Narrator: Alice Yee  
Interviewer: Mildred Andrews  
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Transcriber: Teresa Bergen  

[BEGIN INTERVIEW]  

Andrews: The following interview is being conducted with Alice Yee, on behalf of the Washington Women’s History Consortium for the 1977 Ellensburg/Houston International Women’s Year Conference’s Oral History Project. The interview is taking place on May ninth at Alice’s home in Ellensburg. The interviewer is Mildred Andrews. As a beginning, Alice, would you tell me about your growing up years? Your family, your community, your school? Something about how you developed your ideas about your role as a woman at home and in society?

Yee: Well, that’s a big, that’s a big issue all in one sentence. But let me begin at the beginning. I think I had a very good childhood, a very good growing up, my home life was very traditional in many, many ways. My mother never went beyond the eighth grade, but she was certainly interested in education and in our schooling. Most of my school years were in Spokane. I really think that I had planned to do what most girls planned to do at that time. I would go to school; I would graduate. I always knew I wanted to go to college. But beyond that, my plans petered out. I knew I would get married, and of course I would have children. That’s my ambition. That was my ambition at that time. And for all practical purposes, I think I pretty well followed that pattern.

It was obvious that I was an independent person, both in high school and in college. I knew that I wanted to be financially independent before I got married, so I got a teaching degree, taught for a couple of years, married my high school sweetheart. Had a good marriage, three children. He became ill and died. And that was the beginning, I think, in a change of my whole attitude toward the role of women and what one must do to survive in this kind of society.

I had, in the meantime, before his death, gone on and completed the masters degree because we knew he had a terminal illness. We had enough warning about what was going to happen, so we could do some planning. That planning involved my getting a job teaching at Wenatchee Valley College, so that I was teaching at the time of his death.

Interestingly enough, when he died, we had no insurance because of his illness. So we were totally dependent on my salary to raise three children. Now this was in the early, toward the late ‘50s. And at that time, women’s salaries were not particularly good. So we lived from one paycheck to another. I was a child of the Depression, so of course every penny counted. And I learned very, very quickly that if one was to get ahead, you had to do your job well, but you did it better than people around you. You had to decide what you wanted to do, and go after that. You had to decide how you could manage your own ambitions and be ethical about everything that you decided to do. So this is really
the beginning of a major interest in how to have a productive life and to make the most of my circumstances. I can go on after those years, if you want me to.

Andrews: Thank you for sharing this deeply moving story of loss, survival, and making the most of very difficult circumstances. You’re an inspiration! Now, maybe we should go on to the next question.

Yee: Okay.

Andrews: Which leads from that. What was it like to be a woman in Washington state when you were growing up? Could you describe some of your struggles and achievements prior to the 1977 IWY conference?

Yee: Well, let’s go back, then, when you say 1977. Let’s go clear back to the ‘50s, when I was growing up. Even when I was in college, it was unheard of for a woman to be president of the student body. So I became the first president of the student body. I learned then what it was like to put together a political campaign, what it was like to go against the traditional atmosphere of male only in leadership positions.

I happened, also, to play tennis competitively, liked it very much. There was no women’s tennis team, but there was a men’s tennis team. So I turned out for the men’s team, and I was ranked on the men’s tennis team number two, but I could not play with them competitively, because it would be terrible to have a woman beat a man in tennis.

So that was the beginning, that I decided that we should have women’s competitive tennis. So I started the process of how to introduce competitive athletics for women at Eastern Washington University, where I happened to be. And it was the beginning of our having a women’s tennis team.

These were all, I think, very good learning experiences for me, because I learned to deal with authority. I learned how to line up my ducks, so to speak, before presenting an issue. And I learned the hard way when I did something wrong. So after college, once again, I got a job teaching in junior high school, Castle Rock, Washington. Women teachers at that time were not paid as much as men. As a matter of fact, I got one of the highest paying jobs, $1300 a year, which was top salary. Can you imagine? And we thought that was just great at that time.

Andrews: This was in the ‘50s?

Yee: No, that would be in the early ‘40s. Then after I was married, I did not work for a number of years. When I went back to work, I learned very quickly that women, again, were not paid for comparable type of jobs that men were paid for. I was hired at Wenatchee Valley College in an administrative position. And my salary was less than the men’s salary in a comparable job. I did not know that at first. It took me a little while to learn that, but as soon as I did, you can imagine some of the steps that I began to take.

Now growing up professionally during those years, one simply learned, or maybe I have to say, I learned as I went along, I did not feel that there was a support group. I did not feel that there were other women like me. I’m sure there were. We were just not
networking. We were not working together. We were each trying, in our own way, to make headway. This was true in salaries, in positions that were open to us, in opportunities that we had. That was very different from today.

By the time we reached the ‘70s, we had formed support groups. We had formed statewide networking organizations. We knew where to go to get assistance. We knew where to go to get help. We knew how to get legal assistance. That was not true in the late ‘40s. Certainly not in the ‘50s.

