, and that it was not always forced upon them. That minors are sexual human beings. Then the protection takes away their right to make a decision about being sexually active. It also takes away their right and their ability to make a decision about what to do about any consequences of being sexually active. Now if you're going to have certain rights, like acknowledging that they do have a right to be

sexually active, you have to give them the right to make mistakes when they're sexually active, and to be able to correct them, or to learn from them, or to do both, and protective laws do neither. You have to give young people the opportunity to make their own mistakes and accept the fact that sometimes they will make mistakes. to accept the fact that that is not going to be the end of the world.

So these are the discussions that went on and on. Sometimes they were just yelling, screaming bitter arguments, and they usually went on in people's homes. Thank goodness [laughs] it wasn't in big public places. It was usually done in groups of five or six, because otherwise it would have been absolutely impossible. But after a period of time we were able to get, I believe, eleven different organizations, women's groups, to sign on, so to speak, as supporters of the idea that if a woman is old enough to conceive, then she is old enough to decide for herself about her reproductive life, and to hire attorneys that we can then tell, this is our belief, this is our perspective, this is what we would like to see presented to the court. To have these attorneys write this up, and they did.

Dr. Koome had attorneys from NARAL. It was originally National Abortion Action League, or reproductive rights, something. It had changed. It did have the word "abortion" in it in the early days. I did end up calling them and finding out. ACLU, Planned Parenthood, and the Feminist Amicus Brief were all submitted along with Dr. Koome's own brief in his defense, as friend of the court. Which is what "amicus" means, a friend of the court.

The decision issued in January of 1975 totally supported the ideas raised by the Feminist Amicus Brief and even used some of its language. It was a wonderful victory, which bothers me now that sometimes people don't know about it that it's there. It's in the records, it's on the books, it's in the courts. We must never let go of it or lose it. Because the concepts that are stated about supporting a minor woman's right applies doubly, triply, quadruply, to a woman who is not a minor. Yet we're losing those rights all the time now.

I always felt that the work for the Feminist Amicus Brief was some of the most important that I had done in my life. It did resonate with me very personally because of my own personal background. It was good also because it brought various women's

groups together who don't always work together well on touchy issues. The literature and stuff that I have which shows different groups, all the different people who contributed to it, I think they're all heroes. Because that was a tough one. But they understood it and supported it. I'm proud of that.

Dilg: Well, it brings up an interesting point which you had touched on in some earlier comments and that I've just run across in my research, which is that the Seattle NOW really encompassed a pretty broad political spectrum, of women who are involved from, I'm hesitant to use categories, but from more mainstream groups like League of Women Voters, and the Business and Women's Professional Club, you know, to more left-

Shaw: AAUW, right.

Dilg: Mm hmm. To Radical Women. You were a member of the Socialist Workers Party at that time.

Shaw: Right.

Dilg: Can you talk a little about how that worked and I'm guessing maybe sometimes those coalitions worked better than others.

Shaw: [laughs] That's for sure.

Dilg: Particularly, you just gave an example of even though it wasn't easy, a lot of these groups came together over the support of Dr. Koome and the Feminist-

Shaw: Amicus Brief. Yep.

Dilg: But another big campaign that a lot of women worked on was the state ERA campaign.

Shaw: Right.

Dilg: Which was HJR 61, which was happening in this very same time period, too.

Shaw: Yes.

Dilg: Talk about how that worked.

Shaw: Okay. NOW was, in my mind, in my understanding, *el primo* organization nationwide for first attracting huge numbers and varied kinds of women to all kinds of issues around women's rights. Now frankly, I don't think that the national leadership had really intended to have that attraction. I don't think that they thought it was possible. I think that in their minds, they were geared primarily towards the more professional women who, in those days, we didn't have the expression "the glass ceiling," but they were hitting the glass ceiling. Or they were being mommies when they didn't always want to be. Their careers, they would have to take a break, and it would suffer. That was a lot of women that were in the national leadership of NOW.

But in spite of them, in spite of their desires, or their expectations, or their political perspective, the time was right. There was nothing they could do about it. Women of all stripes, colors, sizes, ideas, politics, belief systems, religions, whatever, all flocked to NOW. The issues that they raised were absolutely unlimited, and it was the same thing here. Our meetings of NOW in the first couple of years, '71, '72, '73, I can't even remember all of the names of the different people who each had another issue. The question of women marrying and not having to change their name. The question of having a child and not being in wedlock and having legality for the child. The question of easier divorce laws. The question of hiring in certain industries being discriminatory. The question of jobs being assigned unfairly, of pay being inequitable, of being raped had having no sympathy and understanding for that.

