Kilgannon: This is Anne Kilgannon, interviewing Gisela Taber, September 16, 2008, for the Women’s History Consortium project on the ERA. Gisela, could you tell me about “who you were” back in the early seventies: where you were in your life, and your background and education, and a little bit about your career history and personal history?

Taber: I was raised at a time when three careers were typically open to women: teacher, nurse, secretary. I became a teacher with a Master’s in English. So I taught high school English for a couple of years—loved it!—had a baby, and followed my husband and his career to Indiana, New York, and ultimately back to Washington State.

That was a time when there was no Women’s Political Caucus in the state, and I wasn’t particularly active or interested in politics anyway. But I did co-found the local chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in Olympia with Margie Reed, and served as its first president. At that time there were seven or eight chapters of NOW around the state, and they were very interested in legislation that affected women. Unlike me. I was more interested in consciousness raising. But I happened to be the person that lived in Olympia. And since there was no one to whom these chapters could turn for information, they turned to me as president of the chapter next door to the Legislature.

In 1971 Governor Evans submitted an executive request bill that added “sex” to the employment section of the Washington State Law Against Discrimination. I didn’t know much about it. But Marilyn Smith, a Radcliff graduate who later got her law degree from Harvard, took me under her wing. She and Lea Nishiura had started an organization called LAW, (Legislative Action for Women.) She said, “Gisela, you’re just going to have to learn these legislators’ names, and you’re just going to have to…” She told me what to do. We provided information to interested women that helped to get the bill through the House. Just when it got to the Senate, Marilyn said, “My husband is going to Korea. I have to move. So you have to let people know where the bill is on its way through the Senate.” I was certainly nervous about such a role. I didn’t know much, but figured I just had to respond to the NOW chapters that were asking me personally for the status of the bill in the political process. At this time, mind you, there was not a single woman in the Senate!

The bill adding “sex” to the employment section of the State Law Against Discrimination passed. This was at the same time that the Governor’s office was putting together a Women’s Council. I can’t remember exactly how many states ultimately had what they called a state Women’s Commission—something like forty-eight states. Our state was organizing the Washington State Women’s Council. My recollection is that Lea Nishiura
served as an intern for the Governor at that time, and was helpful in laying the foundation for the Council.

As that was being formed, Jim Dolliver, the Governor’s Chief of Staff, and Jo Garceau, Special Assistant to the Governor, invited certain people to be interviewed for the position of Executive Director of the Women’s Council. I was one of those invited. At that time it was considered a half-time position. And so I came for the interview, being nervous because of my limited experience. But in the course of the interview I said, “It looks to me like what you want is a full-time position for half price.” Ultimately I learned from Lud Kramer, the Secretary of State, that this comment “sold” Jim Dolliver on me. He realized that I meant business; if we’re going to do this, then let’s do it right.

Kilgannon: It could have gone the other way!

Taber: Yes, it could have gone the other way. And so I was hired. Right away I contacted several people who were real professionals in the political arena. First, I went to a personal friend, Sam Reed, who briefed me on the political process.

Kilgannon: Can you remind our listeners as to what his position was at that time?

Taber: At that time he was Assistant Secretary of State in the Republican administration under Lud Kramer. He was very generous in giving me an overview of the legislative process, not just from a chart, but from a perspective of reality. He gave me excellent pointers, and I asked many questions and took prodigious notes.

Then I also went to three women lobbyists whose wisdom I treasured and with whom I consulted as I needed to from then on. Dottie Smith was one of them.

Kilgannon: A professional lobbyist?

Taber: Yes. Dottie had excellent judgment. There were a couple of significant times in the process of passing the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) when I needed a reality check. I could count on her to tell me, for instance, if I had acted appropriately in a strategic matter, or if my ego had gotten in the way. She confirmed that my instinct had been correct. And, most important, had this not been the case, she would truthfully have told me so.

Kilgannon: Did it help you that your instincts were confirmed?

Taber: Yes, certainly.

Kilgannon: So that you knew you were getting a sense of this process?

Taber: Yes. I learned to trust my gut more and more. But it was wonderful to be able to turn to Dottie Smith several times for the benefit of her objective appraisal. She made herself available to me at any time. In addition to Dottie, Pat Thibaudeau was one of the
women I relied on. She was experienced and always helpful, and freely shared information. And then there was Marilyn Ward, who had led the fight for abortion in 1970, and who was known as “the abortion queen.” She shared her scars with me. These three women helped to train me in what was involved in a professional approach.

The Women’s Council appointed by Governor Evans consisted of sixteen persons that included representatives of various constituencies and geographic locations. The chair was Anne Winchester, the experienced and skillful leader who was Deputy Coordinator for the Council on Higher Education. Former members of Governor Rosellini’s 1963 Commission on the Status of Women whom Governor Evans appointed to this 1971 Women’s Council included Waneta McClung and Representative Lorraine Wojahn. Minority representation was put in place, and was being strengthened by the time I left the Council. Senator Joel Pritchard served on the Council until he went to Congress. He was sensitive enough not to tell the women what to do, as he realized this was a Women’s Council. A real power was Betty Fletcher. She was the only woman president of a major Bar Association in the nation, although at the time of her appointment she might have been vice president. In any case, she ended up as president.

Kilgannon: In some of the papers I’ve read, she was president-elect of the Seattle King County Bar at that time.

Taber: Betty was brilliant. She was politically astute. She was always tactful, and knew how to bring the group together in difficult discussions. When I set a date for a meeting, I would always first see if she was available.

Anne wisely pushed for a retreat of the Council late in the fall. She knew that establishing good personal relationships was important in working together professionally. A retreat setting was conducive to getting to know one another.

There was much discussion about what the Council’s focus should be for the 1972 legislative session. What measures would provide the most benefit for the women of our state? It was sort of like Pareto’s Law in management, or the 80/20 Rule: What twenty percent of the desired change would benefit 80 percent of the women? The consensus was to focus on having the management of the community property law equalized between spouses, and on passing a state Equal Rights Amendment. After the first year was over and both had been successful, I learned from all these major players that they didn’t think either measure would pass! It seemed like such a huge undertaking. But the Council decided on just those two measures, so that our focus would not be diluted. The single most important law that discriminated against women was the community property law. If that alone had passed, the Council would have been very pleased.

Kilgannon: Can you explain that measure?

Taber: The thrust of the legislation was to establish equality for husband and wife in managing their community property.
Kilgannon: I just wanted to know the gist of it. As I understand it, the husband and wife did own everything in common but in the old way of looking at it, the man was the manager and he could make sole decisions.

Taber: Yes, in most matters. In the new bill, the area in which joint action by husband and wife is required is extended. Gayle Barry, the Assistant Attorney General assigned to the Women’s Council, was the principal drafter of the desired legislation. The changes involved the University of Washington Law School and all the legal ‘biggies’ in the state. The Governor’s office was very instrumental in helping to orchestrate the passage of this bill. It was very smoothly handled, and certainly Gayle Barry deserves much credit.

So anyway, we focused on the specific need to change the community property law. But the Women’s Council discussed what beyond this potential change in law would have the most effect. That, of course, would be a state Equal Rights Amendment, because that would impact all other laws.

Kilgannon: Did the ERA also give you a legal foundation for then systematically looking at everything else? A constitutional amendment, it’s fundamental in a different way than a bill that attacks just one area. Doesn’t it set up a foundation, legally, to then look at all kinds of things? Was that part of the argument?

Taber: Of course that is exactly what happened in the following year with the implementation bill that harmonized all of Washington’s laws with the state ERA. Also, passage of a state ERA was an extremely important foundation if we were to achieve passage of the federal Equal Rights Amendment. It was important to get that passed nationally. Of course we know by now that it didn’t. But the state ERA was important as a foundation for that hope.

I think at the beginning we didn’t discuss all the reasons. At that point we didn’t know all the reasons. Of course we tried very quickly to gather and to develop information and rationales and reasons. And now, in retrospect, we can say many things. But the fact of the matter is, at that point in time we did not have all the answers.

Kilgannon: I think that’s really important to say, because now it looks all orderly. But not then?

Taber: Well, it was a logical start.

Kilgannon: Let’s look at the Council now. You were the principal staff person, and you also had an assistant?

Taber: I had Sue VanMeter, who was paid as a secretary, but who served as an assistant and much more! When she left the Council she accepted the position of Community Program Developer with the State Child Development Planning Project. Later she was Director of the Community Development Finance Program, and then served as Assistant
Commissioner in Employment Security. And today, retired from state government, she and her husband have a lobbying enterprise. Sue was an indispensable gift to me, to the Women’s Council, and to the women of the State!

Kilgannon: And sometimes you had interns. I wasn’t able to track them. I noticed you had at least one.

Taber: Yes. Mary Ellen Hudgins was invaluable in creating the Roster of Qualified Women so that we could make recommendations to the Governor for appointing women to boards and commissions. Jo Garceau handled that on the Governor’s staff. When Mary Ellen left the Women’s Council she went to the University of Puget Sound Law School, later known as Seattle University Law School, and graduated number one in her class! She was then hired by the Northwest Women’s Law Center in Seattle as their first Litigation Director. Then, under the state ERA, she litigated the women’s equity in athletics lawsuit against WSU! Isn’t that remarkable? After that she was appointed as Commissioner for the Washington State Court of Appeals for ten years, and now is doing wonderful things in education.

Kilgannon: Yes, you really had some remarkable talent. And that’s it, then? A tiny, little staff.

Taber: Yes. But you can see it was an outstanding staff! And Gayle Barry, the Assistant Attorney General assigned to our Council, accomplished an incredible volume of work.

Kilgannon: And you had the governing board.

Taber: It was the Women’s Council. The Council itself was what you’re referring to as the board. In other words, the Council made policy, and I had to see that it was carried out.

Kilgannon: And Anne Winchester would have been the first Council—

Taber: Chair.

Kilgannon: And then there was a changing membership. I don’t necessarily want to detail all of them here.

Taber: No, I can’t remember all the changes. Except one key change in membership later was the addition of Norm Schut, who must be mentioned. He was the Executive Director of the Washington Federation of State Employees. To my knowledge, he was the only person who had occasional instant access to the Governor. He was powerful. And without him there would never have been a Comparable Worth Study. Some women insisted that women be given sole credit for that, but without Norm Schut it would never have happened. Norm Schut was a powerful member who did a lot for women.

Kilgannon: That’s really good to know. His name has not come up in that light.
Taber: It’s because some people wanted women to have all the credit. But without men—certainly including in the Equal Rights Amendment battles—we couldn’t have won at all.

Kilgannon: You needed their votes, too. And men can be feminists. I don’t know if Norm Schut was, but your point is well taken.

Taber: The men on the Council did not dominate, or “take over” in any way. Anne Winchester was a power in herself. And Dr. Inga Kelly from WSU, who became chair later, was instrumental in changes in education and was persuasive during debates. Betty Fletcher became a federal judge. Representative Lorraine Wojahn, later a Senator, commanded attention. These and other women deserve credit, but if a man does something, he should be credited as well. And Norm Schut is that man.

Kilgannon: I’m happy to have his name in the record. He certainly shows up on panels and is quoted as saying really pithy things. But the newspaper accounts hardly tell the story.

Taber: No.

Kilgannon: As I looked at the mention of his name in the stories, I would think, “Is he behind the scenes? Where is he?”

Taber: Well, he wasn’t on the initial Council. So he wasn’t in all those articles about the state Equal Rights Amendment. He came later. Initially, he was not someone whose strategic brilliance I could regularly tap. He was busy doing his thing with the union. But when he became a member of the Council, then his great contribution was Comparable Worth. This included having sold it to the Washington Federation of State Employees. In addition, he was helpful in the appointment of women, such as getting the first woman appointed to the Higher Education Personnel Board.

Kilgannon: Then he became available to you, all that experience and knowledge? He’d been with the state for decades in different capacities.

Taber: Yes. He was a master in setting things up behind the scenes. And he was known to say to his union that it doesn’t matter who gets the credit, just so the job gets done. But I’m not sure he meant it 100 percent. I certainly think accurate credit is important.

Kilgannon: Well, perhaps he meant he himself wasn’t going to go for it, but we should give it to him.

Taber: Yes. That’s a helpful way of putting it. But now that I have the opportunity to think more about this, I remember that some men actually preferred working for women’s issues behind the scenes, both because they were sensitive enough not to lead the women, but also because they did not welcome a potential backlash from some men and women.
Kilgannon: I think giving credit to Norm Schut is historical justice.

Taber: Yes, yes.

Kilgannon: I want to step back a bit for a moment. Some of the people who were initially on the Council had served throughout the years on various entities. There was the original Women’s Commission, in 1963, under Governor Rosellini. It was a different commission, but there were a couple of people who show up again as members in the later body. They were still interested and still active.

Taber: Yes, there were two members from the original Rosellini Commission, that had over 40 persons on it, who were appointed to the 16 member Women’s Council.

Kilgannon: Different people show up in different jobs, but it’s interesting to see some of the names from the early commission again and again.

Taber: Yes. And it’s also interesting that those on Rosellini’s Commission were allocated no money!

Kilgannon: Those things are always a little bit like that, aren’t they? This Commission was in conjunction with President Kennedy’s national commission.

Taber: Yes. President John Kennedy established the President’s Commission on the Status of Women in 1961, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt. This federal Commission was the first of its kind in U.S. history, and served as a catalyst for state Commissions, such as Rosellini’s.