In 1960, I came to Central Washington University as Dean of Women. And I really came as a change agent. Women at that time were treated quite differently from men. All women had to be in the dormitories by 10:15 p.m. The library was open until midnight. Men could be in the library until midnight, but women had to be in the dormitories at 10:15. I was appalled. And of course asked the question many times, “Why are women treated like this?” I was asking the question of the president of the university, of faculty members, and of other people who worked on campus. It had always been done that way, and therefore, that was the easiest way to do it.

I should go back a little bit to give a background here why I was so concerned about hours. At the time that I was completing a masters degree and my husband was ill, I had been driving to Ellensburg, to Central, to go to summer school for two summers. I completed a masters degree in two summers, plus doing a thesis the following year while I was teaching. During the two summers I was on campus, married women, like myself, living in the dormitory, were required to be in by 10:15 p.m. I really couldn’t do that.

So I went to the housemother, who was a lovely person. She was doing her job. It wasn’t her fault. But I just explained to her very kindly, “I just can’t come in at 10:15 if I don’t want to come in at 10:15. But I want you to know this, and I don’t want to get you in trouble. But I will come in when I feel like it. Now if that is difficult for you to live with, tell me what you’re going to do about it. To be considerate of you, if I’m really going to be late, I will tell you where I’m going and that I will be late in coming in. But I’m not coming in at 10:15.”

And of course, in my head, I had tried to think through what her options were. What could she do if I did not come in at 10:15? She could report me to the dean. They could expel me from the university, which didn’t seem very likely, because I could make a tremendous case and a lot of publicity, which they would not like. So I pushed it to the limit. She was really a wonderful housemother. We became great friends. We adjusted through the two summers. I did what I wanted to do. But of course, I made a vow to myself if I ever worked on this campus, the first thing I would do is get rid of hours. So that was my commitment when I came to Central.

The second thing, the way women were treated, there was a dress code. Now this is a cold climate in the wintertime. Women could not wear slacks on campus. They had to wear skirts, unless it was ten above zero. Then they had to call the dean’s office to get permission to wear slacks. I thought this was nonsense. So as quickly as I could, I changed that rule. But it took me a whole year. I had faculty to deal with. I had faculty who had been around for a long time, and they felt that the role of the dean was to, quote, “take care of the women.” And part of taking care of the women was to be sure that they had a dress code and that they were in the dormitory on time. Those things changed, but before I left Central, we had completely gotten rid of all of the hours, all of the dress codes, arranged so that women and men were treated as students on campus, not that the
rationale was, if you take care of the women, the men will behave themselves. That’s not something that I could accept as a dean.

That’s just a little bit of the background. There’s an anecdote that you might appreciate on the dress code. I thought it was just wonderful when it happened. One day a faculty member came in to see me. He sat down at my desk, pounded my desk, and said, “You’ve got to do something about so and so.” And he named a woman student.

And I said, “Tell me what she has done.”

And he said, “She’s coming to my class, and she’s wearing a miniskirt.” And he pointed out how short it was.

I said, “And what’s your problem?”

He said, “She’s sitting in the front row, and it really bothers me. You have to make her change what she’s wearing.”

Of course it took all of my self-control to keep from laughing. But this was a very serious matter, so I could only say, “If she really bothers you, don’t look at her. That’s your choice.” Of course it took him several weeks after that before he would speak to me again.

I did call the young woman in, explained to her what the situation was, and asked her what she would like to do. I did suggest that it might be helpful if she sat in the second or third row if she wanted to get a grade in the class, since she might be penalized. But it would be up to her. She could wear whatever she wanted to wear.

That was sort of the tone that I set for the years that I was dean at Central Washington University.

Andrews: Now in addition, you were active in other organizations, I think, in the ‘60s and the ‘70s, were you not?

Yee: Well, now when we get to the ‘70s, are we going to get to the ‘70s?

Andrews: We can go there right now, if you like.

Yee: I was at Central Washington University until 1966. Then I left, when I was invited to be Dean of Women Students at Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa. Now you may remember that was the time when the whole world was erupting with rebellion. Grinnell College is a small, private, liberal arts college. It was a microcosm of what was happening nationwide. In the state of Washington, Central had not quite arrived at that point. So I immediately, in the late ‘60s, jumped into a situation where rebellion was rampant, the drug scene was almost out of control. People were marching against the Vietnam War. Students were demanding rights which was happening on every campus throughout the country. This presented a whole different kind of universe.

I don’t need to go into the details of how we dealt with all of that, but I did come back to Ellensburg in 1970, when I married Robert Yee, who was on the CWU faculty. I think it was in ’71 or ’72 that I established the Women’s Center. Now by that time, I had certainly become so committed, and so determined, to do anything that I possibly could in my professional life to help the role of women wherever I happened to be. The Women’s Center, again, did not exist on the Central campus. The Director of Continuing
Education called me one day. I knew him from previous years, and he simply called and said, “Would you come on campus and do something about women?”

