



## **Oral History Interview with: Karen Boehning**

President of Chicago NOW Chapter (1971)

Conducted at Karen Boehning's home

November 17, 2012

**Interviewer: Joanna Redlinska**

A Columbia College Chicago Student

In Dr. Erin McCarthy's Oral History Methods Class

For Chicago Women's History Center's  
Documenting Women's Activism and Leadership in the Chicago Area  
1945-2000 Project

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Joanna Redlinska: My name is Joanna Redlinska and I'm here with—

Karen Boehning: Karen Boehning

J.R: And today's date is November 17<sup>th</sup> 2012. And we are having the interview at—

K.B: My home in Glencoe.

J.R: This is for the Chicago Areas Women's History Council, and the years that you have been an activist are?

K.B: From 1970—I consider that the start of my activism when I joined the Chicago Chapter, the National Organization for Women.

J.R: Now, we're going to be going into the biographical snippet. What year were you born?

K.B: 1945, here in Chicago.

J.R: The place that you were born?

K.B: At Augustana Hospital on the North side.

J.R: Where were you raised?

K.B: Here, also, in Chicago. I attended school here and I did go to boarding school in Michigan when I was about fifteen.

J.R: And your father's place of birth?

K.B: Pardon me?

J.R: Your father's place of birth?

K.B: Oh, my father's place of birth. Springfield Illinois.

J.R: And your mother's place of birth?

K.B: Iowa city, Iowa.

J.R: Could you tell me what is your earliest memory as a child?

K.B: My earliest memory as a child would be finding my mother and I taking a walk on Sedgwick, where we lived, and finding a kitten under a porch. And we brought the yellow kitten back and then I raised him. He became our cat, my cat, actually, but that was the thing that I remember. I think I was about two, two and a half years old and we had the cat until I was twelve or thirteen. So, that's the most clear memory I have of actually doing something doing and, you know, being in the outside world and being on a little adventure.

J.R: What was the feeling that you had when you found this kitten with your mom?

K.B: Well, I knew that the kitten was in difficulty and obviously hungry and cold and I was glad that my mother was going to take the cat back home. I was happy that I was going to be involved in rescuing this animal.

J.R.: In your grade school side of your life, what was your favorite subject in school?

K.B: My favorite subject in school, I would say, was spelling. I'm a pretty good speller and so I like to show off a little bit and I think my mother coached me a lot. I think that's why I was so good. I don't think that I was, you know, just naturally good. I think my mother was a good speller. She graduated from high school at the top of her class, so she was a she was pretty smart cookie in those days. She graduated in 1939. Those were pretty hard times for women, so for her to be the top of her class, she had to work pretty hard and, you know, stay on her toes. So, she helped me along and I was a was a good speller. We did crosswords together and stuff like that when I got older. So, she was a very big influence in my life. My parents separated when I was about three or four years old. So, my mother was the primary influence, you know, in my life.

J.R: So, she played a great role in your life?

K.B: Yes, very important role. And she went and she had to go to work and—but my whole family worked. We lived with my grandparents and I think that—She, eventually, became one of the first women to get an insurance broker license in the state of Illinois. I mean, she took the test a couple of times but she studied very hard, but she became a broker. So, she, with three or four other people, had a little business also.

I saw my father very infrequently but he had his own small business. He was a pharmacist and his business was located on the Southwest side. So, it kind of was in the family, this business of being in small business and kind of standing up and, you know, working a little extra hard in order to make a make a living. So, that was a very strong motivation for me and I think that when we talk further you'll see that that came out a lot in my work in the women's movement is that I was very willing to jump out there and do stuff that was a little scary because I had developed some confidence by watching my mother be able to succeed.

J.R: Were your mother and father religious?

K.B: Yes, my mother was my Sunday school teacher. My godmother was an African American woman who introduced my mother to the Methodist church here in Chicago. She came from Iowa, of course. And her family, my great grandmother, they were Methodist also in Iowa. So, she came here, she was looking around, she got a job in a doctor's office and she was introduced by my, eventually would be, my godmother to the Methodist church here in Chicago. My mother then became the Sunday school teacher for the church. I, then, played the piano in the Sunday school [laughs]. So, then, when my mother and I moved to Oak Park, we continued with the Methodist church there. And then when I went away to boarding school—It was a Christian Science boarding school, very different from Methodist, but I would say that we are practically very practical about our religious affiliations. My father was Catholic. I think that there were some differences in opinion about religion in,

you know, in the relationship. I think that there was some effort to have me raised in a different religion than my mother was, so I think there was some—you know, it is not that unusual to have these difficulties.