Kilgannon: And then after submitting its report, I don’t think it was formally disbanded, but it was not very active, at any rate. The record is not clear.

Taber: There were some activities concerning formal women’s groups after the Rosellini Commission, but I don’t know the specifics. But what I do know was that in 1970 Governor Evans appointed a group of mostly state employees to form the Interagency Committee on the Status of Women. Janet Ward was the chair. I attended meetings of this dedicated group, and we found state issues on which we collaborated.

Kilgannon: Yes. There were several people who are not necessarily Council members, but there are women and men who stayed active for decades in women’s issues and should be mentioned, just for background. There was this Commission, and then after Evans was elected governor, he picked it up and reconstituted it in ’68.

Taber: He didn’t reconstitute that. He formed a new one, to the best of my knowledge.

Kilgannon: Well, yes. I mean, the concept of the Commission. I’m just tracing the historical trail.
Taber: Right.

Kilgannon: He reactivated the Commission, or appointed or reappointed different people. Maryan Reynolds, the State Librarian, for instance, stayed on to serve. Waneta McClung was another; names like hers just kept reappearing in different capacities. It looks like Representative Marjorie Lynch may have had some role in bringing this issue forward that there still needed to be a Women’s Commission, and that it should be more active. But the Commission was quite large. It was made up of members from all over the state.

Governor Evans eventually decided that the Commission on the Status of Women was too unwieldy. So then he created a smaller body, the Interagency Committee on the Status of Women. It seemed like that one just focused mostly on state government employed women or agency issues to do with women.

Taber: Yes.

Kilgannon: And Janet Ward, as you said, was the chair. Some of these people reappear in roles working with you. Gayle Barry, for instance.

Taber: Gayle Barry was the Assistant Attorney General that was assigned to the Women’s Council.

Kilgannon: Yes. So it’s interesting to see them showing up as members on these earlier commissions, attending meetings, and being active in the area.

Taber: In addition to my attending meetings with the Interagency Group, another linkage with it was the affirmative action unit in the Department of Personnel, of which Cheryl Lux Duryea was a part. They took the lead on changing state job titles, making them gender neutral. “Fireman,” for instance, was changed to “Firefighter.” Janet Ward was very supportive of that.

Kilgannon: That was tremendously controversial.

Taber: It was. Because the new titles sounded funny at first. Few people believed that titles with connotations of the male gender constituted real barriers to women. They thought it was silly. That was one of the specific projects of which Janet Ward was extremely proud.

Another development which she and the Interagency Committee supported was the development of new job classifications by Public Service Careers. The three paraprofessional series were designed to provide promotional opportunities into administrative and supervisory positions traditionally not available to women. These were the first “bridge” positions between clerical and professional positions in the nation.
Kilgannon: Yes. For some clerical jobs there would be no ladder for promotion. That would be it. And another issue was, of course, daycare. Because if women are going to work, did women have control over how they could get to work? Men didn’t seem to have to deal with daycare. There was a great deal of discussion about that.

All this activity provides the context for your work with the Women’s Council. It doesn’t happen in isolation. You’re not alone, in that sense. This Interagency Group was one of the groups that asked Governor Evans for a Council for Women. What I wanted to establish is that the Women’s Council was certainly the focal point for so much that happened with women in the state, but it wasn’t the only group working on these issues.

Taber: Yes. Absolutely. That’s true. We took the lead on some issues—certainly on legislation—and were supportive with testimony on other matters, such as the changes in job titles.

Kilgannon: So the Interagency Group addressed some of the issues facing women employed in state government, but there was this whole other area of need—for legislation, for women in general. And that’s, I think, part of the genesis for the Women’s Council.

Taber: Yes, they were important in the creation of the Council.

Kilgannon: And so the Governor listened to them. And we touched on your friends Marilyn Smith and Lea Nishiura, and their group LAW, the Legislative Action for Women group that formed about the same time, in December of 1970. Can you clarify for me their relationship to the Women’s Council and these other groups which were active then? They seem to be also lobbying and working with women.

Taber: LAW was the brainchild of these two women, Marilyn and Lea, as you said. This “group” formed before there was a Women’s Council. They lobbied for the Governor’s executive request bill in 1971 to add “sex” to the Washington State Law Against Discrimination. It was Marilyn’s leadership with Lea that helped shepherd the bill through the House. Then Marilyn left the state. Lea was an intern for the Office of the Governor, as I am remembering. She helped lay the foundation for the Women’s Council. Then Lea left the state with her husband.

Kilgannon: If they have an acronym, it makes them seem like more of an official group.

Taber: In my view that was part of Marilyn Smith’s genius. She made LAW seem bigger and more active than it was. For example, her publicity boasted child care for women who wished to lobby. There was no such child care. I certainly needed child care. Carole Botkin and I from NOW would alternate in lobbying one day, and taking care of both of our boys the next. By the time the Governor’s bill passed and people were invited to be there while he signed it into law, the only persons in the photo were Carole and I, from NOW. No one from LAW was present.
Kilgannon: I’m just trying to piece together all these activities from the archival records. So at least some of these groups went to Dan Evans, the Governor, and lobbied for a Women’s Council? With real funding. And you got it: you got funded out of the Governor’s Emergency Fund. Later, that becomes a bit of an issue. But at this point—

Taber: I’m not certain that all these groups “went to Dan Evans, the Governor, and lobbied for a Women’s Council.” The Interagency Group did make that request. And yes, partial funding for the Council came from the Governor’s Emergency Fund, and salaries came out of CETA, I recall.

Kilgannon: There’s a lot of patch-working going on here.

Taber: Yes, a patchwork. But you know, I’m not the best one to tell you about all of the effort to get a Women’s Council. Jo Garceau would be a good one to talk to about that. She was working in the Governor’s office at the time. Anyhow, when I was hired as staff for the Council, I began to work with absolutely everyone I could.

Kilgannon: But there at least would be people to work with. And they prepared the ground for you in some way?

Taber: Yes.

Kilgannon: They’re forerunners, in a sense.

Taber: Yes.

Kilgannon: So the Council was formed and the staff was hired, and according to the Governor’s proclamation creating the Council, which he sent out to all the state agencies—it was a public document and I imagine there was press on it—he asked for everyone to help you. He directed the state agencies—that everyone should cooperate with the Women’s Council. He laid out three main functions for the Council: that you would identify activities affecting women all over the state and establish priorities for action. I want to point out that the word “action” is all over these directions. And, that you would review and identify needs for legislation affecting women. And, again, make an action plan. And that you would focus the attention of communities on the need for women to have equal privileges and responsibilities. So that was your mandate. You were handed that assignment. It was, of course, very broad!

Taber: Incidentally, the first wording of the Equal Rights Amendment just had “rights,” equal rights. And then an amendment added “responsibilities.” Which I think was a good amendment.

Kilgannon: That’s interesting; it’s the other half of rights: with rights come responsibilities.

Taber: But a lot of people forget that.
Kilgannon: They made it explicit. And then explicit in your directions here, too, which is interesting that, again, is a key word.

Taber: Yes, it was a concept important to the Women’s Council from the beginning.

Kilgannon: They chose the Council members from a broad perspective. I don’t imagine you had anything to do with that part.

Taber: No, I did not. That was a political undertaking. Geographic and ethnic balance, men and women, and all that.

Kilgannon: Some Democrats, some Republicans.

Taber: Yes. Absolutely.

Kilgannon: Different women’s groups represented.

Taber: Yes.

Kilgannon: All kinds of people. Now, let’s talk about that for just a minute. And we will, of course, have to come back to that issue. The people who opposed the ERA maintained that the Women’s Council was not representative. There were a lot of letters to the Governor saying, “Who are these people? Who is this Council? Why don’t I know about it?” “Why are me and my friends not on it,” seemed to be the subtext. Did the Governor—did anyone—ask that question: do you include women of different viewpoints as well as from geographic areas?

Taber: Again, you’d have to ask Jo Garceau. I had nothing to do with forming the Council.

Kilgannon: Did you find the Council broad in its perspective or just broad geographically and otherwise?

Taber: Oh, there were very different opinions. Not everyone identified with the Women’s Movement as a “feminist,” for instance.

Kilgannon: No. That’s one thing. But was there a seed of truth in that there was not “every kind” of point of view represented there?

Taber: That would not have been possible with 16 people. When you have a membership like that, you can’t represent every point of view. One point of contention was the supposed lack of housewives. But Rita Duran was there, a homemaker with six children. And Susan Green was a homemaker, a member of the Central Area School Council.
Kilgannon: I wonder how you would choose a representative housewife. That would be an interesting task.

Taber: Well, I don’t know that they sought out the “happy housewife,” but there were housewives that had become active in their communities. It wasn’t that they were just confined in their house.

Kilgannon: No. You would have to have some kind of profile for your name to rise up and be known outside your home.

Taber: Exactly. And once again, as far as the constitution of the Council, I really can’t tell you.

Kilgannon: But when you came into it, what was the Council like to work with? What kind of things did they do with you and for you?

Taber: Well, the minutes reflect that, as well as the annual reports.

Kilgannon: But can you comment on your working relationship with the Council?

Taber: It was great. It was absolutely wonderful. I think the Council was really interested in getting something done and not just wasting time. We grew in excitement. There was Lynn, from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC.)

Kilgannon: Bruner?

Taber: Bruner. Lynn Bruner. She had a lot of expertise. And she was totally for women. She was the most radical of the group. But everyone in his or her own way was very interested in action, and not just talk. That’s what we confirmed at that first retreat. It was an important time to get to know one another.

Kilgannon: Can you recall it now?

Taber: It was in a retreat setting.

Kilgannon: But you were kind of away, out of town?

Taber: Yes, we were away. But we didn’t have a whole lot of time. We had to focus on the decisions facing us before the 1972 legislative session.

Kilgannon: Was the federal ERA already being talked about? And were different states deciding they wanted their own ERA? Is that part of the background to that decision?

Taber: The federal Equal Rights Amendment was in the air, yes. But I don’t think it was discussed much at this retreat. I think we were focused mainly on the state Equal Rights Amendment. But I don’t totally remember.
Kilgannon: But people would have it in their minds?

Taber: Some would. And some people wouldn’t know a thing about it. There were people like Betty Fletcher and Lynn Bruner who knew a great deal about discrimination law. This was at the beginning, you know. We were all starting at the beginning; we had to make ourselves knowledgeable. I had been active in NOW, but that doesn’t mean that I was really knowledgeable on the whole Women’s Movement, or on Washington State laws. But we really leaned on Betty Fletcher, and on Gayle Barry, of course. She knew the laws, and was extraordinarily helpful.

Kilgannon: She was already working on these issues in other capacities?

Taber: Gayle’s job was with workers’ compensation in Labor and Industries. But she became immersed in these laws. And she certainly became knowledgeable. So that’s what we focused on. The focus on law was also helpful in those early days of the Council because we agreed on the need to change laws. Some of the members did not want to be known as a “feminist.” That wasn’t a popular word at that time.

Kilgannon: Kind of a loaded term?

Taber: It was loaded at that time. “At that time” is really important to stress. Now it’s very popular to be a feminist. It’s politically correct. But at that time…

Kilgannon: Would it have been seen more as a civil rights issue than a feminist issue?

Taber: I think some persons would certainly have preferred that terminology.

Kilgannon: Completing the civil rights movement?

Taber: Yes. They certainly didn’t want any connotations of bra burning, a myth that was talked about by some legislators. And there were some Radical Women who did come from Seattle from the organization by that name, inspired by their beloved leader, Clara Fraser, if I recall her name accurately. A disassociation with terms commonly associated with the Women’s Movement was important to more conservative women represented on the Council who did not wish to be branded with guilt by association.

Kilgannon: Well, these Women’s Council members would be professionals active in the capacity of their work, in many of their cases. This would be something that would interest them just as part of a larger picture, perhaps. I mean, they appeared to be very committed to women’s issues, but, as you said, in a different way.

Taber: I think we looked to the legal people because we were facing a legislative session. The focus was legislation. So we looked to Betty Fletcher, we looked to Gayle Barry, we looked to Lynn Bruner. “What should we consider to make legislative change that would have the most positive impact?”
Kilgannon: One thing that’s emphasized again and again in your Council literature is that the ERA affects women legally, not socially. Not their family relationships, not their personal husband/wife type things. But only legally, that women will be “equal under the law.” And that seems to follow from what you’re saying, that that would be your emphasis, and only that. And not the social/personal aspects of women’s lives.Certainly they were there. But that’s not what you were talking about.

Taber: No, but it’s also true that the ERA and changes in law would ultimately affect changes in attitude, as the changes in law altered behaviors.

Kilgannon: Sure. That kind of comes with it, and it’s a statement: if women are equal, that means something personally as well as legally. But all your literature is about this other more cerebral, almost, aspect of what the ERA is.

Taber: Well, no one knew all the implications in the beginning. They had to do research. The Washington Women Lawyers led by Lee Kraft did research the effects of an ERA that was distributed to legislators. And there was a Yale Law Journal article that was cited. Jane Noland was compiling information for people to use in speeches. Legislators and ordinary citizens were just grasping to know whether an ERA would legalize homosexual marriages, and of course–

Kilgannon: You had to have the answer.

Taber: And we had to have the answer. This became important in the debate on the Senate floor. But in the beginning, many questions and many answers were not known.

Kilgannon: No. You had to do the legwork. The research. And the economic statistics, too, must have been part of it. Some of it is projected: “If women are equal, then we hope it means that they will have equal opportunity to work. And then these things will happen.”