Of classes in NOW about assertiveness training. Helping to teach women that, for instance, if they're in a restaurant and they order and the waitperson comes and brings a different dish than what they ordered, they should speak up. Women were afraid to!

[whispers] “Oh, I don’t want to disturb them. Oh, it’s probably a mistake. I don’t want to get the cook in trouble.” No! You ordered it! You’re going to pay for it! Get what you wanted!

This was the period of time, also, that we had the beginning of Py Bateman starting the Feminist Karate Union. First practice sessions for women learning self defense. Not just bowing, scraping, kicking. It’s how to defend yourself. When a guy comes at you from behind you, what do you do? He throws his arm around you. Grab his pinky and bend it all the way back! Things like that. Self defense. How to do it. I still remember, oh, what was her name? Something James. She was a, I think she was a professor at the University of Washington. At one of the NOW meetings she was talking about rape, and women’s defense and everything, and one of the ideas that was raised was tell the guy that you have the clap, that he’ll catch it from you if he rapes you. [laughs] All things were raised. All things were possible.

You know, if we had eight different task force groups on eight different issues, we had thirty different subjects all the time still going. Tried to always find a way to fit them into one of the task forces so it could work. But women would come in and just immediately step into organization, leadership, going down and meeting in Olympia with the legislators and pushing on the issues. It was exciting.

A lot of the women who started NOW were the professional women who did come from groups like League of Women Voters, Association of University Women, Women’s Political Action Caucus. I can’t even think of all of them. There are so many more. Business and Professional Women, I remember. Oh, wow. All of these groups. I guess that they’d been sitting there waiting to blossom into these very radical feminists, which they all became, according to others. But it was probably a very natural progression, and it was an easy one for them in many ways. They provided excellent leadership. Organizational skills that played a tremendously important role in channeling and funneling this tremendous amount of human energy and demands. You know, and these are skills that they had learned being professionals. It paid off in this sense. Aside from their jobs and everything else, it also meant that women who were coming in who didn’t have those kinds of skills started to learn them, too.

So, yes. There were a lot of different groups that were represented through the members that came in. But NOW was not a group organization; it was individuals. So individuals came from the different groups with their varying experiences, which all benefited building NOW.

When I joined, and I was a socialist, and an active member of the Socialist Workers Party, when I joined here in Seattle, I was the only member of the Socialist Workers Party who was a member of NOW. It isn't that anybody told people not to, but they also didn't tell them to do it. I did it because I was into it. It was my thing. It was my bag. [laughs]

Years later, I used to hear that other SWPers here, when I moved out here, they would go around and say, "Watch out for her! She's a gung ho feminist!" They told me this, and it was being said in a derogatory way. Me? I felt, yes! That's right! I am!

I don't think that members of Radical Women or Freedom Socialist Party were ever members of NOW. They always worked outside of NOW through their own groups, but more by setting up incidental organizations that they participated in and others would participate in. They have their own life, to a great extent. There were members, I'm trying to remember what other political groups were around in that period that were a part of it. The Communist Party was no part of the women's movement in that period. The Communist Party didn't even endorse the Equal Rights Amendment until, in the later '70s, at the same time that the labor movement did. I think there were some other smaller socialist organizations that had a few people that were around.

But NOW was *the* place for political activity around the women's movement and around women's issues. I was happy to be a part of it. It's like that's what I had been living for. [laughs]

Dilg: So how did all these diverse agendas and diverse needs coalesce around the state ERA campaign in the early '70s?

Shaw: Well, I don't think there was any problem of getting all disparate groups supporting the initiative. That worked fine. Now keep in mind also that the US Congress and Senate did not pass out the Equal Rights Amendment until after *Roe v. Wade*. The

House passed it in October of '72; the Senate passed it in like March of '73. January, I believe, was the *Roe v. Wade* decision.

Now what's interesting to me about the Equal Rights Amendment was that that was not a big, primary issue for the women's movement from the period of like '68. We didn't have big marches and demonstrations demanding that the ERA come out of committee. I mean, it had been sitting there since 1923. You know? Twenty-three to seventy-three, it made it a nice round number of fifty years that it moldered in Congress. We didn't have people writing letters to our Congress people, going and visiting, giving them roses, going and lobbying or anything a lot about the ERA. There might be a mention of it once in a while, but it was one of, you know, somewhere down the line we've got this big question. But in the meantime, we've got one, two, three other issues that we're busy fighting for, and we've just made a goal on three of them and we're moving on.