J.R: In which ways do you think your religious background shaped your knowledge of sexism?

K.B: Now, a being a Methodist and having my own mother be my Sunday school teacher and having a leadership role in the church, I'll be honest with you, I actually saw the church as being fairly enlightened about women when we were Protestants. I felt that because I had lots of friends who were Jewish and Catholic—the neighborhood that we lived in on the North side was very ethnically and religiously diverse. We lived in Up-town. So, we had many friends and acquaintances and neighbors who were of very diverse religions. And I knew that Protestants—that my mother's and mine situation—was much more liberal toward women than some of my friends' family's stories that, you know, I heard about what was going on. And, so, I don't feel that that was a block. It may have been the opposite, it may have been influencing me to be more accepting of the fact that women could, if they chose, have a greater role.

J.R: What was it like going through the Chicago school system until you were in the ninth grade?

K.B: In the Chicago school sys—I think I was very fortunate. I had a really good experience in the Chicago public school system and I was involved in Future Teachers of America and I would help out until the substitute teachers came, you know, if the teacher wasn't able to come in unexpectedly in the morning, I was in a group of students who would go and just take care of the class for a few hours until a substitute came from down town. So, I was, you know, involved with that. And, I think that the whole Chicago public school system—which is one of my clients now, ironically [laughs]—was very open. Again, we were in the north side, so we had a, you know, a very liberal curriculum. I think that that was a very positive experience. Then, when I went away to a Christian Science boarding school, that was a whole other animal. That was very rigorous and strict and I was just like, “What is this?” [laughs]. It was very shocking. Now, here the irony is the founder of that religion was a woman, Mary Baker Eddy, and even though I was very impressed with that and I was already, I think, a feminist by that age, I was still kind of shocked at the strictness and the rules and regulations about what you could and couldn't do, which were not the exposure that I had in a protestant church, which was much more putting the responsibility for your actions on the person and saying, “You know you know what's right and wrong, you got to take care of what's right and wrong,” as opposed to being told these are the rules you know you have to follow. So, I think that in that regard I had a very good range, because I had a very, very strict situation with the Christian Scientists and I had a very encouraging and open situation with the Methodists, with the Protestants. I mean the Methodists are like notoriously more progressive. They're not a religion that imposes a lot of rules on you. I mean, I think it's interesting that my mother pursued that when she came to Chicago. She just picked on her early training and stayed with the religion she had been raised in.

J.R: Why did you choose to attend the boarding school?

K.B: I really didn't choose that. My family chose it. I was not adjusting well, we moved to Oak Park from Uptown, and I was not adjusting well. My grades were not good. It was very difficult. My mother had to come from work from downtown. I really didn't know anybody out there and I was just not connecting with the school and with the work. I was doing my homework, but I wasn't doing well. And, one of my mother's friends had sent one of her children to the school in Michigan. So, my mother negotiated with my father to say, "Well, let's try this for a year." I went there as a sophomore. And she says, "Let's try this for a year and see if this doesn't work." Well, it was very effective. And I think it was just a period of time in my life where I think I needed to, kind of, get a hold of myself and kind of push forward in my own life. I think that the timing was just right and, so, I was fortunate to have that experience also.

J.R: What was the first experience you had with sexism?