Taber: That wasn’t really talked about at first. I mean, not in terms of the Equal Rights Amendment. There was already legislation in place that was the basis for equal pay for equal work. Not of equal pay for comparable worth. That was not in place.

Kilgannon: No, that comes later.

Taber: That comes later. But getting back to the ERA, some people would say, “Well, you already have this specific legislation. Why do you need an Equal Rights Amendment?”

Kilgannon: There had already been some progress. Some people thought, “Why not just continue, piecemeal?”

Taber: Exactly.
Kilgannon: Law by law?

Taber: Law by law.

Kilgannon: Did you have an argument for that? Why piecemeal reform might not be the way to go?

Taber: Well, I’m not in that moment right now. My guess is that we mentioned the factor of time. It would take too long to anticipate and to pass so many individual laws in a timely manner.

Kilgannon: Yes. Fair enough. That’s fine. We started to talk about the structure of the Women’s Council. Do you remember where your office was?

Taber: At first it was in the Governor’s office.

Kilgannon: Just in a little room to the side?

Taber: When you walk into the area called Office of the Governor—I haven’t been there in years—you go straight to the back. The Governor was in a large office in the north-east corner. A series of offices was in the back, one of which was mine.

Kilgannon: Was your area larger than a cubicle, but not a big room?

Taber: Yes, larger than a cubicle, and not a real big room. It was in the series of offices that were occupied by the Governor’s legal staff, and by Jim Dolliver, the Chief of Staff.

Kilgannon: That’s really good access to the executive.

Taber: The location was wonderful, of course. But I certainly did not have “access” to the Governor, except for two meetings.

Kilgannon: But you could “see” the Governor, and you could see his staff people?

Taber: You can’t just “see” the Governor.

Kilgannon: No, I mean even in passing, in the hall.

Taber: No, he had a private entrance. You couldn’t see the Governor. But then one day Jim Dolliver came into my office. He was fabulous, the way he operated.

Kilgannon: The Governor’s Chief of Staff.

Taber: Yes. He did things personally. He sat down, chatted briefly, and then announced that Sue and I would move to the Insurance Building. And that’s where our office was
from then on. The Women’s Council was housed beside the Asian Council. There were just too many people whom they couldn’t fit into the Governor’s office.

Kilgannon: Pretty incredible that you were ever housed in the Governor’s office.

Taber: Yes. It was really exciting. It certainly helped me in getting to know the Governor’s staff. But there were advantages to being less visible. As you know, those HOW women [Happiness of Womanhood] and Mrs. Robert Young objected to state money being used for lobbying. And they said that I was being improper in lobbying. I was always under scrutiny. And so being in the Insurance Building during the whole Equal Rights Amendment campaign was helpful.

Kilgannon: Does that give you a little bit of proper distance?

Taber: Yes. I had to be very careful that I “dispensed information” and didn’t “lobby.” And I had to walk that fine line.

Kilgannon: The line between education and advocacy?

Taber: Yes.

Kilgannon: It would have been difficult to figure out exactly.

Taber: Many people would come and trek up to the second floor of the Insurance Building, seeking “information.”

Kilgannon: Did you have a little more space, then?

Taber: It wasn’t a lot of space, but we managed.

Kilgannon: I picture you building a certain kind of library of reports and that type of thing.

Taber: No, no, no. A lot of such a library was in my bedroom.

Kilgannon: Oh!

Taber: There wasn’t much space. But Sue VanMeter was just wonderful, and organized everything—all before computers, mind you. And then I had this fabulous intern, Mary Ellen Hudgins, who established the Roster of Qualified Women.

Kilgannon: I just picture you having to deal with a lot of paper: reports, correspondence. You were gathering a lot of information.

Taber: Yes. And it’s before computers. I had piles like you wouldn’t believe!
Kilgannon: I would believe!

Taber: Yes, that’s why I was saying Sue VanMeter was just fabulously organized. She made it all happen!

Kilgannon: That’s pretty critical.

Taber: And like you were mentioning about all of these other groups and individuals, of course I worked with all of them. Like, for instance, Karen Fraser. She worked in the Highways Department, currently the Department of Transportation. And she was dealing with legislation for her agency. As she screened bills that might impact her agency, she also looked for legislation that had implications for women, and kept me informed. She must have had her piles of paper, too. But she was very organized.

Kilgannon: There was nothing electronic yet. It was all paper.

Taber: It was just amazing. And everybody worked like crazy.

Kilgannon: So would you spend the majority of your time going to meetings? How would you organize your day?

Taber: You know, I can’t tell you exactly. It would depend on the priorities of the day. With legislation, I would have to get sponsors, or organize hearings, or inform readers by newsletter of the status of legislation. There was always correspondence. For the statewide ERA ratification campaign it was important to set up the structures for the campaign throughout the state. I helped set up two committees. Ultimately it was important to hire Micki Pailthorp for five months to manage campaign headquarters in Seattle and to coordinate the two committees. I was involved in that statewide effort largely by giving speeches and taking part in debates. I asked Sue one time to compile the number of speeches I had given; it was eighty speeches and debates all across the state.

Kilgannon: So all the travel arrangements, all the back and forth for each group?

Taber: Yes. I traveled a lot.

Kilgannon: Down to Clark County, Spokane, the Tri-Cities, Yakima–

Taber: Spokane TV, King County TV. Women’s groups and other groups. Often sixteen hours a day during legislative sessions.

Kilgannon: It looked like it.

Taber: Yes. And it was all needed.

Kilgannon: It looked like a full court press. Every aspect of gathering the information, disseminating the information, either by letter or in person. Teaching—all over the
state—giving workshops of some description, with other people. So then there’s all of that coordinating.

Taber: Conferences.

Kilgannon: Conferences. Attending everybody’s function.

Taber: And always being the staff person for the Council. Which meant preparing the agenda, arranging for appropriate resource people and handouts. And always keeping Council members involved.

Kilgannon: And the reports.

Taber: And putting Council members in a position to be informed for the decisions that they had to make. And then I’d have to see that their directives were carried out. And we would meet, I can’t remember, once a month?

Kilgannon: It looked like about once a month.

Taber: Just those meetings alone took much preparation. You can see this by reading the accomplishments in the succinct annual reports of 1972 and 1973. [LINKS]

Kilgannon: Yes!

Taber: The annual reports demonstrate much of what I did as a staff person. They do not, of course, capture all of my activities. For example, when Micki Pailthorp didn’t have any money for her salary, she said, “Gisela, I just absolutely can’t do this anymore, because I need to get paid.” So I went on vacation, and on my own time contacted businesses to raise money.

Kilgannon: You took a leave?

Taber: Yes, I took a leave. I couldn’t have done this in my salaried role.

Kilgannon: You switched hats?

Taber: Yes, I switched hats. I didn’t raise a lot of money, but I tried. Fundraising takes a lot of time. Much groundwork must be laid. You don’t just waltz in from the street and ask for a donation. Weyerhaeuser, fortunately, was the first place I contacted. John Ketter was just wonderful. While I pretended to know what I was doing, he schooled me subtly in what was involved, and pointed me to some other organizations. But a lot of organizations at this time were afraid to be identified with the Equal Rights Amendment. Weyerhaeuser gave us five hundred dollars at the time. That was our biggest donation.

Kilgannon: So when the first group stepped up, it was tremendously important? It gave you credibility. You could say, as I noticed in your correspondence you certainly did, to
another timber company. Simpson, I believe it was. “Well, Weyerhaeuser gave us some money.”

Taber: I don’t think I said the amount. But it was helpful to be able to point out that other potential donors would be in good company. But donors did not wish visibility.

Kilgannon: There’s the very implicit, or explicit, meaning: we’re already supported by these people.

Taber: That’s right.

Kilgannon: I thought it was a wonderful tactic. And then one of the correspondents—now it would be seen as kind of ironic—but you wrote to the Philip Morris Company, the Virginia Slims people with the famous ad, “You’ve come a long way, baby,” those people.

Taber: Not far enough!

Kilgannon: [laughs] You sort of played with the slogan and kind of asked for—

Taber: Unfortunately I don’t think we got money for that. But anyway, on my own time I stepped into that role so that Micki could get paid.

Kilgannon: So you were able to raise enough?

Taber: Not enough. But I did what I could. One time I walked out of a Tacoma office with only a Brown and Haley canister of Almond Roca, instead of the promise of a check. I don’t even know how the rest of Micki’s salary was put together. But it wasn’t really my job.

Kilgannon: No.

Taber: Another thing that I am remembering is that we had quite a turnover in volunteers. And many times for very good reasons. For example, Jean Withers in Seattle had taken on PR responsibilities in the campaign. But then she had this wonderful opportunity to co-author a book on prostitution with Jennifer James of the University of Washington. This was an important professional opportunity for her. Anyway, there were several such replacements that had to be made.

Kilgannon: Yes. It looked like there was some scrambling.

Taber: That takes time, to scramble and get new names and everything.

Kilgannon: Even reading the reports and the correspondence, and trying to put them in some kind of time period during that month off, whatever you did raise, five hundred, maybe?
Taber: $650.

Kilgannon: How did you keep yourself going? Coffee?

Taber: Coffee, adrenalin, passion. I was a younger person then with lots of energy. And I think that the Women’s Movement, and this particular campaign, were my “religion.” It was like many of us were “true believers.” Sometimes one of us would be discouraged, and would call up a “sister” for support. Our hope was always that we wouldn’t both be down at the same time, and that one could encourage the other. I imagine it’s like going through a war. We formed very tight bonds. And it was exciting, that adrenaline. When I look at some of those newspaper photographs of watching the state ERA returns, it brings it all back.

Kilgannon: You all look pretty focused. It was also not a marathon, thank goodness, in the sense that it didn’t go on for years.

Taber: Yes.

Kilgannon: It went on for really intense periods of time. The ERA measure was introduced in the Legislature within something like a month in which it had to pass.

Taber: Yes.

Kilgannon: And did, in this case. So it’s not like you had to go on and on and on.

Taber: Right. Although with the state Equal Rights Amendment, there was the state ratification campaign immediately before November. That was certainly intense, especially at the end when the result was decided by the narrowest margin in the history of the state until that time, by .26%. The results fluctuated as absentees were counted: win/lose/win. It was nerve-wracking.

Kilgannon: Yes. There have to be these different stages of a campaign.

Taber: I took a vacation right after the legislative session. I went to see my dear personal friend, Lea Nishiura, who had moved to San Francisco with her husband. I drove by myself.

Kilgannon: To decompress?

Taber: Yes. And that was wonderful.

Kilgannon: That would be nice. I hope you took the beach route.

Taber: Yes. I borrowed my husband’s car, a red sports car that cornered well and was really fun. Usually I don’t care what I drive, just so it’s safe. But this car cornered well,
and I got “into” driving for the first time! I never enjoyed the experience of driving so much as driving that car on that particular journey. Anyway, it was wonderful decompression. Just what I needed before coming back to the state ratification campaign.

Kilgannon: What a good idea, to take a break. You had a child to care for throughout all of this. How did you manage that?

Taber: You know, it’s really important that you ask me that. Some times my husband cared for Andrew, but he was often busy in the evenings. Carroll Boone at that time was head of Planned Parenthood in the state. She had a son exactly my son’s age. When she took trips around the state for Planned Parenthood, she would leave Johnny with my son Andrew and me. And I would drop Andrew off with Johnny when I had commitments. So that’s how we did it. The boys really enjoyed it.

Kilgannon: You would have to have these partnerships, because it was one of those “it takes a village” situations. How do you actually do these things? I think people want to know that because, just looking at your schedule and all the travel, it raises the question.

Taber: Yes, quality child care was the most important personal consideration.

Kilgannon: I have children. So I was thinking, “Oh, I can only imagine what that kind of schedule would have been like.”

Taber: Childcare was always challenging. It was about this time that I started the habit of writing down thoughts that Andrew expressed, which I have called “poems” during our life. I have many notebooks filled with his poems, relating to all aspects of his life. A sample of these when he was age four through age eight is on [LINK]

Kilgannon: There wasn’t much organized childcare, I don’t think. So to get any is really helpful.

Taber: No, there wasn’t much. Quality childcare was always a problem. And quality parenting was always a concern. One of my favorite memories of those days was when Mary Ellen McCaffree, one of only two women agency directors in the administration—Department of Revenue—took me to lunch. The only part of our conversation I remember was focused on parenting. She even gave me a book that I still have today, *P.E.T. Parent Effectiveness Training*, by Dr. Thomas Gordon.

Kilgannon: It’s important to realize that many, if not most, of the people doing this work were married and had small children. Marianne Craft Norton talked about bringing her children to meetings in their Carter’s pajamas. They would play behind her or somewhere in the room.

Taber: That was a few years later.

Kilgannon: Women were trying to carry the double role.
Taber: Sue VanMeter, in our time, really was an expert on childcare. She had had a former job in that area. Not in taking care of children, but–

Kilgannon: Policy?

Taber: Yes. But anyway, I know that whole area of childcare was so complex. I never even tried to fully understand it. I always let Sue handle all of it, because she knew the most about it.

Kilgannon: There were so many questions. Should it be state supported? Or private? Or both, in whatever combinations. Some companies were beginning to think of offering it to their employees. There was the question of affordability, and, of course, what is that? And quality, of course. So daycare is really complex. There was meeting after meeting on it. It shows up everywhere. It’s a constant discussion and, I believe, it’s still with us because it’s still an issue. Not something you solve once and then you’re done. It’s just something that everyone has to work on. But it’s important to realize that the people doing this lobbying and working these issues were themselves grappling with that very thing.