I think that the reason that the Equal Rights Amendment first of all came out of the Congress, is because there was an active women's movement. They were marching and demonstrating about so many things, and especially scaring them. For people to take to the streets on an issue like reproductive rights and abortion rights, I mean if women are going to do that and expose themselves on those kinds of issues, what on earth are they going to do about something like the Equal Rights Amendment? They had to get it out. They had to get rid of it. They had to show that they're on the right side. Because all of those people scared them. That was what worked with the antiwar movement. That's what scared them about civil rights movement.

The women's movement, when it was massive, when it was visible, when it was loud, when it was demanding, that's when things got changed. So, in Washington State, when there was a decision made by movers and shakers and from within the women's movement, and these were all women who were well trained, legally trained, in the legislature, and they said, by God, we can do it! This is the time!

A woman's name keeps running through my mind, and I can't get it out of my head who was one of the leaders who helped to initiate the campaign to get the Equal Rights Amendment voted for. Anyway—

Dilg: Was it Michelle Pailthorp?

Shaw: No.

Dilg: Gisela Taber?

Shaw: Nope. It will come to me at some point.

Dilg: Okay.

Shaw: [The 1972 Campaign for the state ERA as an initiative on the ballot was organized and led by very capable, politically experienced “mainstream” kind of women. They did an excellent job and there was general unity from the varied strata of other women’s’ and political groups.]

Dilg: Are you talking about the Washington State ERA?

Shaw: Yes. Some of the different perspectives about the state ERA evolved around issues of implementation as it would impact other legislation such as labor protective laws.

Dilg: Well maybe you could talk a little bit about what your activities were in the HJR 61 campaign.

Shaw: I was basically in NOW and a foot soldier with the campaign. I was still very active in the abortion rights movement, and it wasn’t until about ’74 that I took on a responsible role as the western state convener for NOW. So that I didn’t really play a role in the ERA campaign until I became convener. Convener is like an organizer for the western part of the state—we had two statewide—to be responsible when there were requests for information or help to set up a new NOW group. That was when I picked up on my responsibilities for the Equal Rights Amendment.

Plus, a lot of our ERA work was primarily at that time being directed by the national. Because we had already passed a state ERA.

Dilg: Right.

Shaw: So what we were dealing with was ratification, and we got ratification out of our state legislature fairly early. It was done in 1973. So that national was the one that was sending out all the information. You know, we're going to do this, we're planning this, we're going to have this national demonstration. Therefore, as a convener, I was getting the information from national, and expected, and did, follow through. We're writing letters on this. This is the state that we're targeting now. Send support. Raise money. Various things. This went on for a number of years.

Now one of the other things that started to go on around 1975, and all of this time still, there might have been a couple of other people who were Socialist Workers Party members who had joined, but I was primarily the only one. But in 1975, the Socialist Workers Party seemed to have some epiphany nationwide of, "Oh my gosh, look at that organization called NOW! Look what it is doing! It is just so fab, we ought to be working with it! Let's all go in and work with it. [laughs]

They did. An awful lot of them, and frankly, it scared NOW shitless. All of a sudden, all of these radicals pouring into NOW, saying, "I have an idea!" "No, I have a better idea!" "Let's go out on the street." "Let's take it to the—" I think it was, on the part of the SWP, it was poorly executed. That's a nice way of saying it, I think. For NOW, it absolutely overwhelmed them and scared them. Because we're still dealing with primarily leadership, especially at a national level, that sees the organization as something much more controlled. Much more limited and directed in ways that they approve of. I think that nationally, especially, it was difficult, as opposed to people who were local, who had the experience of working with new women coming in with other ideas, other issues. The national people were more removed.

But even here in Seattle, the outpouring of radicals, of SWPers into NOW, just threw some of the leadership for a real loop. We had some very serious red baiting with motions and resolutions to expel people who were members of the Socialist Workers

Party. I still remember one of the meetings that was held in a church where we were meeting at the time, just immediately north of what is now the Wallingford Center in Seattle. There's a church like on Fifty-First Street, just a block off of Wallingford. We used to meet in there. I remember this meeting. I remember Judy Lonquist, and some of the other executive board members, arguing for expulsion of SWPers. What was surprising and very encouraging were people who stood up as members, who basically said, "You've lost your mind. How can you say you're going to expel people because of what they believe? We say we're fighting for a world and an organization that will accept everybody, and not to discriminate. If you say you're going to expel people like Rita, who's been an active NOW member for years, and worked on everything, there's no room for her, then how can there be room for me? I don't even do as much." You know, it was very interesting. The vote did not carry to expel. There was a very uneasy peace afterwards because some ugly things had been raised in the course of that.