I said that I would love to, but only if I could do what I wanted to do, and not be told what to do. You can understand, I was very independent by that time. I didn’t have to work, but I welcomed the opportunity of doing more in a field that I really loved. He assured me, because I did know him well, that I could do whatever I wanted to do, as long as I kept him informed. That was great. I was provided an office, a desk, a telephone, access to a halftime secretary.

And that was the beginning of the Women’s Center. Five hundred dollars a month was the only money that we had to work with. That’s when I learned to write grants. My approach was to reach as many community women as possible, as well as to provide assistance and support for women on campus in all the areas where they needed help. We got financial support from National Endowment for the Humanities, from Washington Commission for the Humanities, from Title I, just to name a few. Now remember, I had not written grants before. But one can learn to do a lot of things when there’s a real need for it.

We had some exciting programs. We involved women not only in our community, but statewide. That’s when I began to make major contacts with women and organizations on the West Side.

Yee: The Washington State Women’s Council was a wonderful help, a great resource. So it was from 1970 on that, I think, we put Ellensburg on the map because of the kinds of programs we did. We involved the Northwest Women’s Law Center. We involved a number of major organizations throughout the state. We brought leading speakers to campus, did yearlong workshops and seminars. So by the time 1977 came around, we had pretty well established a firm network for all kinds of women. It was a natural to move into the conference.

We had a large group of community women that had become active from ’70 to ’77, people that had never been active before. Many of these were women who were well educated in a college town, did not have jobs, could not find jobs, were unhappy for several reasons. So it was matter of finding niches for them, pursuing further education, all of the things we know about women in their second lives. It was really the Women’s Center that led up to and laid the foundation for the International Women’s Year Conference on this campus.

Andrews: So you were in on the ground floor of the planning committee for that, weren’t you?

Yee: For the planning committee?

Andrews: For International Women’s Year?

Yee: Not really on the ground floor. I of course read all the publicity about the conference. I knew Gisela Taber was in charge of appointing committee members, or at least had something to do with it.
Andrews:  She was from the national level of organizers

Yee:  She was at the national–

Andrews:  Jill Ruckelshaus was the head of that.

Yee:  Yes.

Andrews:  And Gisela was in charge of, I think of the western, northwestern states.

Yee:  Okay. So I got hold of Gisela. I told her I was very interested in working with or being on the state committee. She told me how to apply--kinds of information that they needed on applications.  I worked through Gisela. Made my application to be on the statewide committee, and was subsequently appointed.

Andrews:  And were you the instigator of having the conference at Ellensburg? Or was that a committee decision?

Yee:  It was a committee decision, but it was a natural one. Ellensburg is sort of like the center of this state. We have a conference center here. We had facilities. The expense, cost to individual participants would be reasonable, which was terribly important. So as a committee, as we discussed our options for where should we have the conference, Ellensburg became the place of choice. And I had checked it out, then, of course, with our conference director, our center for conferences, and subsequently, then, I helped to make the arrangements.

Andrews:  Were you involved in any other women’s organizations that were not part of the campus or part of the education center?

Yee:  I was very busy, so was not that active. But I belonged to the League of Women Voters, to NOW, National Organization for Women, to Planned Parenthood. Attended as many of these meetings as I possibly could. Certainly kept up my membership. And most of all, kept up my contacts with leaders from these groups so that I felt very comfortable in calling any of them at any time for specific help, for support, for ideas, for speakers, for whatever we needed. In that sense, I had sort of become a contact in eastern Washington.

Now I should mention that the action, the people who are really, really active, seemed to be on the West Side. On the East Side, we have a saying, “Thank goodness the west side votes.” But we have to work differently on the East Side of the mountains than you do on the West Side. We recognize, for instance, this community is a conservative community. It’s a combination of agricultural interests, university interests, and everything in between. Our commitment has been to help educate, to involve other people, to be sure we understand their points of view, to find common ground, so that we begin there in working toward making changes. It is not as easy to make changes in any area of women’s concerns on the East Side as it is on the West. And that’s because we simply don’t have that kind of a liberal bent. But that isn’t to say that there aren’t
wonderful people on the East Side. We just have to work differently, if we're going to be effective in what we do.

Andrews: How did you view women’s role in the home and in society at the time of the conferences? Did you see a need for change? I think you’ve already addressed some of that.

Yee: Probably. And perhaps that’s, again, a follow-up of what I’ve just said about the East Side. The general attitude, and this is a general statement now, is that through certainly the ‘50s and ‘60s, women’s role was in the home. On the East Side, one would find that to be more prevalent, perhaps, because of the farming community. Personally, because of my own personal background, I felt that women should have a choice. That being a homemaker is one of many choices. It is a good choice for many women. My point always has been if you wish to be a homemaker only, and not work outside the home, that’s fine. But be sure it’s your choice, and that society has not dictated that for you. If you wish to combine homemaking and a career, great. If you want to do one or the other; if you choose not to get married; whatever a woman wants to do, she ought to be able to make that choice.