So we have you running all over the state. You’re giving workshops? Did you always talk about the ERA? Or did you have a variety of things that you spoke on?

Taber: At that time, most of it had to do with Women’s Council activities. That would be the reason I would be invited.

Kilgannon: I notice that some of the groups you worked with would include people from the Human Rights Commission, or different experts. You’d be one of the speakers. And they’d use different resource people.

Taber: Yes. Yes.

Kilgannon: And your role on the panel or whatever would be your work on ERA.

Taber: Many times. Yes.

Kilgannon: Did that have a two-way street aspect for you, where you gave information but you also got information and contacts for people all over the state? On local conditions, type of thing.

Taber: Yes, when we had Women’s Council hearings in the state following the 1972 legislative session, we met in the Tri-Cities, Vancouver, Bellingham, Spokane, Yakima, and Tacoma. There was definitely a dual purpose. One was to educate the women in these different geographic locations about the meaning of the laws that had been passed—the educational phase: “This is what it means.” And in the same hearing we would get feedback: “What other needs do you have?”
Kilgannon: That was a wonderful mechanism for meeting women and finding out who is active, and what are the emerging issues.

Taber: When there was a focal point for women’s needs for the first time—the Women’s Council—people would come to me or would be referred to me all the time. I remember a battered woman came with her small children to my office in the Insurance Building. They climbed up the stairs. And at that time, there was no shelter, no help for them. What do you do with a battered woman? At that time there was not even a name for the syndrome. She was just a woman with black eyes and bruises. Ultimately I housed her in an apartment that my husband and I had. After a while she went back home to her husband, unfortunately, and then she’d appear again at my office, with more bruises. And so there would be all kinds of referrals—people that referred women to me from all over the state. I became a resource person: “Oh, check with the Human Rights Commission. Employers can no longer say, ‘We won’t hire you as a manager, but we’ll hire you as a waitress.’” Or, “Did you know that the Seattle Women’s Commission is working on legislation against rape?”

Kilgannon: You were a one-person clearinghouse?

Taber: Yes, a focal point. Because I had an overview of what was happening. This was a time that was so exciting! We were part of a rebirth—that’s the title of a book, *Rebirth of Feminism*.

Kilgannon: Those personal stories, the actual showing up on your doorstep of certain women—

Taber: They would show up at the Women’s Council.

Kilgannon: Well, not your home doorstep. But would that fuel your resolve to keep working?

Taber: It was my religion, being part of a network that helped women in all these ways.

Kilgannon: You’d have all these personal stories, kind of in you, by this time.

Taber: And other people, too. We’d share them with each other. And helped one another—like I said, it was our religion.

Kilgannon: Earlier you said when you were in NOW—you stayed in NOW on some level—that it was the consciousness raising part that was important to you at that point.

Taber: Well, that was at the beginning before I was so busy with Women’s Council activities.
Kilgannon: But did that stay with you when you were thinking about—well, the phrase of the day was “the personal is political.”

Taber: Yes. As we had shared our feelings of what it was like to grow up as a girl in our society and what we experienced as women, we learned that our problems were not just personal and unique to us. We came to know that our shared “personal” experiences and feelings were systemic, and therefore “political.”

Kilgannon: Did that concept help you and inspire you?

Taber: Yes, coming to realize how we shared in experiencing a secondary status did raise our awareness. Of course it was a long process to realize how we had internalized many assumptions of our male-dominated culture. And it would be a life journey to become free. We found, not surprisingly, that once this journey began, there was no turning back. And in this journey women were very supportive of one another.

Kilgannon: You share your story. You’re heard?

Taber: Yes. And we realized that we were not alone, that our stories had much in common. But when I was in the Women’s Council, I was too busy for regular meetings like that.

Kilgannon: No. But you had it in your background.

Taber: Yes, and that background empowered much of the legislation for me. And when I quit the Women’s Council and started a Women’s Studies Program in Lower Columbia College, I had a consciousness raising group there also. That group had the same empowering effect.

Kilgannon: It gives you that support, that kind of touchstone of people who you can call or stories you can draw on. It’s a kind of power.

Taber: Yes, and the people are there for one another. I found that single parents especially found it a real source of strength.

Kilgannon: Nobody really goes it alone?

Taber: That’s right, if they reach out.

Kilgannon: Let’s turn now to the actual ERA statewide ratification campaign that followed passage of the ERA in the Legislature. We’ve talked about it, but we’ve kind of gone around it; let’s look at the mechanics of it. You had a kick-off event in Seattle at the Roosevelt Hotel. And you said it was very hot that day.

Taber: First, let me give you an organizational statement. Sam Reed, and later Joel Pritchard on the Council, introduced me to the idea that you have two types of groups.
The first committee is composed of prominent people whose names would be used to influence people to pass the ERA. The second committee would be a campaign committee of ten to twelve people. This committee would set up a campaign county by county and city by city.

Kilgannon: The names down the side of your stationary would be from the first committee?

Taber: Yes, you use their names, and that carries weight. If you can showcase these “important” persons, it hopefully persuades citizens that it’s okay to be part of this effort. And then you have the workers group. And so we set those up. But what I clearly remember as we started to meet—none of us had a lot of experience—was that people in the working group would really resent that the “prominent people” group didn’t do as much work. They felt that it wasn’t fair just to use prominent names. This stemmed from Women’s Movement principles that you should get credit for everything you do, and not be exploited for work you did, but for which others were given credit and visibility. Women had had enough of such exploitation. Most campaign workers did not understand that having a group whose primary function was precisely the use of their names, was politically helpful. I mean, we wanted them to do more. But if they didn’t, it was okay.

Kilgannon: Like the president of WSU, Glenn Terrell, who co-chaired the campaign with Betty Fletcher–

Taber: Yes, campaign workers wished he would do more.

Kilgannon: He probably couldn’t have.

Taber: The working group felt he could have done more than he did.

Kilgannon: In the correspondence, you can tell people were having to come to terms with the fact that he’s a figurehead. And he was happy to be a figurehead?

Taber: He said he was pleased to be associated with the campaign. It had actually been an initial challenge to get him to agree. We must remember that the ERA campaign was not popular, there was no assurance we would win, and in eastern Washington it was especially difficult to get a person of stature to associate with the controversial measure.

Kilgannon: You can tell that the people are struggling to deal with the fact that he doesn’t really have the time.

Taber: It’s not about time. He didn’t want too much visibility. Perhaps he would have made the time to be present at the opening of the campaign with Betty Fletcher, had he wanted to. Not coming to the opening of the campaign disappointed workers. He had agreed to head up the campaign with Betty Fletcher. We needed him as a man, to be
paired with Betty, a woman; and we needed him to represent eastern Washington, as Betty represented western Washington.

In retrospect I understand the risk he took in light of developments. Remember that I said the intern, Mary Ellen Hudgins, years later became Litigation Director for the Northwest Women’s Law Center? And that she litigated “Blair vs. WSU; Women’s Equity in Athletics”? She used the ERA as her legal foundation! And won! I have often wondered whether Glenn Terrell regretted having co-chaired the state ERA campaign in light of that considerable disruption at WSU.

Kilgannon: That would make it difficult.

Taber: Yes. Anyway, you asked about the actual campaign. I can’t really put it together for you. So much of it was a whirl. But organizationally, we created the right committees, hired Micki Pailthorp to manage an office and to work with the committees. We had to develop everything—develop materials and develop speakers’ kits, develop everything.

Kilgannon: Yes, there were speakers’ kits, there were actual speeches prepared. There was fundraising, everything from selling buttons and bumper stickers to hopefully larger things. Yard signs, doorbelling campaigns, tabloids that went out all over the place.

Taber: I still have some HJR 61 buttons.

Kilgannon: And speeches, speeches, speeches. And getting in the press. What was the press response? Were they friendly with you?

Taber: You know, it would depend on the reporters. Some of the “friendly” reporters would have a difficult time if they worked for a conservative paper. We worked to identify our allies, and our networks were born. Pro-people and anti-people networked all over. The Equal Rights Amendment campaign and the early years of the Women’s Council accomplished in our state what the International Women’s Year in 1977 accomplished later in the nation with nationwide networks. And so in working with reporters, we would know–

Kilgannon: Would you call friendly reporters to ask them if they could be present, or alert them?

Taber: Different local people would develop relationships. It’s just like effectiveness in anything. You develop relationships with people. You knew what news they were covering in a particular newspaper. And so people would get to know that person. And then if they really got to know a reporter well, they would hear the inside story. A reporter might say, “You know, I’d really like to do more, but I can’t because of the conservative paper, but what I can do for you is after such and such a point, I will do a special article on so and so.”
Susan Paynter, of course, was an incredible ally; we knew exactly where she stood. And Sally Mahoney was a big friend. Both were professionally objective, of course. And they had more freedom. But some of the other reporters had more difficulty. Tacoma, Spokane’s *The Spokesman Review*—there were difficulties there.

Kilgannon: I recall reading at least one article where you were trying to deal with a reporter who could not understand the term “Ms.”

Taber: Oh, I don’t even remember that.

Kilgannon: They were after you a couple of different times about that but I recall reading one reporter who just couldn’t grasp that concept. And another time where it was not the reporter but that person’s editor, where they changed the designation and you sounded exasperated in what you wrote about it.

Taber: I can’t remember. I would like to think that I would have remembered to “let the main thing be the main thing.”

Kilgannon: It was all part of the mix. I’ve read Susan Paynter’s articles and other people’s articles. But there was that other side where those are pretty new concepts for some people. Women’s pages—or whatever they were called at that time—were also in transition from a “society” aspect to covering women’s issues. They were changing themselves.

Taber: Exactly. You know, if you talk to some NOW people about those early days, they’ll start reminiscing and they’ll say, “Remember when we were trying to get our own name in the telephone book? When we were only known by our husband’s name, and we couldn’t even look our women contacts up in the telephone directory? And remember the help-wanted-men and the help-wanted-women ads? And remember when women’s news was in a separate section of the paper? And all those changes. Things we take for granted now.

Kilgannon: Yes. I noticed that there was a real style difference. The women who were involved in the movement used their own names. And the women who were opposed to the movement—

Taber: “Mrs. Robert Young.”

Kilgannon: –used their husband’s name. And in some cases, I have never been able to find out what their real names were. They just disappeared.

Taber: Right. Right.

Kilgannon: It was definitely a time of transition. Some women were comfortable and ready to make that change, and some women were not.
Taber: Yes.

Kilgannon: And some men, too, of course. So you worked on the official campaign, it said, in an unofficial capacity.

Taber: I couldn’t lobby.

Kilgannon: That was what I was thinking must have been the distinction.

Taber: Yes.

Kilgannon: You could do everything but?

Taber: You know, there was one newspaper article, this one. For some reason I have it in my notebooks, dated and everything. The name of paper and date have worn off on my copy, sorry. Mrs. Young charged me for the misuse of money. “In Olympia, Ms. Taber denied Mrs. Young’s charge that she was lobbying for ratification. ‘I don’t have to disagree. I have been asked around the state to give information on the equal rights amendment, which I have been glad to do. I have dealt with the facts of the matter, what it does and what it does not. Members of the Women’s Council, a non paid citizens’ group, have been free to take an advocacy stance and to lobby. I must point out that ratification is a Women’s Council request bill, which it wants passed. I am the staff person supporting the Council, and I have to facilitate certain procedures for the Council at its direction. These include getting sponsors for the ratification measures. However, I personally have not spoken to any legislator, nor lobbied any legislator, on behalf of this measure. On many occasions, legislators have turned to this office for information. In all cases, I provide information requested, and refer them to the Yale Law Review article on the ERA, which has been quoted by both sides.”

That was one of the attacks.

Kilgannon: I thought that was very succinct.

Taber: Yes. I had to be very careful. But of course I helped put people together. And I could duplicate things. And I had a telephone. I could rightfully be very helpful, because I was staff, working at the direction of the Women’s Council.

Kilgannon: I noticed on several occasions there were times when you—always willingly, according to the sources—gave information to people who were opposed to the ERA, because you were for “all women.” You were there for whoever needed information. And they acknowledged that on occasion. You just had information, and they were welcome to it.

Taber: Yes, yes. I tried to be fair. I really tried. I tried to understand the women and I still have several books, like The Total Woman, and Fascinating Womanhood. I tried to imagine how they thought.
Kilgannon: If you could develop a sense of empathy for the other side, did it help you sort through— I mean, a lot of things were being thrown at you. Did it help you have a broader perspective?

Taber: Well, I very much had my own perspective. I don’t think that changed at all.

Kilgannon: But you did have to understand all sides?

Taber: Yes. I understood where they were coming from. But to tell you the truth, I wanted to understand in order to find better ways to refute their arguments.

Kilgannon: You had debates with some of the leaders of the anti-ERA side. There was a big one in Tacoma, for instance, with Dr. Kathleen Skrinar.

Taber: She was a medical doctor, although she was home with her kids. She was smart and articulate, and did her homework.

Kilgannon: But she was not practicing medicine at that time?

Taber: I don’t think so.

Kilgannon: Mrs. Robert Young and Miss McCaughie were also there, and there were some ministers. You also had a minister on your side of the debate. There were a couple of different church groups. Rev. Bruce Foreman helped you on the other side of the question. I’m trying to picture. Would you be at a long table, and then there would be a moderator and different people would be seated in a row?