The '75 convention was probably one of the most telling conventions. There was a huge fight. I don't mean physical fight. Argument. Literary. Oral. [laughs] I never saw any fisticuffs. Between two groups of women competing for national leadership of NOW. I won't even try to go into all the details of it, but the group that got elected, primarily, was not the group that the majority of the leadership of the NOW chapter in Seattle supported. Only one person got elected nationally that was supported by the leadership here, and that was Elaine LaTourelle as the legislative vice president. She's the one that brought Melissa over to DC to work on that. But it was like cats and dogs between these two different groups.

One of the things that went on then also at that convention was that I was attending the ERA workshops because of my work with NOW and on the western part of the state, having to see what's happening nationally. One of the workshops I attended just became my epiphany of disgust with the NOW policy on trying to win the ERA nationally. There were about three or four women giving presentations from unratified states. Maybe not all of them from unratified states. Basically the advice that they were giving on how to win the Equal Rights Amendment is to work legislatively; go and lobby. If you have elections coming up and people who voted against the ERA, organize, run somebody else, defeat them, get the new person in, and then have another vote. Of

course the person that you get in is the person that you've gotten to say that they support the ERA. This was the general line.

They even wanted to counter the anti-ERA who were going around giving out apple pie or something, I can't remember. That we would give red roses or carnations when lobbying for supporting the ERA. Oh, this was one of the saddest things in the workshop that I had ever heard in this workshop at NOW. Along with all the arguing and the non-fisticuff fighting about leadership, who in my opinion represented basically similar things, and it became a microcosm, for me, of like the fighting between the Republicans and the Democrats that there's not that much difference. Maybe a little bit of degree or speed on something.

But that workshop, that's what did me in. I just felt so sad. I felt so discouraged. I felt that we were taking the step off the precipice into the abyss of lobbying and legislating and getting nowhere when really it is a mass movement, a mass of angry women demanding what they want, that got us anything. They were totally retreating from it.

We all came back to Seattle after that convention, if I remember correctly it was in Philadelphia, in the fall. At that point, Georgiana became president of Seattle NOW. I was able to get the officers together and to talk about where we're going with the ERA; to tell them my opinion about what was going on. Since most of our ERA work was being directed by national, and since most of the leadership of Seattle NOW no longer agreed with most of the national leaders of NOW, my proposal to form an independent ERA coalition of many organizations open to anyone, to make it an issue in our state, where it wasn't at that point, won support. Anyway, can we stop for a moment?

Dilg: Yes we can. [recording stops and resumes after a brief pause] So you were, we just took a short break, and you were talking about the formation of the Washington ERA Coalition. Talk a little about how that formed and who was involved, and what organizations, and what your activities were.

Shaw: Well, in the meetings with the NOW people, the proposal basically was to form a support organization for the Equal Rights Amendment, federally, the national one, within

the state of Washington. Even though we had not only ratified the federal, but had passed a statewide ERA law, we needed to do something to make the ERA question visible. It wasn't being visible with the techniques that were being used. The emphasis was on just sending money to states in order to support electoral campaigns, which we did in Nevada like three different times. Each time, we managed to get people elected that were going to support it, and then the vote would come, and they'd vote against it. Three times! Three times!

Anyway, what we had decided to through on is that through NOW we would contact various other women's organizations. Many of the same groups who were represented by the women who first helped to form NOW. Except that they were different women. League of Women Voters, Business and Professional Women, University Women, different women's groups from the college campuses, different professional groups. We did that right away in the beginning of 1976. We got a wonderful response. They all saw the validity of what we were proposing. Not only for supporting states that were unratified, but if we don't do something to help support them and get it, we don't have an ERA. As we started to say early on, you live in an unratified country; it doesn't make any difference what we have in Washington State.

What we wanted to do, and did, was to introduce an organization that was not preset. In other words, it was not a *fait accompli*. Here is the Washington ERA Coalition. Here are the officers selected from these various groups that we have gotten together. This is how we will function. This is what we will do.

We did just the opposite. We had their support. We knew that they were going to be behind it. They also supported the idea of forming an organization that was going to be open to all women to come and to participate and to learn.

March of 1976 was our first open meeting. We put out the call, put out leaflets, posted them up on telephone poles. Sent out the word. We were meeting at the downtown YWCA. That first meeting was wonderfully successful. I can't remember, my records and boxes of stuff probably have information about how many people were there, and how many were not from existing organizations, which was great, which was what we wanted. We took some time, also, to set up committees, and one of the committees had to write bylaws. Because we did not come in with a preset, preconceived set of bylaws.