K.B: With sexism. Well, I knew, from maybe ten or twelve years old, I knew cause we—my mother and I would go to the movies every week, so I've seen a lot of movies, and I was like—and she would tell me stories about, I know she was a very attractive woman. She was a brunette. I mean, I look like my father I don't look a thing like my mother. And she would tell me stories about a salesman would come in and, you know, "Blah, blah, blah." Then they'd make their pitch and everything and then they'd come back a half an hour later and ask her to go out. And she was like, "No, thank you." You know, very, "I appreciate your offer and everything, but I'm not interested. And she said that they would get nasty. They would get mean. They would be angry that she rejected their overture. And my mother was, you know—We would talk about this. We would talk about it in terms of what the hell do you—what do you say if you don't want to go out with somebody? You know, "Sorry"? My mother was always very polite and everything, so she wasn't, like, being mean to them. But, what I heard from her was that this is a real problem and that the basic business and social relationships with men that women are at a disadvantage and you have to be careful. I hadn't had any other bad experiences myself. I felt that I was in a world—and I think I told you earlier I mean from movies from whatever—that the world was different for women than it was for men. And it was. It was two different worlds. And, so, don't forget we're talking about the 1950s and 60s. You can't even fathom what that must have been like, because like I said, still we don't have full women's equality now and we're way beyond sixty, seventy, sixty years behind that. So, I think that that was really close to home. And I would hear this from Aunts and whatever, that they all have the same kind of problem; that you, kind of, got to be careful around men because they get upset if you don't express that you're going to cooperate with them in one way or another, whether it's business or dating or whatever. So, I knew that I had to be careful. I kind of was wary; I was cautious, I was very cautious of about upsetting men. I got over that [laughs]. I really, I got over that a [laughs] little later. Go ahead.

J.R: What are some aspects that you remember about family members, friends, or individuals in your community being discriminated against under gender roles? Other than your mother.

K.B: Because of their gender role?

J.R: Yes.

K.B.: You know, that that's an interesting thing. Now, we are talking, you know, before I'm age eighteen. This is before that. So, we're still in the era o of the 60s where things were not very overt. Women were very cautious. I would say that the thing that impacted me the most and that I could feel and was aware of the most, was that there weren't really any women bosses. There weren't many women in charge; there were really no women in charge as far as the eye could see. Men were in charge. Women like me, I was just like the rest of the women, were very cautious about making sure that you didn't get yourself on the wrong side of men who appeared to be all powerful in the culture. And, when you looked at television and you looked at movies, it was very clear that men were in charge and women, although they were often very bright and very lovely and very personable, were not in charge. So, that was my view of the world, is that men were in charge and women weren't and that's just the way life was. Underneath that was this business of, "Be careful," because if you make them angry they can, you know, do you harm. So, don't forget what my age is. I know I can see it in your eyes that you're saying like, "What?" But, don't forget the age difference here. You're in your twenties I presume. Yeah. And I am going to be seventy. So, there is a big difference in the experiential thing. We can get to this, but everything went absolutely crazy into the 60s and 70s, you know. In the mid-60's it was still mini-skirts and go-go boots. I mean, that certainly had not much to do with women's rights and women's equality, it may have had something to do with women's freedom but that is a lot different than equality.

J.R.: Could you describe your high school self?

K.B: My high school self. Yeah. I was a leader. I was the head of the women's athletic organization at boarding school. I was a good student. I did well in my grades, so I overcame whatever problem I was having when we moved to Oak Park. And when I went to boarding school I think I blossomed. I think it may have been a good time for me to be on my own and getting a sense of myself and being able to—It was a co-educational boarding school, by the way. I thought that that was unusual. And there were twice as many boys as girls, two to one. It was a convenient situation for young girls. You never had to worry about a date to go to the prom or anything because there were always two or three guys asking you to go. And I was on the basketball team. I was in athletics and the head of the women's athletics organization. And I was on the governing committee. So, I was there three years. I retook my Sophomore year, Junior and Senior and I was one of the speakers at commencement. So, it was a good experience.

J.R: Were you ever intimidated that there were more boys than girls in high school?

K.B: No, absolutely not. These were boys, see, not men.

J.R: [Laughs]

K.B: So, don't forget my mother's stories to me. These were grown men, you know. A lot different than dealing with—you know, when you're sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old, boys aren't as scary. But, let's face it [laughs]. It's a different story when you get out in the regular world.

J.R: What were your goals and aspirations when you left high school?

K.B: I needed to get a job. My father had died in my senior year and I knew that there would not be money for college. So, I applied to Duke University, to the Pre-Med Program, because I really wanted to be a doctor. You know, medicine had been around my whole life my mother worked in a doctor's office, my father was a pharmacist. My aunt had brittle diabetes, another aunt had multiple sclerosis so, it's like, my whole orientation was there is a whole lot of sick people in the world and, you know, someone's got to help them. I'm very oriented in fixing stuff. When there is a problem, I'm going to fix it. I applied in my junior year and I was accepted. But, we were not going to have the money, and it was Duke, so I knew we were not going to have the money to pay for that. So, I knew when I graduated that I would have to go to work and then I would have to go to night school and that it was going to be dicey. Medical school was very expensive. I wasn't sure, you know, it's a lot different when you know the tuition's going to be paid, then when it is not. Your drive is a lot different. If everything is going to be fine the money will be there, okay. And if it is not, then how much do I really want to do this because I'm going to probably have to have a job on campus in order to pay part of my tuition. I just didn't think I could do the studying and have a job and make it work. So, my thought was that I was going to get a job and give myself a year or so and see how driven I was to want to go to medical school. And I was not driven at all to go to medical school [laughs]. The passion did not stay with me. It was too daunting; the idea was too daunting. And the number of women going to medical school was extremely small.