And I know that I went into the conference certainly with a very strong feeling that whatever we do in our workshops, whatever we do in our conversations, that we make it clear that homemaking is one of many choices— a good one, but not the only one. And I think that’s one of the eye openers that the so-called Blue and White contingent that was at the conference came to maybe not accept, but at least be exposed to. I do know that in talking with a number of the Blue and White participants, that they felt that the liberal viewpoint was totally against homemaking. That was not true. That’s never been true for a true feminist. We only believe that women make choices, and that they make the choices, not that society dictates them, or that a man dictates them.

Andrews: Were there specific events, other than what you’ve already mentioned, that spurred your thinking about the changing roles of women in the home and in society?

Yee: Certainly one cannot isolate one’s viewpoint just by what’s happening locally or within the state. Of course, over the years, I became very much interested and involved in national as well as statewide issues. I’m not sure that I can answer that question very well other than to reiterate that women have many roles, and it’s a privilege to be able to have many roles. And I think for many years, we were not able to exercise that right. We certainly hope, we certainly plan that those kinds of rights and privileges not be taken away from us.

You might be interested, I could mention another group that has been very influential in my life. As a dean at Grinnell College, I became associated with a small group of deans from small liberal arts colleges throughout the United States. In 1967, we started meeting at this wonderful dude ranch in Colorado. It is called Peaceful Valley. We still meet every single year. And our next meeting will be this last week in June. There were fourteen of us to start. There are now four of us that are left. And we still meet.

At that time, during the late ‘60s and ‘70s, we had a regular agenda. And the agenda was always how to deal with students on campus. But that implied roles of
women, how to encourage women to take leadership positions. How do we support and keep in touch with each other so that we know what’s happening nationwide, as well as our own campuses.

As the years went by, our agendas changed. We moved from just students to women in society, and then to older women. We’ve all grown old together. So part of our discussions now, a good deal of our discussions now, have to do with how to grow old gracefully, how to deal with the aging process, how to deal with health problems. But most of all, the importance of friendship, and the support of women throughout one’s life. And whatever age one happens to be, that the greatest strength that a woman can have could well be the support of women around her with whom she can talk, with whom they can share real feelings, real issues, real concerns, not just superficial. That group has been extremely important to me, and I’m sure will continue to be, until we no longer exist.

Andrews: That’s an inspiring group. Is it made up, I’m just wondering, in terms of the group’s original makeup, was it equally men and women?

Yee: No, no, no, no. These are all women.

Andrews: Ah.

Yee: These are all women. And the genesis of the group started at a national deans’ meeting, that we all attended. We discovered at the national meeting that the workshops and the speakers were all geared for the very large universities. They were not applicable to us in the smaller colleges. Actually I suggested then to one of my cohort deans, “Why don’t we get together with the small colleges? Let’s see what we have.” I remember we met at midnight one night in somebody’s room, just the smaller colleges. And we talked then, very seriously. What do we want from the meeting? What are we getting here? What do we need? How can we get it? And let’s go forward. It was from that point that I was appointed to find a central place where we might meet. After making several inquiries, I found Peaceful Valley in Colorado through the dean of women at Colorado Women’s College. We liked it so well that we went back every year. And of course, I have to say, they treat us like queens. [laughs] We have been going, as you understand, for so many years, they simply roll out the red carpet.

Peaceful Valley, what a beautiful name for the kind of thing we were looking for. It really became our place during those difficult ‘60s and ‘70s; and even into the ‘80s, it became our place to reassess where we were with women’s issues, what could be done better, how could we coordinate nationally, how could we support each other, where are the weaknesses, what do we do on legislation? You can imagine all of the agendas that we pursued. Personally I found it extremely helpful in all of my work with the Women’s Center.

Andrews: I’m glad you told me that story. It’s the first time I’ve heard it. Wonderful.

Yee: Oh, it’s a wonderful, wonderful group.
Andrews: I’ve already heard about how you became interested and involved in the Ellensburg conference. But I’d like to know more about your role.

Yee: All right.

Andrews: Because it’s very significant.

Yee: At the time, when the decision was made to have the conference on the Ellensburg campus, it was natural, then, that I would be appointed as on-site chairperson. Very simple title. Of course the name implies exactly what I had to do: make all of the arrangements, because I was here. That was easier for me to do it than somebody else. We had, have, still, a conference coordinator. We certainly have food services. We have somebody in charge of residence halls. So it was a matter of working with all those people to explain, to coordinate, to meet the needs that we had as a conference. Of course it took a great deal of time. I knew the campus well, so it was easy to select dormitories that we could use, arrange for food service, do all the things that would be necessary for a conference.

Now, the greatest weakness, I think, of what we did was in registration. Prior to the conference, I had sat down many times with the director of the conference center and worked out exactly what we would do with registration. We knew we had approximately two thousand people pre-registered. Many of them were assigned to dormitories. It was important, then, that they not have to go through a regular line. We had arranged it in small segments of the alphabet that they would, if they were pre-registered, go to that section, pick up their packet, go to the dormitory. They were through. On paper, it looked good.

The night before the conference, when we learned that we were going to have two thousand more people, I notified the conference chairman and the residence hall people of the additional number that were coming. Food services, of course, could not accommodate them. We could not expect them to.