Other committees immediately started working to organize for a demonstration in the spring, in Seattle, in support of ratification for other states.

All of our meetings were always held on a certain pattern. Because we also developed a piece of literature that outlined our agendas for the meetings. The meetings would start at a certain time, but a half hour before, people could come, and there would be open discussion about the ERA, about the issues, about the organization, about how we function, what we're planning, what they can do. Then the regular meeting would start. They were always conducted with great structure, so that it was never chaos. But it was also conducted with timelines for specific points that were always constant on the agenda. It was also conducted so that everybody could participate.

Now in some ways, without using some of the techniques from the early days of, oh, I'm sorry, the words are—

Dilg: Consciousness raising.

Shaw: Consciousness raising. Thank you! There's one of my senior moments. One of the things that used to work in consciousness raising groups, which I had participated and been part of setting up, was that women would be given like little lima beans or something, certain number, each one. Every time they wanted to speak, they had to throw a lima bean into the pot, and no one can speak a second time if someone else who hadn't spoken wanted to. If a woman used up her lima beans, then she shut up. That was it. Then the other people had a chance to express themselves.

Well, we didn't have lima beans or anything, but whoever was chairing, and the chair was always rotated to different people, they started to learn how to recognize, to get around so the people had opportunity to speak.

Well, all of this was going on, and we were in the midst of planning for activities almost immediately. We would always have it set up so there would be a break at some point after committee reports. So the people could go off to the different committees and sign up and find out what they're doing, and get information about where the next meeting, it could be announced and posted on, not a chalkboard, but a large sheet of paper prints so everybody could go. We had printed out lists of the committees, the

people, their phone numbers. So that everybody could get a list, you can always be in touch with whoever's working on a committee.

Now there was some dissension. People came who did not like the idea, primarily, that we have a whole organization that is devoted to one issue. We thought, I thought, that focusing on that one issue was what gave it its power. It's what attracted new people. It's what gave it a real focus. We would have discussions at different meetings. It would be raised all the time. We have to campaign for different issues. We have to raise the question of the war in Vietnam. We have to raise the question of protective labor legislation. We have to raise the question of this, of that.

There always seemed to be one particular group of people that were raising this and we would have discussion. It would be discussion, we didn't try to shut up people that were raising it, and here would be people saying why they think it shouldn't be that way. Then somebody would get up and say, "I think it should be expanded."

This went on for quite a few months. After a while, a lot of the people who were there who were brand new to both the women's movement or any politics about it, they were the ones who were answering, "No! We feel that this is very effective. We're going to focus on this. You want to work on those other issues, that's fine. But we're working on this."

So after a while we could say, from the chair, whoever was chairing, "Well, we've already been discussing that for a number of months and it's taken care of." We'd move on; it worked. We had women coming to these meetings who had never been in any organization. These were not women who were professionals in that sense; they were working women. They were women who worked as secretaries, they worked as waitresses. They worked at office positions of accounts receivable. They came to these meetings. They were made welcome, they started participating, they started learning how to organize. What they also learned was their own ability and their own self confidence. So that the ERA Coalition in Washington was able to do a tremendously large number of things and activities.

We were coordinating with national NOW. So that when there were calls for focused national activities, we were able to really be to focus on it and do something on it. But we also did local things to educate. One of the things that we did was to develop a

speakers bureau that was extremely competent, that could go anywhere from an elementary school to any professional group and speak about the Equal Rights Amendment. We put out literature that answered questions, that posed the questions, answered them, raised them, referred people to places where they could find out more about it. We had our own lending library where people could come and look and research. The pros, the antis, what's happening, etcetera.

Our speakers bureau, especially, was very effective. We actually had people training for four weeks on Saturdays. I must say, Judy Lonquist who had been a national NOW legal vice president and had also been an office—who did some of the red baiting in Seattle—but stayed as a strong supporter and active, would give introductory talks of background about the ERA. She was so succinct, so good, that people just got it. Then would come several weeks of training, of speaking, of answering questions.

So we not only did that, but we took on other issues of, like two conferences that the Washington ERA Coalition held, which were called the Northwest Women's Action Conference. There were two of them. I believe it was '76, oh, here I go. [looking at papers] Either '76 and '77, or '77 and '78.