I mean, I had to write two essays to Duke in order to secure my acceptance. They needed to know that I was really serious and everything. But, my grades were not, my testing was fine, but my grades were not sufficient for them to offer me a scholarship. And, okay, this is a perfect example, I had forgotten this. They said that they were not investing dollars in women to go to medical school because the women usually dropped out or they got their degree and then they had started a family and didn't they didn't come back and they didn't practice. So, they didn't want to invest. So, I would say that that to me that was the most stark indication right there, and it's funny you asked me before what experience I had and I'd forgotten about that. So, your questioning is very good. That was the first time I really came up against it and it was like, "What?" I remember talking to the people at the boarding school like, "How is this possible?" I just really didn't understand that this was a possibility. You know, if I was smart, if I could pass the test, what's the problem? You know, I happen to be a girl, so, what? And that's not how it went.

So, I came back to Chicago and I was pretty aggravated, but I was bound and determined. I was going to make it anyway. I wasn't just going to get married and, you know, go the way. I was the only girl who did not go to a finishing school from my class. Everybody else went to a two-year finishing school. Well, there was only thirty girls in my graduating class. But, that's where they went and, you know, found husbands, that's the way it was. And I was the only one, I remember because everyone writes back and forth, "Blah, blah, blah." I was the only one who got a job. I got a job as a claims adjuster because I knew medical terminology and my math was good. So, I passed the math test and I passed the test about what's a humerus and you know what's a Capela and all that stuff. I knew that and so I got a job. I couldn't believe it. The people in the office, there were a lot of women in the office, but they were all older. And, so, I was this young up-start there in the office. I just thought that I was just like, "Wow! I got a job. I'm not a waitress. I'm actually in an office here. I got a desk and

an adding machine.” So, my mother was pretty impressed too she says, “This is highly unusual.” (Laughs)

So, anyway, I kind of took it from there that business—that is so weird that I didn’t remember that business about them not wanting to invest in any scholarships for women because it didn’t benefit the University at all. Because they spent the money and gave out the education, but that didn’t come back to help the University by having a graduate come in and be a doctor there. Okay, that was a long answer [laughs].

J.R: [Laughs]. Describe some articles or books, any films or speeches, theatre performances that influences you thinking about gender roles.

K.B: About gender roles?

J.R: Yes, during your high school—

K.B: Oh, during high school.

J.R: And a little bit after.

K.B: You mean movies, your saying?

J.R: Anything that comes to mind.

K.B: Okay, about gender roles, gender roles. There was a theatre downtown called The Clark Theatre. And women had to go sit up in the balcony, so that they wouldn’t be molested by men in the theatre. They had a balcony upstairs if you wanted to go and see. They played all old vintage movies. And I would go there, and I just thought that this was just outrageous when I first went there because they had really great old-time movies. And I was just like, “What? What is this that women have to go up there?” “Because, you know, we don’t want some guy in his overcoat trying to feel you up.” He says, “This is for your protection. All the women sit up stairs.” I said, “Well, what if I come with a guy?” “Well, then you don’t have to worry about it because you’ve got a guy with you.” [Laughs] So, it was only the single women. What’s the question again? I mean, that was so weird. What was the question? Was that a good answer? Okay. (Laughs)

J.R: How did you understand that women’s rights were apart of human rights?

K.B: At that time? I mean, are we still at the time of around high school?

J.R: Yes.

K.B: Nope, no understanding at all. None.

J.R: None?



K.B: None. No understanding what so ever. Now, don't forget, we're talking about the 60s. This was before the demonstrations in 1968. The anti-war demonstrations. So, that was one of the issues also. This was before the Vietnam War.