Taber: I can’t remember. There were so many long tables. And so many occasions. It has become somewhat of a blur.

Kilgannon: From what I understand, the pro-ERA speakers tried to stick to more of the legal aspects. And the anti-ERA people were much more concerned with what they called the destruction of the family, the more religious aspects, of a certain type.

Taber: Yes.

Kilgannon: There was even a certain amount of what could be called red-baiting in the sense that it was said children in homes would be socialized and that the privacy of women would be invaded by the state, that women would be forced to send their children into daycare, and forced to work.

Taber: You’re reminding me of stuff I haven’t thought of in decades! That’s true.

Kilgannon: If your argument is on this one track, but their arguments are much more emotional, say, how do you meet that kind of discussion?
Taber: I remember, just like you said, our aim was to educate people that the Equal Rights Amendment only affected matters of law. It did not tell you how to live in your home with your husband. And that’s true. So that was an educational effort. I would try to give examples of that.

Kilgannon: I have read other people’s somewhat exasperated comments about, “They only want to talk about toilets!”

Taber: Oh, unisex toilets, like in airplanes or in our homes, we would reassure. Or the homosexual marriages.

Kilgannon: Complaints about “Could we get off that level?” But it doesn’t appear that anyone could.

Taber: No. These issues were repeated again and again. They all came out, even to the floor of the Senate.

Kilgannon: Again and again. That was interesting how that was just a constant refrain, and it didn’t matter how much you refuted it.

Taber: Right.

Kilgannon: It was what they believed. And it came right down to the Voters Pamphlet. There were all the steps: getting the bill through the Legislature, which was hard fought. And then because it was an amendment to the state constitution it would have to be voted on by the people. And one of the biggest issues was the wording that went into the official Voters Pamphlet. There were a lot of questions about people not understanding that proponents and opponents wrote their statements, and that they were not checked–

Taber: For accuracy.

Kilgannon: –by other higher authorities, or whatever that would be.

Taber: The Secretary of State.

Kilgannon: The statement against House Joint Resolution 61, which was the proper title of this amendment, they start out by saying, “Well, of course we want equal pay for equal work,” and this sort of thing. But then they say, “But House Joint Resolution 61 would remove all preferential consideration presently extended to women in our society.” There were a lot of arguments in these debates and what not—how did they put it? “Women do not want equality, they are already superior, so equality would be a come down. They want to stay on a pedestal.” An interesting statement.
Taber: That became a difficult realistic issue when it came to labor protective legislation against long hours and lifting heavy weights and matters of the draft, or serving your country.

Kilgannon: Women had been exempt.

Taber: We had no draft at the time. And I would say, “You’re right in that matter. That’s where the ‘responsibility’ comes in for both sexes, as well as the ‘rights’ and privileges.” I happen to believe in that as a human being. It wasn’t just a facetious statement. But the stepping down from perceived “superiority” was hard to refute with people who did not treasure mutuality.

Kilgannon: It was brought up again and again.

Taber: I know it was.

Kilgannon: It was interesting that it was seen that way: “Men won’t open doors for me anymore.” The really big one, of course, was “Husbands will not have to support their wives and children.” There won’t be alimony, there won’t be child support, there won’t be—men will be able to act irresponsibly, basically, within the family. And with divorce and all those things.

Taber: Our argument, of course, was that alimony and child support would not be eliminated, but would be paid by the spouse who could afford to do so. The interesting fact is that some of the women in my life since then have, in fact, paid their husbands child support.

Kilgannon: Well, if the woman earns more money. That’s interesting.

Taber: It is equality in rights as well as in responsibilities.

Kilgannon: It works both ways. But here, they talked about high school wrestling teams, how there would be girls wrestling with boys, and how that’s ludicrous. Homosexual and lesbian marriage would be legalized. Again, this concern that never goes away. Even though you had a lot of studies that showed this was never going to be a related issue. I remember that Tim Burke who worked as a staff member for the Legislative Council wrote an entire report addressing this question.

Taber: Yes. Yes. Exactly. But it didn’t go away. There was no record of experience. I think there was one precedent in another state regarding homosexuality we could point to. “No, it didn’t happen there.” But there was very little precedent. And so people were reaching, and their imaginations were inflamed with fear. We would tell them that if same-sex marriages were legal in this state, the ERA would only have the effect of ensuring that this legality would apply to marriages of both gay men and to lesbians.
Kilgannon: And this divorce issue. And the issue of no distinction between the sexes regarding the draft and barracks life. Again, this is the sort of shared toilet issue, that and other privacy issues. You try to address that in Statement Four in the Pamphlet.

Taber: But you know, we couldn’t see one another’s arguments before drafting our own.

Kilgannon: No, I understand that each statement was written in isolation.

Taber: And so we didn’t really know what the other side was saying. The Secretary of State’s office couldn’t tell us, even though they probably wanted to, because they were on our side on this matter.

Kilgannon: He must have had to walk a fine line, too.

Taber: Oh, absolutely. They had to be fair to both sides. So when Lois North and others were putting the statement together, they had to be familiar enough with the arguments to know what would be helpful to preempt.

Kilgannon: So from all your debates and all those conversations, you would have had some sense of what were the fears, what were the concerns of the other side.

Taber: I tried to be a helpful resource. Lois North certainly had good sense.

Kilgannon: We should say that Lois North, of course, was the prime sponsor of the bill.

Taber: In the House.

Kilgannon: In the House of Representatives, of this measure. And actually of the federal ERA measure, too. Along with many other people. But her name was the prime, listed first. How was it chosen whose names would go on the Voters Pamphlet?

Taber: It was intentional strategy.

Kilgannon: There was a certain geographic coverage of the state in the names represented.

Taber: Many factors were considered in forming a strategy.

Kilgannon: Yes. Certainly the correspondence documents that different names came up as possible signers. There was a discussion of “We need someone from a union. We need people from different walks of life.”

Taber: And well-known people who were trusted.

Kilgannon: And from different parts of the state.
Taber: Yes, and again, the idea is to select people who are trusted by various constituencies. Sometimes voters don’t even read the arguments as much as they say, “Well, who’s endorsing this? Which organization or which individual whom I know and trust endorses this?”

Kilgannon: That makes sense.

Taber: That’s true in a statewide voter situation, and it’s true in the Senate. Senator Gissberg, who actually voted against the Equal Rights Amendment, was a great ultimate proponent of the community property changes. And he was so trusted in judicial matters like this that there were lots of senators who would wait to see what Gissberg thought about it. Once he had made up his mind, he would have a minimum of eight people vote like him, and often more. People trusted his judgment on judicial matters. There are so many bills that you can’t possibly read and digest and understand all of them. You have to learn whom to trust in certain areas. You look to so-and-so in educational matters. You look to, well, Gissberg on judicial matters.

It’s the same principle with the Voters Pamphlet. If you can get people or organizations that are trustworthy to endorse an issue, voters reading the Voters Pamphlet will say, “Oh, well then, I’ll go with that.”

Kilgannon: Yes. “Oh, it’s supported by the League of Women Voters.”

Taber: A perfect example.

Kilgannon: Or “Here’s the AUW, there’s the State Council of Churches.”

Taber: Exactly.

Kilgannon: You had some good names for sponsors.

Taber: They were good, we think. But of course, the opposition would not think that.

Kilgannon: Here on the anti statement you have—of course, there are always legislators, because it’s their realm. Jack Metcalf, State Senator, and James Kuehnle, a State Representative from Spokane. And then Mrs. Robert Young, state chairman of HOW, one of those acronyms. She does not say what HOW is, but I guess you’re supposed to know. And the League of Housewives.

Taber: Is HOW Happiness of Womanhood? I think so.

Kilgannon: Yes, I think so. There are a couple of like groups that are quite similarly named and I get them mixed up. And then they have an advisory committee, Connie Bamesberger. I haven’t seen that name anywhere else. And Dennis Dunn. He must have been a prominent businessman at the time?
Taber: I don’t remember.

Kilgannon: You have, certainly, a stronger organizational committee. But it was still, it was a new thing.

Taber: It was up and down. The absentee ballots decided the outcome. I was actually in the home of Dottie Smith, with Pat Thibaudeau there. We were there to evaluate what had happened as the basis of future strategies.

Kilgannon: Because you thought you had lost?

Taber: Yes, at the time we thought we had lost. I can’t remember precisely what future campaigns we were there to discuss. I do know that I wanted the input of these excellent lobbyists before I even met with the Women’s Council, so that I could give the Council my informed input. All of a sudden the phone rang, and it was for me. It was Lud Kramer!

Kilgannon: The Secretary of State. He’d been tracking you down?

Taber: He was tracking me down. Before cell phones. I couldn’t believe it. And he said that the ERA had won! I said, “Don’t do this to me, Lud.” I thought he was teasing me, because it had gone up and down, up and down, up and down.

And he said, “No, really, Gisela. And it’s the most narrow victory of any measure in the history of the state.” We had won by .26 of one percent! He cared that much about the emotional wringer I had been through that he went to all the trouble to track me to a home in Seattle to share the victory immediately. Isn’t that amazing?

[Lud Kramer letter LINK]

Kilgannon: He must have known your network.

Taber: I’m sure he called my office, and Sue gave him my number. Boy, that made our day. I don’t think we got any work done!

Kilgannon: I would think that would be enough for one day! Well, let’s review your achievement. There were two phases to your campaign: there was getting it through the Legislature, and I understand there was a certain amount of dancing in the halls when that happened. Let’s go back to Bill Gissberg, a senator from Snohomish County. When he could not support it, did it look like it wouldn’t pass the State Senate?

Taber: Well, the state ERA was too close to call ahead of time.

Kilgannon: It was quite close. Did you sit in the Senate gallery and watch the vote?
Taber: Yes. And by the way, I was with a seasoned lobbyist when it passed. She said to me, “Don’t move, Gisela. Just bask in the moment. Breathe deeply, and take it all in.”

Kilgannon: Did she think someone would be taking your picture just at that moment?

Taber: No, not necessarily. But people were looking at me. They knew that I was the behind-the-scenes organizer. And so it was just—very nice. We just sat there, quietly, feeling the impact.

Kilgannon: Concentrating on not falling off the bench? You were sitting above where they were voting.

Taber: Yes.

Kilgannon: Were you also present in the gallery of the House the day when two young women ERA activists did not stand for the POW [Vietnam Prisoner of War] ceremony? That was a low moment, I think.

Taber: That was a year later, when we were dealing with the federal ERA. No. I was in my office. But reporters rushed to me immediately. They thought I was behind that. And I wasn’t.

Kilgannon: How would you have been?

Taber: Many people thought honoring the POW in a joint session of the Senate and the House was related to the ERA campaign because people were there at the same time waiting for the Senate floor debate on the Equal Rights Amendment.

Kilgannon: I believe they had the ERA badges on.

Taber: Yes. Yes. And those issues got mixed up. And somehow certain reporters thought I was involved with it, or at least that I knew what was going on. But I didn’t even know what had happened. I wasn’t there, and was only waiting for the ERA debate in the Senate.

Kilgannon: Attributing you with a lot more coordination than you could manage?

Taber: Yes. And it really was damaging. There was no reason for ERA advocates not to honor POWs. And if they did not wish to do so, they should have taken their button off. In any case they violated a cardinal rule; you don’t mix issues, especially volatile issues.

Kilgannon: It almost derailed you.

Taber: Yes, it had that potential. I had to be very careful to step back, and to get a letter out, so that—
Kilgannon: Damage control?

Taber: Yes, damage control.

Kilgannon: It’s really one of those moments that a lot of people speak of.

Taber: Oh, yes. It was horrifying! Horrifying! “How can something so totally unanticipated like this derail us?” The anger on the part of legislators was explosive. Ironically, Senator Mardesich, who ended up voting against the ERA, moved to postpone action on the ERA, and put the matter on the next day’s calendar. This move had the full approval of Senator Fleming, who was to be in charge of the floor debate. This was an example of an opponent of the ERA being helpful and fair in the process to help get the measure more objective consideration than would otherwise have been possible.

Kilgannon: Getting back to the statewide ratification campaign, were there people behind the scenes who helped? I know the Secretary of State helped you. Slade Gordon, the Attorney General, spoke at the kick-off of the campaign. Dan Evans, the Governor, helped you.

Taber: Governor Evans did what he needed to do.

Kilgannon: He wrote letters. He supported you. He even pounded the trail for you.

Taber: Yes, he was helpful. Signing jointly with Slade Gorton, Attorney General, and with A. Ludlow Kramer, Secretary of State, he requested that the State Republican Convention place HJR 61 on the 1972 Republican platform. He also declared the week, culminating on August 26, when women obtained the vote in 1920, as Women’s Week. Without him, of course, there would have been no Women’s Council and no ERA campaign. But he could not exactly “pound the trail” for us. He had to be careful, as he did not wish to jeopardize his primary issues. But we kept track of his schedule, and invited people to ask him questions about the ERA in their geographic areas.

Kilgannon: He had a lot of correspondence dealing with the ERA and women’s issues. I wondered, how much did you help with some of those letters? Who answered the letters?

Taber: I was familiar with some of them. There’s always a person in the Governor’s office in charge of correspondence. At the beginning of the Women’s Council, this person was Jo Garceau. Toward the end of my time with the Council, it was Jennifer Belcher. In any case, the person in charge of correspondence would routinely send letters that required input to appropriate agencies. If a letter dealt with fishing, it was routed to Fisheries.