These conferences had a great draw. We had nationally known speakers. We would have about two thousand women from around the state who would come to it. We would have different workshops. The focus was always on understanding that if the ERA doesn't get ratified, we don't have it. It doesn't make any difference what we have in our state. You know, you're going to move. You're not going to live here all your life. What are you going to do?

Also, there was an attempt, I believe it was in, was it '77, '78, an attempt in the Washington State legislature, to rescind the ratification. We were very active in that. In fact, I was looking through some papers, and there it was. We had I think four or five hundred women that came down that went around lobbying that time and talking about why it shouldn't be rescinded, and we defeated it.

Then the issue was going to come up again on the ballot. It was being put on by the legislature. At that point, another group was organized called Friends of the Equal Rights Amendment. The Friends was basically composed of women and some men who had political and economic stature in Washington State. So that they became—Jeanette

Williams, who had been an officer, an elected officer, in the city of Seattle for many years—I think she was the one who headed it up. That was in '77, because Friends of Equal Rights Amendment were in existence prior to the Ellensburg conference in 1977 for the International Women's Year. I remember, because they had asked the Washington ERA Coalition to take responsibility for the workshops at that conference because they weren't set up to do it, and, basically, we were. So that was also in existence. They played a specific role of lobbying, of influence, of reason, that counterbalanced our role of demonstrating being out in the streets, which we did at least twice a year in the city of Seattle and elsewhere around the state.

The Washington ERA Coalition, of course, stayed in existence until the time ran out. There was an extension given. It was originally, let me see, it came out of committee in 1973. So it was '82 was when it finally went out of existence.

Even with a three-year extension.

Dilg: Right.

Shaw: We still hadn't reached the required number. But that organization raised and framed a whole layer of women activists that went on to other things. I know some of them, I still see them. They became union activists. A couple of them ended up organizing. They were nurses, and organizing in hospitals where they worked and there was no union at the time. Others went on to other issues. But they learned the power of their organization. Of working together, of being a mass instead of going hat in hand as an individual. They also learned that they had some of the same skills that men had, that they were always told they didn't have. They learned it by doing it.

I felt like a mother hen in many ways. I had taken on the responsibility as what they called an interim chair or something, at the formation, and then stayed on as chair for about a year and a half. Then there were other people who stepped in. Sometimes they were co-coordinators, but people moved into different positions, took on responsibilities and carried it through.

Now, throughout all of this, the Washington ERA Coalition was the primary visible organization supporting the ERA, and that all of the other groups basically

supported. We won a tremendous amount of respect, not only from all the other groups, but from a lot of very prominent individuals in the state.

The organization played an important role at the International Women's Year conference. We were taken by surprise, as was everyone else, basically, with the influx of people who were opposed to many of the issues that were being supported by the feminist movement at these conferences. Especially to their opposition on two issues that were dearest to me—the Equal Rights Amendment and the reproduction rights, which were the two issues that they came honing in on. From the reports, because I swear, I do not really remember a lot of the details that those three days [Ellensburg International Women's Year Conference], it's lost in a blur of activity. But there were reports that were printed. I think that we did a fine job. Understanding what we were up against, trying to allow for open discussion, to give the newly arrived non-registered people a chance to participate to have their say. In the long run, we won the day.

I think that we won it by conviction of people, by discussing the issues. By even convincing people who were in the middle on some of these issues, rather than some of the methods that I saw being used in other campaigns, even by NOW, in other states. What they call “dirty tricks.” There would be discussions about locking women into bathrooms so they couldn't come out and vote or speak on time. All the sleaze that you hear about between political parties like the Republicans and Democrats, and what they do to defeat each other. We didn't have to do that, and made a conscious effort not to do things like that. I think that was an agreement of all of the people involved in the planning and operating of the '77 conference in Ellensburg, and that a lot of that came out of the positive experiences of the Washington ERA Coalition, which made a great point of never functioning like that. There was no need to; we don't win anything by functioning like that.

That was very exciting and very good. Except that we lost the ERA in the long run. We're losing abortion rights, and reproductive rights. That, to me, is key.

Dilg: Could I have you go back a little? You brought up the situation of individuals and groups opposed to some of the important issues that were being raised at the Ellensburg conference. Certainly that opposition to the ERA had started to coalesce in the mid '70s.

I'm sure that the Washington ERA Coalition encountered some of the opposition groups whether Stop ERA, or HOME, which stood for Happiness of Motherhood Eternal, or HOW, which was Happiness of Womanhood, more day to day outside of the Ellensburg conference. As an important person involved with the Washington ERA Coalition, can you talk a little about what your experiences were, and in what situations would you encounter the opposition, and how did you handle that?