I should explain, because I think it was a traumatic moment in our planning. Our committee was meeting the final, the last evening before the conference started, I think on a Thursday. It was five o’clock in the afternoon. We were just ready to close our meeting. Everything was in order, so we thought. There was a knock on the door. Someone went to the door. The person asked for me. It was Susan Roylance. And she said, “Alice?”

I can remember so well. I think I can almost give you the exact words that we used in those circumstances. She said, “Alice, I just thought you would like to know that there will be two thousand women coming tomorrow for the conference, and they are not registered.”

Of course, I had many thoughts going through my head, none of them very pleasant. And I said, “How nice of you to tell me.” And then I said, “Why did you not pre-register?”

“Well, we didn’t know about the conference. And we thought this would be a good way of coming.”

I said, “Well, thank you for telling me. We will do everything we can to accommodate you. I cannot take care of your food, because it’s too late to work through
food services. We will do everything we can to put you up for the nights, and, we will have packets ready for you.”

And she said, “Oh, we will help you.”

And I said, “Thank you, we don’t need your help right now.” I can remember being so angry with her, and yet so determined not to lash out, which of course I wanted to do. So that began another whole session of planning. We knew from the experience that other states had had, that part of the hidden agenda would be to not have the conference people provide them with the proper materials. Then they could complain that they were not treated properly. We knew that we had to do everything possible to give them the same packets that everybody else had, because otherwise we would be vulnerable. And we certainly did not want that to happen.

I went back to our meeting, explained the situation. We decided the only thing to do was break for dinner, have a bite to eat. Then we all came back here to my house. It was at that point that I called the one printer that we had in town. At that time, we just had one printer. I explained our problem. Told him I would be indebted to life if he would stay up all night and do our printing. And that we would get everything to him within the hour. He was very good, very kind. And bless his heart, he did exactly what he said he would do. We met here at the house, pulled together all of our stuff. I took it down to him. As fast as it ran off the presses, we brought it back here, collated it, and you can imagine the assembly line that we set up. We collated two thousand packets that night. We didn’t go to bed, although I think we might have gotten two hours sleep. But it took us all night to get it done.

In the meantime, I called everybody I knew in the school district, in the recreation department, in the churches, anyone who had floor space where they might accommodate people at night. We opened up all the gymnasiums in town. We arranged for all the custodial people that had to be there. In the meantime, of course, I had a very wonderful, active group of local women who had been working with me. Some were very strong churchgoers. So those who were affiliated with churches worked with their own church. In that sense, we used every church that had accommodations.

Before ten o’clock that night, we had gymnasiums and churches open for places to stay. They were on their own for food. We collated their packets. By eight o’clock the next morning, we had two thousand more packets ready for delivery.

Now I can say all this in a calm tone, but it took a great deal of planning, of working together. We were all tired. We were tired because we had worked so hard to get to that point. But this was the central planning committee, and they were wonderful, they were just wonderful, in the way we worked together.

Now what happened at registration? This has been something to this day I’ve never been able to understand. Registration was to open at two o’clock, as I remember. And at 2:15, it was not open. This was beyond my control. It was in the hands of the conference director. These were paid people. They were not our IWY people. I couldn’t control it. Finally I went to the source, they were going to get ready, whatever had happened. Overnight, they had completely changed the entire registration process. And as they set it up, I didn’t understand it. I went to the director in charge and I said, “What have you done? Where is our plan? Our pre-registered people are having to go through the long lines.” He could not or would not change, and it was beyond my control.
I can remember that an hour and a half later I finally took two of the women that had been working closely with me, put them in the line, and said, “Go through this line and just tell me if it’s moving.” Because I couldn’t believe that we were at such a standstill. The line was moving, but very slowly, and very inefficiently. We had long lines that we should not have had. It was a hot day. It was uncomfortable. People were in line for hours, and I could not do anything about it.

I can remember somewhere going to Jack-in-the-Box or someplace, and getting fifteen gallons of lemonade and delivering it up and down the line because it was so hot. But that was only a temporary ease of a very difficult situation.

The rest of the conference, that is, the arrangements in the dormitories, the food service, the facilities in the Union Building, I think that they worked very well. My job during the conference was to, when the conference actually started, was to simply see that everything was where it was supposed to be. You have to understand that that was in the days before cell phones, so we had runners. This was a large, local committee of women who were, again, just jewels in what they did on the three-day conference. they were assigned to certain parts of the Student Union Building. And then I was at a central point. They always knew where I was, so that if they had a problem and they couldn’t solve it, they came to me. If it was a room that was too small to accommodate the size of their group, sometimes we could move them, which we tried to do. Sometimes we could not. It depended on other facilities available. Once in a while the P.A. systems didn’t work, so we had to fix that. They needed more chairs. Someone had to have water. Dozens of things happened in a conference of this kind.

For three days, I just monitored facilities and what was going on. I did not attend a single workshop. I was so sorry that I never got to go to any of those. I did go to all the plenary sessions, loved every minute of it. But there were just so many things that took priority.