Kilgannon: Right.

Taber: The correspondence secretary wrote many letters. But often, to help assure accuracy in facts and nuance, she asked for a draft to be written. Jennifer Belcher was
hired in the spring of 1973 as Correspondence Assistant. She developed an excellent system of control from routing a letter or inquiry to the appropriate agency, to routing the draft response past the Governor’s policy staff, to having letters signed either in person, or on the signature machine.

Kilgannon: Yes. I noticed that all the letters had a certain tone to them. Both answering people for and against the ERA. It was really interesting to see how they were handled, and I wondered if you had a role in that. There is some consistency in the answers.

Taber: Yes, I had input for certain letters, that could then be used as a whole or in part in generic responses.

Kilgannon: So these statewide elected officials who helped actually all happened to be Republicans. Were there Democrats who helped you as well?

Taber: I was part of the Republican administration, you will remember. But of course we intentionally invited Democrats into active participation. Success demands bipartisanship at every stage. So in everything we did, we always tried to get Democrats involved.

Kilgannon: Do any names come to mind?

Taber: Wasn’t Francis a Democrat?

Kilgannon: Senator Francis, yes, Pete Francis. Yes. Senator Robert Bailey?

Taber: Was he a Democrat? Yes, he had been prime sponsor in 1972.

Kilgannon: He also did some procedural things for the passage of the bill in the Senate.

Taber: So the answer is yes. So there definitely were. I can’t remember all the players and their party affiliation; I’m too far away from that, and would have to look the information up.

Kilgannon: That’s all right.

Taber: I was hired by Governor Evans. And whenever I would go anywhere, I would try to be very neutral in terms of party. Democrats would be very antsy until they were sure that I would not use my presence as a Republican to advantage. Ours was not a partisan issue. I would always try to involve Democrats as well as Republicans.

Kilgannon: It would have been one of the few issues, I suppose, just then, that would have to be bipartisan. That would try to reach beyond normal politics. That would try to be a kind of a universal type of thing.
Taber: Actually, it would be difficult for most issues to succeed without bipartisan support. But we have to be vigilant as to how we recognize and utilize support. I was schooled in this regard by agency Director Maryan Reynolds. She was head of the Library and had worked with the Legislature for many years. She told me, “Gisela, I’m not going to be able to help you up front. I have to wear my Library hat.” Publicly, she had to be identified only with the Library. But she gave money. And I could certainly go to her for private help.

Kilgannon: Yes.

Taber: She would have done anything behind the scenes that I needed.

Kilgannon: Certainly she could find you information, or at least direct her librarians to do so.

Taber: Yes. And she authorized me to go to a woman on her staff for help. This was Charlotte Wood who was also active on the Interagency Commission. Marvelous, smart, always-prepared, efficient person.

Kilgannon: A lot of behind the scenes resources?

Taber: Oh, yes. And as you acknowledged earlier, the Women’s Council did not just suddenly spring from the brow of Zeus. It resulted from a rich milieu of individuals and organizations who were ready to work for the equality of women.

Kilgannon: And that’s, I suppose, how you won.

Taber: Yes. And you know what? It took everybody in their role to win! I also believe that it took the Radical Women. Sometimes everybody would be so mad at the Radical Women because some legislators tried to use them as an excuse not to vote for our measure. But it was because of those Radical Women that legislators could be more comfortable working with me and with people like me. They couldn’t work with these Radical Women outside the system, but they could work with those of us within the system.

Kilgannon: They made you look good?

Taber: Yes, and my point was, it took absolutely everybody’s influence to win. Many legislators just wanted an excuse to vote no, and had to be pressured. “He got 80 telegrams against it yesterday!” We tried to think of all the connections: Who’s the best person to approach this legislator? So it would differ. Some times it would be a wife, or a former wife. Often it would be a campaign manager, or someone who worked on that legislator’s campaign. Perhaps it was a friend from his district, a constituent, some tie, you know. Because a critical part of politics is personal relationships. Secretaries could be a fount of information. “He reads everything. He needs information on the draft. He wants a lawyer to explain constitutional questions and the right to privacy.” The Senate
doorman would be helpful. People wanted to know, where and when can you talk to this legislator? Sometimes it would be on the way to the restroom! Or catching someone early. Like they’d get to the office at eight or at seven or whatever and—

Kilgannon: They’d go for coffee?

Taber: Normally it would not be possible to “go for coffee” without an appointment. But knowing a legislator’s habits enabled persons to “catch” him right before he got to the door, before all these other people were there demanding attention.

Kilgannon: I picture you laying in wait!

Taber: That was literally true. Because sometimes you never had access—everybody’s busy, and some legislators intentionally tried to avoid ERA proponents. So we identified people’s patterns.

Kilgannon: You must have studied them with a big magnifying glass.

Taber: Everybody did. And, once again, this is where some of the professional women lobbyists were so helpful in sharing this kind of information.

Kilgannon: They already knew this?

Taber: They already knew much about legislators. They’d have known some legislators for years, and often shared relevant information with ERA proponents they trusted. Of course, one always had to keep learning, to keep being alert and creative…

Kilgannon: They would help you compile profiles of the members?

Taber: Yes. Absolutely.

Kilgannon: Their previous voting patterns. What they were for, what they supported and what they thought was important in their district? That kind of thing?

Taber: Right. Now, at one hearing, I was accused of having a file. What was his name, the prime opponent?

Kilgannon: Jack Metcalf?

Taber: Yes, Metcalf. He had a hearing, a Senate hearing. Jim Dolliver was there. I was there, but only to listen to others testify. All of a sudden Jack Metcalf said, “Mrs. Taber?” I had to stand up. He said, “I understand you have a card file in your office.” That made me very nervous.

Kilgannon: He makes it sound like the CIA!
Taber: And in fact, I did have a file.

Kilgannon: Well, of course, you did.

Taber: And he said, “What do you have in this file?” I said, “Well…” And then I mentioned senators’ political affiliation, how they voted previously on the state ERA, and some other points, all of which were true. Of course I didn’t tell them everything I had on the card file.

Kilgannon: No.

Taber: And then Senator Metcalf said, “I want that card file in my office at eight in the morning.”

Kilgannon: The one on him?

Taber: My whole card file.

Kilgannon: Your whole card file? Oh, my goodness.

Taber: On the Senate. On my way out several people were kidding me. “You’ll have a long night.” [laughs]

Kilgannon: Yes. You wouldn’t want to give him the only file you had.

Taber: It would be more about information on the cards. People who had come to Olympia to lobby would often come first and look at their senator’s objections to the ERA, including his latest objections. We would provide information on how to refute myths about the ERA, or how to respond to certain questions. And then they would go talk to the senator, already knowing where he was coming from, and knowing how to respond. And then, before they went home again to whatever district they lived in, they would come back to Sue and me.

Kilgannon: And you could update the file?

Taber: Update the file. Exactly. There would be comments like: “Wants to see effects of the state amendment before ratifying the federal one.” “Believes in equality but does not believe in legislating it.” “Hopes that it’s passed before his name is called, so he can vote against it.” “His mail is 60-40 for…BPW women for; housewives against.” “Afraid of excessive federal power.”

Kilgannon: I would think you would hardly be the only person doing that. Was that effective? Could you—did some one ever change their minds?

Taber: That’s hard to tell. But I do remember that at least one senator asked if he could be helpful in talking to senators who appeared to be “on the fence.” It’s really interesting
to read the card file. Some senators had outrageous excuses. They’d say one thing, and when that would be refuted, would go to another excuse, then another. They would just–

Kilgannon: Kind of like throwing up a smokescreen?

Taber: Right. Right.

Kilgannon: So they’re just saying whatever came into their heads? In the heat of what was a battle, people say amazing things.

Taber: It was certainly a battle. In the House it went relatively well. But in the Senate, every vote was a battle.

Kilgannon: Well, you had most—not all—but many of the Democratic leaders were against the ERA. Senator Gissberg was not the only one. You had Senator Mardesich; you had Senator Greive. You had all the really big names in the Democratic-led Senate.

Taber: They were against us.

Kilgannon: That you still passed this is kind of astonishing in the face of the list of those who did not support you.

Taber: One of my women lobbyist friends told me early on about not burning bridges. She said, “Never burn your bridges, because a foe on one issue can be your best friend on another.” And so I would use that wisdom. The very people who were against a constitutional approach, but said they were with us on specific issues, did in fact help us with community property legislation in 1972, and with expanding the Law Against Discrimination with credit, marital status, insurance provisions, etc. in 1973. And so they kept their word.

Kilgannon: Right.

Taber: Gissberg—without him, the community property bill would not have happened at that point in time. And Bottiger was helpful with expanding the State Law Against Discrimination.

Kilgannon: And for some of them, was the issue that the ERA was not a specific bill but a constitutional amendment? They had trouble with that format? They couldn’t support it as an amendment because that takes it to a different level?

Taber: Yes. Some legislators were uncomfortable with “a meat axe approach” when they could not grasp exactly how it would affect all our laws. They much preferred specific legislation so that they knew what they were dealing with.

Kilgannon: One of the quotes often cited by people opposed to the ERA referred to “specific bills for specific ills.” Not this broad-brush approach.
Taber: Exactly.

Kilgannon: So I was wondering, is that the kind of argument you would get?

Taber: Yes. And discomfort with the “unknown.” When Gayle Barry was slowly able to complete the huge study about implementing the ERA by getting agreement with the specific laws in our state, it wasn’t so scary. Sometimes it was simply a matter of changing a word. For example, assuring equity in judges’ pensions required changing the word “wives” to “spouses.” But when you don’t know what’s going to be affected, because we didn’t have all that research done at the outset, it was kind of scary for some.

Protective labor legislation was a thorny area. We found that to be protected legally often had the effect of “protecting” women out of higher paying jobs. What was at one time perceived to be a good thing, we no longer perceived to be a good thing in all circumstances. We took the position that if genuine protection was involved, this should be extended to men.

Kilgannon: You had to make a promise that was in the future, that you would go back and address the labor issues to include everyone under protective legislation. Or abolish certain things altogether, depending on the case. So that hadn’t yet happened.

Taber: But an ERA would make sex-specific protective laws unconstitutional.

Kilgannon: So in a sense, people were having to buy an unknown quantity in the hope that all those things would come into play.

Taber: I guess I would want to add, while on this topic, that some of the senators were sincere in not wanting to take risks with a constitutional approach while sincerely, although not necessarily passionately, wanting to help women. But for others such potential risks were used as an excuse to vote against the ERA. I mean, some people didn’t really want to help women. So each senator was different.

Kilgannon: Your report on the federal ERA as it went through the Senate was in such great detail—a lot of the arguments are virtually the same—I thought we could look at that report. [LINK] You did pass the state ERA. Did it help or influence the passage of the federal ERA, do you think? What was the relationship?

Taber: First of all let me relate what I had said in the newsletter following the passage of the federal ERA. When contrasting the floor debate to that regarding HJR 61, the state ERA, of the year before, the caliber was on a “significantly higher level.” Much education had taken place, and the debate reflected relevant issues thoughtfully presented. Having said this, in answer to your question of the relationship of the two campaigns, there was a backlash. The passage of the state ERA energized the opposition; they thought, “If we had just done a little bit more.” And so there was a great backlash.
Kilgannon: Ah. And also because it was the federal ERA, there were nationally organized groups against the ERA that the state opponents could tap into, I suppose, that might not have been quite up to speed for the state effort.

Taber: I think you’re correct.

Kilgannon: Also slightly different in that it does include the question of the draft. How much does that muddy up the issue for the federal ERA?

Taber: It was a big point, and many senators had requested information on this for their education before the floor debate. During the debate on the floor it was mentioned several times. First, Senator Dore mentioned it, saying the draft “is now null and void.” Senator Metcalf, the prime opponent, disagreed saying, “Had the draft been included in the vote regarding HJR 61, it would certainly not have passed.” Senator Fleming, when countering various objections to the ERA before the vote, asked, “Why should it not apply to women? They already serve.”

Kilgannon: A harder issue to discuss?

Taber: What made it easier was that we did not have a draft. But discussion would entail, “We can’t have our cake and eat it, too.” Some people would admire an answer like that. But others wanted to be protected from the draft.

Kilgannon: Sure. Well, this was the Vietnam War era. The draft was kind of a red-hot issue.

Taber: Yes, it was an emotional issue, not just an academic one.

Kilgannon: It’s a much more of an esoteric position that if women were given the rights—and you did mean it—and responsibilities, you meant the whole thing.

Taber: Yes, this issue really demonstrated the heart of the ERA; that equality did entail responsibilities—even when sticky—as well as rights.

Kilgannon: Actually, we’re seeing it right now in the newspaper. Young mothers leaving their children behind as they go off to war. And I’m sure there are many people that look at those stories and wonder if that is a good thing.

So again, you had to go to pretty much to the same people, with the same arguments. And it was the very next year. There’s not much break in the action.

Taber: Senator Henry captured it best as he opposed persons who wanted to kill the ERA “because we still have six more years.” He claimed that the ERA was like an “ingrown toenail; it’s not fatal, but it can be very aggravating.”

Kilgannon: “Oh, could they ever talk about something else?!!”
Taber: And I was careful not to “lobby.” But they knew. They’d see me, and they could—

Kilgannon: Yes. You’re “that woman.”

Taber: I’d be talking to Lois North or whoever, and they knew.

Kilgannon: Sure. And you probably had a bag of handouts slung over your shoulder.