Shaw: Well, the opposition never came to our meetings to discuss anything, of course. They had their own meetings. We were aware of their positions because we could read about it. They put out literature. They had national literature. They had certain people that were opposed to the ERA, and here would be a lot of written back and forth.

But from early on, there would be debates with people who opposed what we were supporting. In fact, just recently, I pulled up some of my old papers, and it turns out that some of the things that you forget about because you're involved in doing it, that in November of 1973 when I said I wasn't doing that much in the ERA, but that I did go and debate a woman who had distributed a two-page flyer about God's plan for families at Mercer Island High School. That was a Mrs. Young who was also evidently very active in the 1977 Ellensburg conference, in opposition.

This is, [looking at flyer] one side is all quotes from different parts of the New Testament. The other side is posing questions and conclusions, and basically telling the students that, it says that the family is the primary group that is the responsible agency for—where is that? Oh, oh, here. Yes. The most important thing that the family is responsible in any society are children, property, and inheritance. Now she relates that to biblical law as those being the most important things.

Somebody who cites biblical law as above the constitution, which she says, and is what needs to be instituted, it's very hard to compete with the Bible and somebody's interpretation. But I certainly, you know, felt that the control over children, property, and inheritance not very good. I don't consider children like property. Maybe she does. We had to discuss that. We had to discuss the question of inheritance and property. Does this apply to everybody in our society? There's a lot of people who don't have property and inheritance to pass on or as a concern. What about the other people in our society?

Anyway, I would have debates. There was one time early on before the *Roe v. Wade* decision that I debated, I can't remember who, I think, somebody told me that they think it was Schlafly, but I don't think so. I think it was one of the so-called Right to Lifers, a man, at the University of Washington, at the big ballroom. It was packed with people for this debate. CBS had sent up a crew from Los Angeles to film it. People would send me notes. "Oh, God, I saw you on the news," etcetera.

I remember that debate because my daughter was there sitting in the front row with two of her friends. During that debate, I used my poor eleven year old daughter as an example of young womanhood, and what are we to tell them, and what do we have to pass on to them? My daughter keeps reminding me that I used her, and it's true, I did. But she was a good example. Later on, after she was sixteen, I remember she even spoke at one of the ERA events when Rhoda [the Mary Tyler Moore Show character played by actor Valerie Harper]—do you remember Rhoda, the television star—was up here speaking.

Dilg: Sure.

Shaw: She was on the platform with Rhoda, and she remembers that. I think she has forgiven me for using her. But yes, we would have debates. Like with the three of us, Gloria and Georgiana and myself, I was a terrible person to have to sit down and write something. I could talk it, but I couldn't get it down on paper. I would talk it and they would say, "Oh, that's wonderful. Put that down." Couldn't remember what I had said.

Both Georgiana and Gloria were wonderful writers. They were also good speakers. But they would always push me, and I would do the speaking. I don't think that we ever had any feelings of resentment of doing different things at different times. It was one of the most egalitarian situations of working together and that I wish everybody could experience that sometime in their life, at least, if not always.

But anyway, we dealt with the opposition as directly as we could. We would prefer open debate. I don't think that we ever took to badmouthing or making fun, just talking logic and what is reasonable. I would still take the same positions based upon one of the primary things of our constitution, and that is the separation of church and state.

People who opposed reproductive rights for women or the Equal Rights Amendment do not seem to believe in that part of our constitution, or in many other parts. People have to make a decision as to where they stand on it. Open discussion is the only way for people to think about different issues and to come to a decision.

Dilg: So when the ERA's ratification period passed and there were not enough states that had ratified it. Do you have any reflections on the period right after that, and how you feel about the ERA now? Actually, it's been reintroduced.

Shaw: It's been reintroduced, right.

Dilg: In 2007, in both the US House and Senate. how you feel about the ERA now?

Shaw: It's the Women's Equality Act now. They didn't want to use the same wording. So it's the WEA. Oh well. [coughs] Sorry. Well, after the time ran out, many of the women—and they weren't only women, I shouldn't keep saying that, because there were men, also, that supported the ERA Coalition and worked with it—felt that they wanted to keep in touch on other women's issues of what was going on. They set up a pattern of meeting twice a year, and they did that for quite a few years, into the '80s. I don't know that they ever did very much, but I think that a lot of them kept in touch because they had gone through the common experience of working together, and it was a feel good situation.