Andrews: Were you involved in setting up the elections procedures for the elected delegates?

Yee: No. No. I did not have anything to do with that. I was trying to keep up with what was going on. I do know that when the first slate came out, I think about forty-nine names were on that first slate. And I was on that first slate. But I did not have anything to do with that. When the Friends of ERA met separately to put together their own slate, and I have to say that this was politically astute. It was something that had to be done, given the situation that we were facing. This was not what we had wanted to do. Now because Friends of ERA are primarily West Side, it was very easy to have most of the names, primarily, on that slate, from the West Side. I was not on it. All those of us who were not included were asked to withdraw our names, which we did. There was no other choice.

Because, again, this was a wonderful lesson in political strategizing. It was done, I want to say, almost on the spur of the moment. The women who put the slate together recognized immediately that we could not proceed as we had planned or we would lose everything that we had worked so hard to gain. I commend them for what they did. And even though there was controversy, there’s always controversy. But the controversy was settled. They were able to talk it out in a very short time. And it was the wise thing to do.
How difficult for the pro-ERA, and I want to use the quote, “liberal” faction, to agree on a slate of candidates when there were so many very wonderful, very capable, very diverse women who could be on that slate. How easy for the Blue and Whites to put together a slate, because you have a homogeneous group. That is essentially the difference in what we were seeing in these two groups of people.

I’d like to mention one incident at the plenary session. This is not particularly apropos to a question, but if I could go ahead with that.

Andrews: Sure.

Yee: This is an event that was so impressive and so emotionally charged that I just will never forget it. I see it today as if it happened yesterday. We were in a plenary session, going to vote on the passage, on the support of the Equal Rights Amendment, which was a top priority. I should mention the way the voting was going in the plenary sessions with two thousand women (the Blue and Whites) all seated together en masse. Whenever a vote was taken, they stood up en masse and voted yes, or voted no. Down in front of each of these sections was a man who held a placard. And on the placard, one side said “yes,” the other side said “no.” Before the vote was taken, the man would stand, hold up the placard. The women rose according to whatever the sign said.

So we knew what to expect when the ERA vote came. And sure enough, but when it came to vote yes, five women among the Blue and Whites stood up. They were not together. They were spread out. Five lone women. And we, pandemonium broke loose. We tried to reach across bodies, heads, to touch these women, to give them the support that they deserved, to tell them how much it meant to us and to them to take a stand because they believed in something, not because they had been told how to vote. I know they paid a price. We don’t know what price they paid. We know that in the parking lot were four or five cars each day with Utah licenses. And men were in front of those cars instructing women, whatever they were saying to them. So that we know that this is all part of a planned organization in how they would vote and how they would behave. We were thrilled, absolutely thrilled, that five women out of this group stood on their own. And to me, that was the highlight of the entire conference. It’s something I will never forget.

I talked with one of them. I did find one afterwards, and talked with her just very briefly. Told her how very, very pleased we were. How much we supported her, how strong she had to be to do that, and that we would help in any way that we could. She said she had never before been in a conference where there were so many ideas presented. She didn’t know that this was really what the Equal Rights Amendment was all about. This was not what they had been taught.

Of course, that, in a nutshell, is really to me what this conference was all about. It was about education of women. We went there with a commitment to put together recommendations from the state of Washington that would go to Houston for the national plan of action. But the process was an educational one. And I think a real plus from our conference was that we had women from all over the state who were, indeed, exposed to various viewpoints. We did not agree, and we should not agree, because there are so many ways of looking at different issues. This was an opportunity to air those issues, to
discuss them, to compromise, to find someplace where we might agree. And I think the educational goal of that conference was realized in many ways.

Andrews: I understand that the election of delegates to the IWY Houston Conference was quite controversial. Would you care to comment on that?

Yee: You mean the election of our delegates here?

Andrews: Yes.

Yee: Yes. The slate from the ERA was presented. Of course we got the word out as fast as we could. It wasn’t saying “you must vote,” it was saying, “we recommend that you vote this slate of twenty-four, because we need to have twenty-four delegates presenting this viewpoint at Houston.” The Blue and Whites did the same thing. Now there’s always, how did the votes go? What happened in the process? I was not involved in the actual voting, but I know that eventually, twenty-three of our delegates were elected. One of the conservative side was elected, which was very good, and we were very, very pleased.

I also know that because of the way that the conference was going, and the overwhelming number of conservative women who had arrived, word went out to women on the west side who had not come to the conference but were interested. It is true that several busloads of women came to the conference so they’d have a chance to vote. They had to register, they had to be credential; they had to go through all the hoops. But they voted legitimately. And I know that because of that registration line, some of them did not get to plenary sessions because they were busy registering.

The vote for delegates, in its controversy, was too bad. I was sorry that we could not have an open voting process and not have to deal with the slate of candidates. On the other hand, I have to say again I thought it was a wonderful political strategy. It was something that had to be done. And it’s also a lesson in rising to the occasion when you’re faced with what seems like an insurmountable barrier, then you figure out what’s the best way to get around it to accomplish your goal. And I think that was exactly what was done in the case of this slate of candidates.