Taber: No, I would be careful never to do that.

Kilgannon: But you’d pretty much have the same plans again. Lois North is the prime sponsor, with many members listed behind her name. And all the different players are pretty much the same as during the state campaign. You still debated; did you still travel around the countryside, giving speeches? You were active?

And the state ERA hadn’t been in place long enough for people to answer the question—one of the big questions was will it flood the courts?

Taber: I did less “traveling around the countryside,” because my presence was with the Legislature. At that same time of trying to pass the federal Equal Rights Amendment, we were also trying to pass that omnibus bill, implementing the state Equal Rights Amendment.

Kilgannon: Yes.

Taber: So that effort was parallel. And it was helpful. People could see that while many changes had to be made in terms of numbers of laws affected, the changes themselves were not so huge. Ultimately, we were the number-one state in the union to have harmonized our laws with our state ERA. So our accomplishment gave a lot of states in the country reassurance that this effort wasn’t a huge unknown to be afraid of. We had passed, in one year, a state Equal Rights Amendment, and implemented it the next.

Kilgannon: And Barry’s research showed that men would benefit, too.

Taber: Yes. Exactly.

Kilgannon: One difference between the state and federal ERA campaign was that the federal one was only a legislative campaign not requiring statewide ratification. And it still meant you involved all kinds of people to write their legislators and call, but it didn’t then go to a vote of the people, so the structure of the campaign was different in that respect.

Taber: Right. Thank God.
Kilgannon: That might have been a little too much? Did people say, “Well, you already have the state ERA, why do you need a federal one?”

Taber: That might have come up, but it’s an easy one to explain.

Kilgannon: Now, again, the bill went through the House fairly easily. It got hung up in the Senate, as usual. One of the ways to kill a bill is to say, “Well, we need to study this.”

Taber: And they did, as I mentioned.

Kilgannon: But Senators Rasmussen and Metcalf put forward an amendment to delay passage. And there were several times when members said, “You’ve got six years to pass this. What’s the rush? Let’s study it.”

Taber: I know. The death knell! And coming from them, it was a transparent way to kill it. And everybody knew that.

Kilgannon: So that is one of the ways things are done away with. But you did have some people who helped. At one point there was a hearing, and a woman called Mary Ellen Krug and Rev. Paul McCann, from the local United Church, came and spoke for the passage. You brought in these people and they spoke very strongly for no delays, just: “We must do this.”

Taber: They did not, of course, take part in the Senate floor debate. But Paul McCann was respected, and I remember Mary Ellen Krug. She was a toughy. She was great.

Kilgannon: She sounds pretty stern! And you had some people who helped you move the bill who were actually not necessarily for the bill, but were for the process. You had Senator Martin Durkan and Senator Frank Atwood, who voted against it, but still helped you move it from the committee to Rules. Getting it out of the Rules Committee was another place you needed help—another good place for a bill to die.

Taber: Yes. And people were working on that. We would say, “Even though you’re against it, we think people should have the right to vote on it.”

Kilgannon: And that was definitely a workable proposition for many. One of the arguments was: “Don’t just kill it in this unobtrusive way. Take it to a vote.”

Taber: Yes. Be accountable publicly.

Kilgannon: For some legislators that would be a very meaningful argument.

Taber: You know, I’m glad to remember that. That’s true. That was important.

Kilgannon: You and your coworkers must have been masters of this process by that time, to know that you could reach people with that argument.
Taber: Yes. And every bit of pressure was important.

Kilgannon: And there were tactics, knowing not to try to bring it up in Rules when certain members were not there, because it would fail, and then you would really be in a bad place.

Taber: Yes.

Kilgannon: After all this, finally it comes through, it comes to the floor of the Senate. So you had members like Senator Nat Washington, a lawyer, a descendent of George Washington. He really understood it. He tried to address the other senators’ spoken fears. And he insisted this issue meant a matter of law, not private relations. “This will not invade the home.” So he tried to go right to the place where people were really throwing up a lot of dust. And as he was a lawyer, that had some weight.

But there was still Senator Ted Peterson, who talked about God placing woman several steps above man, not just one but three, I believe, was the number, the pedestal argument, as it comes up. He again says, “We need to study this. What’s the rush? You’ve got years.”

Senator Metcalf, the draft was one of his issues. He just can’t go there. He just can’t do it.

Senator Henry, who was a really old-timey kind of senator. He actually tried to make some jokes and lighten up the moment, and came out for it. And his wife, or former wife at that time, was Millie Henry, who was the head of—

Taber: The Seattle Women’s Commission.

Kilgannon: That’s really interesting. I don’t know if she was in the audience looking at him!

Taber: She definitely was in touch with him. She worked him real hard.

Kilgannon: Because they were no longer married, that might have been very difficult.

Taber: Oh, I think it was okay. She did a great job.

Kilgannon: Senator John Murray who, not incidentally, ran the *Queen Anne News*, and then became a senator, talked about this idea that “every woman is a housewife is a thing of the past.” Women needed employment.

Taber: That’s right. He was great.
Kilgannon: There were a lot of back and forth, back and forth, and they were really grappling with each other. It’s very interesting to read. And I’m not even beginning to quote everybody that you quote in your report.

Taber: It really brings up memories.

Kilgannon: Senator Fleming, who was a civil rights champion.

Taber: We were blessed with his leadership.

Kilgannon: He worked up a lot of these kinds of issues. He tried to, again, like Senator Washington, address everybody’s stated and perhaps unstated fears. He addressed the draft and the Social Security issue, which apparently was another big problem that some people were concerned about, that the ERA would change the provisions and cost “billions.” And he tried to kind of lay that down.

Taber: Lee Kraft and the Washington Women Lawyers addressed the Social Security issues. That was something I would circulate to legislators. Their official legal research was very helpful on that issue.

Kilgannon: That was a big one, because Senator Bottiger was worried about that cost. But Senator Fleming, first of all he kind of downplayed it, saying it really wouldn’t cost that much. But he also said it was a matter of social justice. And if it did cost that much, so be it.

Taber: Excellent. That was leadership!

Kilgannon: And there was one quote that I just thought was very fascinating. Senator Fleming said, “There are women who do not want to be on that pedestal, who want to ride side by side with you. That is a personal decision.” I thought he really understood that women did not want privilege; they wanted opportunity. And perhaps as a black person he was particularly perceptive about that issue.

In the end, twenty-nine senators voted for it, nineteen against it. And one was not present. You only needed twenty-five. For a hot issue, to get four more votes than you needed, more people stood up beyond what maybe they had to, that was good.

Taber: That was excellent. And I was reminded, once again, of what my women mentors taught me, “By the time you get to the floor, to those speeches, people’s minds are made up.”

Kilgannon: Yes. They’re not convincing each other.

Taber: No. It’s for the gallery. It’s for publicity. It’s for history.

Kilgannon: And the record.
Taber: They make the record of a compelling argument for their constituents and for the world. Isn’t that interesting?

Kilgannon: It’s finally the record. People campaign on those statements, both for and against, of course. They do use the record. It’s in the Senate Journal of that debate. So that kind of covered the ground of people’s feelings. And in the end, you got it!

Taber: Yes. I’m so glad to have this report. Thank you for finding it.

Kilgannon: Yes. It’s very detailed. I’m not sure if you got that dialog out of the Journal, or if you were furiously picking it up at the time.

Taber: Karen Fraser took a lot of notes.

Kilgannon: I understand she knows shorthand!

Taber: She knows shorthand. And she would share her notes, and would give me permission to use them, in conjunction with my own notes and impressions.

Kilgannon: That’s a real blow-by-blow.

Taber: Yes. And people throughout the state who had worked so hard but who could not be there in person to hear the floor debate, wanted to know the arguments. And they deserved to know. So I could disseminate it in the Women’s Council newsletter.

Kilgannon: It really also puts a reader right there.

Taber: Yes. And they loved it! People out there who had worked so hard in Spokane or in the Tri-Cities or in Yakima, really appreciated this account, and read every word. This is the document I wanted you to look up. Thank you, again, for finding it.

Kilgannon: It’s so inclusive. I mean, it’s as good as a novel. It’s an enormously important document. So immediate. The emotion is there, and the power of the speeches is there.

Taber: Yes. Yes.

Kilgannon: On both sides. It’s an amazing report. This must have been almost cathartic to send out.

Taber: Yes. I spent time on it. I wanted it to be accurate. I wanted to catch everything—the culmination of it all. And by the way, included here is the telephone call I had from Martha Griffith’s office in Washington, D.C. in order to confirm whether we had, indeed, ratified the ERA. She pointed out that we did so on March 22, that marked the anniversary of Congress’s passing the ERA the year before and passing it to the other
states for ratification. So Washington State became the thirtieth state to ratify the federal ERA on the first anniversary of Congress’s passing it to the states!

Kilgannon: Fortunately for this process, it was the last step. You don’t have to then go out and gear up for the next campaign.

Taber: Yes, fortunately.

Kilgannon: There’s a little note in your correspondence after all this, where it says you got the flu immediately after the campaign.

Taber: Oh, did I?

Kilgannon: I pictured how you were just going and going, and then, suddenly, you’re done. You have a little collapse there.

Taber: I can well imagine.

Kilgannon: Maybe your body had been trying to get your attention for a little while?

Taber: But a happy collapse.

Kilgannon: I can glimpse, and only imagine, how much work this was. So when it was done, were you also doing all kinds of other Council business besides the ERA? Or did the campaign take all your time?

Taber: Well, during the legislative session, I’m sure that all of our Women’s Council legislation must have taken all my time. But you read the annual reports. We were always going “like a house afire.”

Kilgannon: It’s pretty intense.

Taber: It was very intense. And I always thought it a great privilege that I got paid for doing what so many others did for nothing.

Kilgannon: Yes, that’s true.

Taber: People like Karen Fraser, or like Carroll Boone, or, like so many others who had their jobs, and then would spend hours into the night doing this other stuff.

Kilgannon: Yes. Karen Fraser describes typing, into the night, her notes, and sending them off to all these people.

Taber: And Carroll Boone had her job as head of Family Planning. In addition, in 1972 she represented NOW as one of the co-chairs, along with AAUW and LWV, of Thurston County’s ERA ratification campaign. And in 1973 she was campaign chair for Karen
Fraser’s first political race for Lacey City Council. Yes, it was a great privilege for me to be there in a paid position at the point in the history of our state where clear changes had to be made. Today it isn’t quite as easy to point to specific changes for women. I mean, everything is—

Kilgannon: Not as concentrated?

Taber: Everything affects women, of course. But discrimination today is not as blatant as forty years ago. So back then making so many changes that touched our lives so clearly was very motivating.

Kilgannon: You could see it?

Taber: Yes, you could see it. And it felt like such a wonderful sisterhood in those early years. The rebirth of the Women’s Movement took place throughout our nation. And in our state we were at the national forefront in three areas: one, credit legislation; two, implementation of our state Equal Rights Amendment; and three, Comparable Worth. Eleanor Holmes Norton, head of the Equal Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in Washington, D.C. asked our state to testify on Comparable Worth. She considered this issue the civil rights issue of the 1980s. Our state was the only public sector arena that had accomplished such a landmark study.

Kilgannon: You were a model for the whole nation?

Taber: We were at that time, in the areas that I mentioned. It was wonderfully rewarding.

And then I resigned, for personal reasons. My husband left me.

Kilgannon: What you said in your letter of resignation is “Many of my personal challenges in this job have been met. I have enjoyed my work immensely.”

Of course, there were still many, many issues and much work to be done, including the care and feeding of the Council itself, and keeping it together. Part of the problem with your success is that then people thought that the Council should be disbanded and that it wasn’t needed anymore.

Taber: Right. Opponents of the Council’s work really didn’t want the Council around anymore. And that’s when Senator Martin Durkan—I don’t know if he died?

Kilgannon: Yes.

Taber: He came to me. He was a powerful man.

Kilgannon: Oh, yes. He was the Senate Chair for Ways and Means. The “money man.”
Taber: He was scary. He said, “Gisela, you’re not going to get funded unless I get a commitment in writing from you.” He demanded a letter from me—not from the Council Chair, by the next morning… [Durkan letter LINK]

Kilgannon: Binding the Council not to request funding beyond the next biennium. In effect, 1975.

Taber: Yes. So I contacted the executive committee. Betty Fletcher was incredibly helpful with the response.

Kilgannon: Yes, well, he had the power to discontinue funding for the Council, being the chairman of the Budget committee.

Taber: That’s right. And I knew he meant it. I felt this demand was in direct response to our successful campaigns.

Kilgannon: Yes. One of the bittersweet parts was that many people figured you had played all the hand you were going to. The Council and you both argued, of course, that there was still the implementation and educating people around the state about what this would mean.

Taber: And there is a difference between theoretical and practical equality. But we were not building an empire. To sum up our position: “And we above all people would like to terminate the need for a council when there is real equality.” Senator Durkan did not get the commitment that he wanted from me. But we did get funded. We took a big risk.

To be fair, an argument in their favor was that there were many statutory boards and commissions. The Legislature wanted to get rid of a lot of them.

Kilgannon: You weren’t the only one on the chopping block.

Taber: We were not the only ones. But I thought there was extra zeal in trying to do away with us in reaction to the Equal Rights Amendment. I don’t think it was just paranoia on my part.