I was not that involved after about 1980. One of the reasons was that I had taken a different job, finally, in 1979. I decided I just wanted to go to work for a large company and be a cog in the wheel, and work someplace where there's a union to protect my rights so I don't have to go hat in hand, as I had been working independently, to an employer.

I got a job as a clerk with the Burlington Northern Railroad. One of the real reasons that I probably didn't keep as active is that I was working all kinds of crazy hours. The railroad runs 24/7. Being a new employee, you're at the bottom of the heap, and you work on an on-call basis. Which meant sometimes I would work three different shifts within the same week. I was a walking zombie. I couldn't have been much good to

anybody. [laughs] In fact, I think that you don't do too much good even for the railroad when you're in that situation. But we didn't get that changed for a few years, and we got it changed through the union.

After 1979, I think it was, there must have been another convention of NOW that I had gone to. I just felt that NOW had gone down the drain, down the toilet. The desire to be able to control the direction and the growth and presence of NOW by women who were totally devoted to being professionals only, who had no consciousness of what I consider to be extremely important, and that is to understand the class basis of our society. They were busy denying that there's any difference. They're busy denying it by trying to work on one of the basic positions of NOW, which was women's entry into the mainstream.

Well, if you're going to work for something, you should be realistic about what the problems are of trying to accomplish it. From the very beginning, their idea of working on women's entry into the mainstream was unrealistic to a very great extent in my opinion because of the class nature of society. Because if they wanted women into the mainstream, I kept thinking of women as all women. But they had finally been able to narrow it down more so that the organization did not reflect all women. It did not reflect the interest of all women. It had narrowed. No matter how much national NOW tried to show that it was the great liberal mother of us all by speaking out more on lesbian rights or antiwar or other issues, I thought they had lost it. They were no longer the vital growing voice for women. I don't think they are now. I think that they speak to important issues. Ellie Smeal has, for many years, had her Feminist Majority. Or is it Feminine Majority? The Feminist Majority, I think it is. They deal with issues on abortion rights, on defense of clinics on abortion. It's all important. They talk about deprivation and "short sheeting," so to speak, of women and insurance. It's all important.

But it's not the vital issues, and it's not a vital movement. Because they're still just doing it by hiring professional politicians to go and to lobby. The last thing that they seem to want is a mass movement of women, all women. If you don't have that mass movement, and all you have is paid politicians lobbying for you, you're up against competition that you really can't compete with. Your only strength is a mass movement. If we don't have it, we don't get it.

Dilg: Well, I have come to the end of my official questions for you. But if you have any further reflections, or any topics that you'd like to make sure get included, this would be a great time for that.

Shaw: It's hard for me to think what didn't get included. I'll tell you one thing. I always felt very good about my activities in the '70s in the women's movement. Not only because I believed in it and did good, but one of the reasons that I felt good about it was that lots of my experience and learning as a member of a radical movement like the Socialist Workers Party taught me things that until the '70s I had never really had a chance to try out, to see how they worked. What I found, and what I believed, is that some of the basics that I learned worked. I'm happy that it worked in a movement that I wholeheartedly supported.

I found some of that same experience later on as I became an active union officer on the railroad. But that wasn't nearly as exciting as the women's movement. I don't know if there will be a new movement. I kept looking for it. I keep expecting that something will develop comparable to a mass movement like the civil rights movement or the antiwar movement of Vietnam, or the women's movement, especially around the war in Iraq now. There hasn't been. It's going to be slow to develop.

I think that the reason that it's slow to develop is the same reason why NOW is no longer really effective. That's because all these other movements have accepted the same line of political perspective of hiring professional politicians to speak for the masses of people. Their idea of membership is to have somebody pay in a few dollars and receive a newsletter, and they make the decisions, do the arguing, and the convincing. It's never going to work.

So I guess that's where I'm at. I think that one of the reasons that I never really burned out, as a lot of people did during the height of activities, is because I did have a more realistic perspective of what we were trying to do, and what you can't do, within the society. I saw that the demands that were raised, whether it was civil rights or antiwar or the women's movement are a step towards educating and organizing people to learn, first of all, what it is they really want and have a right to, which I don't think most people

know. Then to learn that they have the power to fight for it if they organize from the bottom. That's why I didn't burn out. I'm looking forward to being able to live long enough to see another mass movement rise. [laughs] I just hope that the lessons are learned by younger people. Because it's going to be the youth that are going to have to do it. If they don't, it's going to get harder for the next generation. That's it.

Dilg: Well, thank you very much for your time and your thoughts and your history.

Shaw: Thank you for listening and for doing this project.

Dilg: You bet.

[End Interview.]