Andrews: Did you participate in the Houston conference?

Yee: I went to the Houston conference as an alternate. And that was an interesting way of choosing. After the delegates were elected, then our committee met. Anyone who had not been elected but would be interested in going to the conference was invited to make a presentation to the committee. Why do you think you should be a delegate to the conference? Instead of nominating people, you essentially nominated yourself. I really wanted to go, of course, but I just couldn’t stand up and give a litany of everything I had done. I can remember when it came my turn, I stood up, I gave my name, and said I was on-site chairperson for the conference, I did what I could. And I sat down. Other people, I thought, if you don’t know what I’ve done, then I’ve failed. At that point in time, other people gave quite a long speech, up to five minutes, of what they had done and why they should go. I just couldn’t do that.
I think I was the first alternate that was selected. And I was glad to go. I was just so glad to go. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience. Even though we did not participate in the voting, we participated in all of the other kind of action, interaction with other delegates from all over the country.

There’s one incident that I thought, once again, was one of those occasions that I will never forget. That was the opening of the conference. I can remember standing outside of the big Houston convention hall, wherever we were. We were waiting for the torch to arrive from Seneca Falls. And it was to arrive at any moment. It finally arrived, the last runner brought the torch in, raised it high. There was sort of a stair step arrangement so the runners were up on that platform. As that torch was placed in its position, all of us -- these hundreds of women that were standing there, waiting for it to come -- all of us stretched our arms into the air, reaching toward the torch. The arms were every color of the rainbow. And I just, to see that, has stayed with me for years. Red and white and yellow. Every color that you can imagine. And I thought, this is what it’s all about. This is the story of the women’s movement, of women of all backgrounds, of all kinds of ethnic groups, despite their differences, working together to attain their common goals. And that was the beginning of the conference. I’ll never forget it.

[End Track One. Begin Track Two.]

Andrews: Okay, we just turned the recorder off for a minute, and are back now. You said you’d like to say a little bit more about the core committee that planned the conference, and its diverse makeup.

Yee: Yes. I’d like to mention that, because it was such a wonderful experience for me. Working with this group of people on a statewide basis was a tremendous learning experience. People came from all different backgrounds. People had different kinds of skills and experiences. But the glue that held us together was our commitment, and it was a very deep commitment, to do the very best that we possibly could, to contact the people, the women in the state of Washington, and to follow the rules set down by the International Women’s Committee.

We knew that we wanted to have as diverse a group as possible. We made every effort to contact everyone. It was easy to do the West Side, because there are support groups, and there are networking groups that are easy to get a hold of. The east side was not that easy. So we worked very hard through churches, through newspapers of very small towns, through granges, through all kinds of ethnic groups. Anyone who had a lead, we followed it.

One of the criticisms of the conservative group is that we didn’t try to reach them. I think that’s an unfair criticism. I think we bent over backwards to reach them. The news, the information was there. Whether or not they chose to respond to it would be up to them. But the information was there. And we individually made innumerable calls to individuals, to leaders. I know what I did on the east side in calling people in Spokane, in Tri-Cities, in Walla Walla, in places that are more out of the way for this kind of a
conference. When the committee actually came down to nitty gritties and had to work out conflicting kinds of projects, I was always so thrilled with the way that people were able to work together with their differences, to find places where the best solution, whoever it was, would be the one that would be chosen.

And when we got to the conference itself, it was because of the cohesiveness, I think, of that committee, that we were able to counteract what proved to be the very divisiveness of we against they, of the Blue and White group. We did not go into the conference with the idea of just projecting our viewpoints. That was not the purpose of the conference. The workshops were set up in a way to encourage discussion, diversity of opinions, and plenty of opportunity for people to say what they had to say. The fact that the Blue and White felt that they were excluded, I think, was really a misperception on their part. I talked with several Blue and White people, not in workshops, since I didn’t attend, but outside, in between the workshops. My general opinion was that they were pleased, that they were being exposed to a whole different world that they didn’t even know existed. And I think that was a real success of the conference itself.

If we had to do it over again, would we do it differently? I don’t know how we could have done it any differently. No, I think in all fairness, that given the numbers we dealt with, given the circumstances, I think we did the best we could. But it was because of that central committee and its commitment to do everything possible to explore women’s issues in the fairest possible way.

Andrews: I’m glad you brought that up and talked more about it. It was very, very important. I just have a couple more questions. What kind of follow-up activities did you participate in, both short and long term?

Yee: Well, let me start with the very first one, which is kind of interesting. The conference was in 1977. It was 1978 that the decision was made by the university to close the Women’s Center. Those were the years of RIF, Reduction In Faculty, which simply meant that the university was not getting the kinds of legislative funds that it needed, or felt that it needed. So it was looking for all ways possible to reduce its expenditures. Anyone who was not tenured was vulnerable. I was not tenured. I was an adjunct office, not really funded by the university because I had written grants and funded our own operation. However, I had just completed a Title I program which had been a year-long program, highly successful, involved over two thousand women over a year’s time. I had been asked by the Title I committee in Seattle to reapply for another year.