Kilgannon: I’m sure that would be true. You answered that the Council simply cannot predict what progress can be made in the next two years toward the goal of human equality. In other words, you cannot make this promise in good faith. If great strides are made so that the Council and the women of the state can see the job close to completion, the Council, then, would go faithfully toward its own termination, like you said. If great inequities still remain, despite determined effort by the Council and other concerned citizens, their job might not be done. Additionally, new conditions might arise which simply cannot be foreseen today. You’d be making a promise, you know, based on what?

Taber: Exactly.
Kilgannon: “They cannot speak with such finality on a subject so vital to all of the people of the state of Washington.” So yes, it was very much a live issue.

Taber: Yes.

Kilgannon: They did get to hang in there. And there’s a long story of the fight to make the Council a statutory commission. It’s very complicated, and there’s so much back and forth. But it is finally successful. And then it was defeated by an initiative.

Taber: That’s after my time.

Kilgannon: Yes. And so, I just wanted mention it, briefly.

Taber: On the watch of a woman Governor!

Kilgannon: Yes. But as you said, your success often created a backlash. So success is one of those, “gosh, that’s wonderful,” and then here was a whole new problem. I want to talk about the backlash only in a general way. Did you stay involved in women’s issues on one level or another after you left the Council officially?

Taber: Women’s issues, as you call it, became a part of me for the rest of my life. But I wanted to leave town because of my personal situation.

Kilgannon: Olympia is a small place.

Taber: Right. And so with a Master’s in English I thought, “What can I do for a job?” I sent out my resume to all the community colleges. But you know an activist in the Women’s Movement can be perceived as threatening. Nobody wanted me, except one college president who was totally intrigued with my role with the Women’s Council.

Kilgannon: Were you a dangerous woman? [laughs]

Taber: Well, you know how that is. Nobody wants a potential trouble-maker who might stir up women who feel discriminated against. Anyway, at Lower Columbia College in Longview, Dr. David Story, far from being intimidated, was excited to hire me! He welcomed me in every way and even helped me to get settled.

Kilgannon: Good to be wanted.

Taber: I was a single person at that point, with a little boy.

Kilgannon: How old was your son right then? When was he born?

Taber: ’69. He was only five.

Kilgannon: So he was still quite a little child.
Taber: In Longview I created a Women’s Studies Program. I had an advisory group with an outstanding chair, Betty Horne. First, we created a curriculum with volunteer help from the faculty, that included courses of women in history or women in literature. Some practical courses followed, such as how to fix basic things in your car or how to do home repairs. Then I got a CETA grant to recruit, to train and to place women in non-traditional employment. The college was the perfect training ground in apprenticeship programs of electricity, plumbing, carpentry. Recruits in our program could be integrated into the apprenticeship programs at the college that had never before included women. Hiring of the women could then potentially take place at Longview Fiber, Weyerhaeuser, and Reynolds Aluminum. Part of the vision in that grant included a support group of the women recruits, who needed tremendous support in their non-traditional pursuits. Money in the grant included salaries for staff, and I hired a remarkable director, Fran Chaffin, who made this program into a model in the nation.

Kilgannon: The right kinds of jobs were there.

Taber: Yes. And then I got an unexpected call from Jill Ruckelshaus in Washington, D.C. She wanted to interview me for the position of Northwest Coordinator on the national staff of the International Women’s Year Commission. At that point in 1977, being a single woman and coping with challenging circumstances, I didn’t even know there was an International Women’s Year! They had called the Governor’s office for recommendations. The Governor’s staff had recommended me for the position, because our Women’s Council had achieved such extraordinary progress. And the International Women’s Year Commission wanted someone for the northwest quadrant, fourteen states from Alaska through Missouri, who actually lived here.

Kilgannon: That’s a big piece of geography!

Taber: Huge, huge. So it would be my job—and I was the last on board—to put together a committee in each of those fourteen states based on public law, that would plan a state conference which would elect delegates to attend the First National Women’s Conference.

Kilgannon: Hawaii, too?

Taber: That wasn’t one of “my” states. But that was one of the states in another quadrant. And so I put together those fourteen, that were amended and ratified by the Commission. The International Women’s Year Commission was at first headed by Jill Ruckelshaus, but with a change in administration, as Carter became President…

Kilgannon: Ah. From Nixon to Carter.

Taber: Then Bella Abzug became Presiding Officer of that Commission. With the Gloria Steinems and all the ‘biggies’ on it. It was to President Carter and Congressional leaders that the official report on the National Women’s Conference and the work of the National
Commission on the Observance of International Women’s Year was transmitted. That opportunity was something I just could not resist.

Kilgannon: Where did you do that work from? Where did you relocate to?

Taber: Washington, DC. We, the Secretariat as the staff was called, were housed in the Department of State.

Kilgannon: Oh, so you had to move.

Taber: I had to move with my son. So that was more than challenging from a single parenting perspective, as you might imagine. This was when I experienced that quality of parenting was not enough; quantity of time spent, being there when needed, was also of crucial importance. I was in three different homes before I was safe with Andrew and the housing “worked.” Three of us single moms lived in one home with our children and shared some of our tasks, such as transporting our kids to and from school. But although Andrew and I had some agonizing times that stretched us both to our utmost limits, the excitement of being part of this historical time carried me forward. And the Washington State International Women’s Year Conference that year—

Kilgannon: The Ellensburg Conference?

Taber: –was one of “my” fourteen.

Kilgannon: Did you attend that? As part of your work?

Taber: Yes.

Kilgannon: So you came back to Washington State?

Taber: My job as staff person was to set up each committee—to be approved by the Commission—to meet with them at their first meeting and be helpful in orientation, and then to attend a few of their ultimate conferences where their delegates were elected for the First National Women’s Conference in Houston. In Houston, I was put in charge of housing as a person resigned from this position shortly before the Conference. Yes, I came back to Washington State. Alene Moris agreed to chair the committee initially to get it started, and Dorothy Hollingsworth became the permanent chair.

Kilgannon: You must have known many of the women involved.

Taber: Yes. I knew many of them. And I was thrilled to be at the Ellensburg Conference, attended by more than 4000 women. I could not go to all the others.

Kilgannon: No. That’s a huge territory.
Taber: Yes. Huge territory, and many conferences took place on the same weekends. Utah was one of my states, which had the largest meeting in the nation with over fourteen thousand women, ironically headed by men. The male presence was because the Mormon Church got involved. It was all very dramatic.

Kilgannon: Were you able to document as it went from state to state, the growing opposition? Because there had been something like a groundswell developing.

Taber: There were others who did that. We had a staff of about thirty people. After the National Women’s Conference in Houston, Texas, I quickly had to find another job in the Northwest, near Andrew’s father and my family, and move. It was then that I experienced burnout.

Kilgannon: You were probably too busy to notice.

Taber: I didn’t even know what burnout was. I wanted to come to Washington State, but couldn’t get a job there immediately. So I got a job in Portland to be a Title IX Specialist for HEW, Region Ten. I worked as a Title IX Specialist with schools, K through 12. But I wasn’t at my best, and I didn’t know what was wrong with me. I didn’t know what it was to be “burned out.”

And then I did what you’re never supposed to do. I quit my job without having another job in place. Then I experienced personally how you can’t get a job if you’re unemployed.

Kilgannon: Well, it’s harder.

Taber: It’s much harder.

Kilgannon: You must have been tired to the bone!

Taber: I was. And it was so distressing not to be at my best! I was unemployed about eleven months, I think.

Kilgannon: That must have been a little bit scary.

Taber: It was scary. I had some savings, and my parents would have helped me had I needed it. But it was still scary. My son loved it—loved my being at home when he came from school. And during that time, significantly, my spiritual rebirth slowly began to unfold. Ultimately I got a job in state government in Olympia.

Kilgannon: In the Department of Personnel?

Taber: Yes, I was in a Human Resource Development division that interfaced with all Merit System agencies. I worked there for seven or eight years. Then, at age forty-eight, I went to the Iliff School of Theology in Denver to be trained as a pastor. I studied at the
seminary for three years. In 1990, I was ordained to serve churches in the Pacific Northwest Conference of the United Methodist Church.

My life’s journey has always been a quest for meaning. Embracing the Women’s Movement had always fit the passionate “true believer” in me. It was the perfect prologue for serving four churches. And now I am retired.

Kilgannon: It must have been a big moment to realize that was your true calling at that point in your life. And then be able to do it.

Taber: Yes. And I found that nothing in my life was wasted in this calling. Not only all of my successful experiences, but all of my mistakes, were valuable in ministry.

Kilgannon: It’s sort of amorphous, I’m sure.

Taber: At times. But the call to ministry came into focus clearly!

Kilgannon: And then it becomes a path?

Taber: Yes. And now I am discerning my path through retirement.

Kilgannon: Have you learned through all this that it will arise and something will find you? And you will find it?

Taber: Yes. I am confident of that.

Kilgannon: So you did come back to Washington State. You served in Davenport.

Taber: I served in Davenport-Edwall; then Monroe; then Kirkland; and finally in Sequim, as their first woman pastor.

Kilgannon: Kirkland is a bigger city. So you served in both rural areas and urban areas. I imagine they’re different. The kinds of people.

Taber: Kirkland—Microsoft country—was certainly more liberal than the other churches. There, after almost three years of a conversation about homosexuality and the church, we affirmed an inclusive policy statement. That would certainly not have been possible in Sequim, where I retired and continue to live. But on the whole people were more alike than different, certainly in their individual and community hunger for meaning. For my retirement here, by the way, my church made a DVD that included the story of my life.

Kilgannon: That would be amazing.

Taber: Yes, it was amazing how they captured stages in my life, with music as a background. They did a chapter on my growing up in Europe, with German folk songs. Then came the Women’s Movement segment, with Holly Near, Bette Midler, Aretha
Franklin, Helen Reddy and others. Finally, my ministry in four churches was portrayed, with traditional and with celebration music as a background.

Kilgannon: Life with a soundtrack!

Taber: It is wonderful. And it helped me to see my total life with holiness all around. And to see my journey in becoming more fully alive as I catch glimpses, or wait to catch glimpses, of the presence of our God among us.

Kilgannon: What a gift.

Taber: Yes. Their tribute was astonishing.

Kilgannon: You came full-circle. We did actually leave out that you were born in Europe.

Taber: Poland.

Kilgannon: And how you came to the United States.

Taber: We were Germans living in Poland. During the last month of World War II, we fled the Poles and the Russians in a covered wagon with oxen in sub-zero weather. As a three year old I was lost in Czechoslovakia on that journey. This, my earliest memory, became a metaphor for my life. We came first to East Germany, then escaped the Russians once more to West Germany. In 1950, we came to this country, that my father always called the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey.

During my first year in retirement I went to Ukraine, where my maternal grandfather had served as a much-loved Baptist missionary. He served a German congregation in a village where he enlarged the brick church to a capacity of two thousand. Just imagine, two thousand people at a time of horses and wagons, before World War I! After he returned to Poland, he was banished to Russia with his family that included my mother, just after the outbreak of World War I. There he died, thankfully of natural causes. I went to the Volhenian village where ‘Opa’ had served, and spoke to that church with a translator. The congregation today is totally Ukrainian, women on one side, men on the other. The women all wore scarves. I was introduced as the granddaughter of Eugen Mohr, the pastor at that church for ten years. I could address the congregation, but was not allowed to say that I was a pastor, like my grandfather. Women were not allowed to be pastors in that church, and my tour escort, a Baptist minister from this country, would not allow me to mention what was so important to my core identity.

Kilgannon: Wouldn’t want to give anybody any ideas?

Taber: It was not my intent to change their culture. But I passionately wanted to be myself. And my identity now is certainly as a pastor, the granddaughter of a pastor.
Kilgannon: The issue never goes away. Can you look back—and I know this is a really hard question, this was a very important part of your life, obviously. How do you see your work on the Council and the struggle for the ERA in the whole mix of your long and very fruitful life? The Women’s Movement, your work with the Women’s Council, these particular years. What do you carry with you now?

Taber: From that time? Those were some of the most formative years in my life. I love this opportunity to review those years that take me back to the energy and the passion—the relationships and the working together for improving lives. This segment very naturally became a prologue for being an ordained clergyperson. One reason I felt at home as a United Methodist, was because social justice is so important to United Methodists. John Wesley, the founder of the denomination, didn’t only have an intimate relationship with God. From that spiritual foundation he served the needy in prison and elsewhere, and stood for social change. After my Women’s Movement involvement I could never be in a church that didn’t care about changing society and the world; that didn’t care about “peace with justice.”

Kilgannon: Something was growing underneath even if you didn’t have much time? It’s so interesting. I mean, you just sound like a snow plough to me, just pushing forward.

Taber: That’s how I was then.

Kilgannon: And then you have to regroup a bit, and kind of rebuild from the inside out again.

Taber: Right.

Kilgannon: You know, “Who am I and what am I doing?”

Taber: Yes. And that’s what I’m doing now.

Kilgannon: And you don’t shirk the big questions!

Taber: I love big questions!

Kilgannon: Here you are, working with big fundamental issues. And you know what you’re doing. That’s so clear in your writing, your speaking. But then, as we all do in our lives, you have to go back and ask the first fundamental question again: Who am I and what am I doing? And you’re able to reinvent and find yourself. And that’s a real testament.

Taber: Thank you. I am enjoying my present, which includes a lot of time with my adorable grandchildren, Alexis and Hiroki. And I look forward to what’s next.

Kilgannon: I couldn’t even imagine. I’m sure it’s going to be exciting. Well, thank you.
[End Interview.]