So I had submitted the proposal, and had gone to Seattle to defend the proposal. But before I went, I had been told by the college administration that they no longer would provide five hundred dollars for my operation. But they would lose a hundred thousand dollars from a grant! All they had to do was provide some support. But this was a small kind of thinking from an administration that really didn’t have that much empathy for women’s issues or the Women’s Center.

So I went to Seattle to defend the proposal, got all through to the end, and was asked the question, “How much is your university putting into your grant?” I of course hedged the question, talked about all of the in kind services, office, secretary, telephone. “How much money is your university providing you?”

I said, “None.”
They said, “Then why should we?”
I had to say, “You’re absolutely right. Why should you?”

So the grant was canceled. I came back home; the grant was canceled, and the Women’s Center was to be terminated. When the publicity went out that the Women’s Center was to be closed, I had a call from a couple of the women locally with whom I had worked very closely over the years. And they said, “What do you want us to do?”

And I said, “If you have not learned what to do by this time, then I have failed in what I’ve tried to teach you.” And I let it go. They did an absolutely wonderful job. They called the press. They called a big meeting of the administrators. Television. Lined up all of the things that we had accomplished. They put it all together in a very coherent, cohesive way. Invited me to come as a guest, but not to speak. It was just beautifully done. The administrators looked pretty sad when it was over. We got good publicity in the paper. We got a lot of support from all the organizations countywide.

The end result is that the Women’s Center stayed alive. They simply appointed another woman in charge who had tenure in the education department, because they couldn’t fire her. She was not, unfortunately, that committed to women’s issues. But it kept the Women’s Center alive. I thought that part of this may have come from the conference itself. Women learned the power of organization, the power of standing up, presenting their case, and doing it well. So that was an immediate result.

In the Women’s Center I had worked over the years with the director of the public library. So I simply moved my operation to the public library, and wrote grants from there involving the public library and the university as sponsors, co-sponsors. One of the grants that we got in the next year was through Radcliff College. Radcliff, at that time, awarded seven grants nationally. And we got one of the seven. It was just wonderful. I’d put together a core group of four of us who were going to essentially run the project. We were flown to Radcliff for a full week, living on campus, interacting with women leaders from across the country, and from Harvard, and Radcliff, while we perfected the proposal of what we were trying to do. Then we came back, and for the next year and a half did our project. But that was really, again, a plus thing that happened after the conference was over.

My sense is that the impact of the conference on the women locally was quite measurable. Women who had never been active before, who had never really paid attention to roles of women, opportunities for women, became more involved. They spoke out. We found mother/daughter affairs where younger people were being exposed to thinking that they had not done before. So I think the impact on this community was very commendable.

It’s hard for me to judge what happened statewide, but I still run into women, who had attended the conference. For instance, last week I had lunch with a group of people, both men and women. There had recently been an article in the local paper, about the conference, and it just happened that my picture was on the front page, and it had a history of the conference. This woman came up to me and said, “I was there. I can tell you exactly where I sat. I know exactly how I voted.” And she’s a woman who is now seventy-five, and she never forgot what happened at that time. So I think for those who participated, it did have an impact on their lives.

I’m very much concerned in today’s world, young women perhaps are too busy earning their living, paying their bills. I’m concerned that younger women are not as
actively involved in protecting the rights that we have worked so hard to gain. It’s too easy for us to lose by a vote in the Supreme Court what we have treasured for so long. But young women will say, “Why should I worry? I’ve always been able to do what I wanted to do.” How true. So I think that one of our greatest challenges is for those of us in this generation and the next generation down, never to relax. That you cannot take for granted that the educational process will always go on. We are the ones who carry that message. And unless we continue to carry it, it will get lost. So we all have a job. From that conference, if I ever have a message that I’ll never forget, it would be that you never quit. There’s always something that has to be done.

Andrews: Well, this has been wonderful. And thank you. You’ve answered the questions that I had. I had one or two that I didn’t ask, but you anticipated them. And in summary, is there anything else that you would like to add?

Yee: Only that I’m so pleased that you’re doing this kind of project. It’s something that we need. I hope that when it’s done, there will be a way of making it available as an educational tool for high school, for junior high, for colleges, for women’s studies courses, as a stepping stone, as a take off point for future action in women’s issues and women’s concerns. We have social concerns, we have legal concerns. They will always be with us, but they are threatened more today than they have been for a whole generation. I hope that this becomes a tool and an incentive to do a great deal more.

Andrews: Thank you, Alice. Your contribution has been marvelous. I’ve enjoyed talking with you so much. And this will be a great contribution to the project. And by the way, all of this will be archived at the State Historical Society, and we also have a website that will be available to schools, to community groups. So I think part of your wish is already in the process.

Yee: That’s great. And thanks so much for doing it.

[End Interview.]