You're not used to talking to women as old as I am right? [Laughs]. You forget the fact that I was already an adult, a lot of things that were extremely influential on women and helped them to see the position of women in the world, they hadn't happened yet. There was not a media outcry. There was not a media message about that. And Betty Friedan wrote the book in 1963. So, it wasn't really in the popular culture because the story hadn't been written. So, when I joined NOW [National Organization for Women] a little bit later than that, and I started working with Mary Jean [Collins] who was president of Chicago NOW, and she had a mail order book store that sold, it was called The New Feminist Bookstore. She sold history books about women to women all over the country. She advertised in Universities and stuff and whatever. And I helped her, because I was good at math and good at organizing and good at basic business things. I filled the orders, sent them out, took them to the post office, put the money in the bank blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And I started reading some of the books. That's when my eyes got as big as half dollars. Like, how did this get by me? You know, why didn't my mother tell me this? Because my mother didn't know. My mother, in my mind, she graduated at the top of her class. She was a smart cookie. She didn't know this! And here she was out in the business world and she didn't know this. My grandmother certainly didn't know this. I mean, who knew this? My lady friends, my young girlfriends they didn't know this, we didn't talk about this problem. We'd talk about how to get a boyfriend, or isn't he cute and blah blah blah. We were not talking about something that we didn't know. The thing that Friedan says, "It is the problem with no name." You know it's not right. You know that the world is not equal and it's not a flat even floor here, but you don't exactly know what's wrong. Is it the guys, is it the girls, is it everybody? What is the problem? But, you just had this feeling that it wasn't right. That there was no real way to really articulate it or give it a name. That's why it was called the problem with no name. You know that it's not right, but you don't know what to call it. There was no such word as sexism. Even from the days that they were trying to get the right to vote, they really didn't use that word. Sexism is not what they called it. They were just really documenting—of course they really couldn't do anything. I mean, these women, I don't know how they kept from killing men [laughs]. Because, it's like, you know, they couldn't do anything for Christ sake. Literally, besides not vote, they couldn't go out on the street unescorted. It was just absurd. But, again, they didn't know it until somebody started organizing and saying to them, "Um, hey, Suzie. You know that your husband shouldn't be beating you?" [Laughs] Okay. Alright. So, next. Is this giving you the material, I mean are we doing fine?

J.R.: Oh, yes!  
[Laughs]

K.B: Okay, good.

J.R: I just wanted to ask, when you mention men and women were treated differently in society, I was just wondering in high school, how did you learn about sex just in the general term?

K.B: You didn't. You didn't really talk about it.

J.R: At all?

K.B: No. Because to girls with your girlfriends and stuff you were not going to admit that you were having sex of any size shape or form. And the guy usually taught you how. I mean, women really didn't know how it goes. They may have understood masturbation, but they didn't understand the mechanics of sex. And it's sort of like you got to do it in order to understand it. Usually, the guy was the one that was going to explain it all to you. Introduce you to it and indoctrinate you into in to how it gets done. So, you know, that just wasn't just something that you could—Absolutely, the most important thing you talked about with other women was, “Was he nice? Was he interesting? Was he a good kisser? And that's about as far as it went. Good kissing was about the only thing that was discussed. Now a days, of course, it's open season. Everything can be discussed. And I don't think there was a language or a comfort that even allowed that discussion to go on. You could think about it in your head. You could fantasize about it, but it was not a subject for social discussions, at least not in the circles that I ran in. Now, it may be different culturally. In other situations, there might be a more of a naturalistic approach to it. But, again, Protestant, middle-class, and generally moderate politically. So, that was just not in that cultural strata. Now, you look back at this almost laughable how uncandid, or the lack of candor, about sex was just like, how did anyone make babies? It was so taboo, that it's peculiar given today's standards.

J.R: How did you personally learn about sex?

K.B: [Laughs] That way. From a guy that I was dating. That was, you know, we just progressed along, progressed along, progressed along. It was very, you know, secretive and furtive and we had to make plans to be together or stuff like that. There was not an openness either, in the culture or even among best friends. I mean, best girlfriends didn't talk about it. There may have been some assumptions that you were doing it, but there was no discussion about it.

J.R.: How did you struggle with your sexual preferences as a developing individual?

K.B: With my sexual preferences? I was straight until I got into the women's movement. I had two relationships with women that were related to the women's movement. And I don't know whether or not this was a function of the awareness of the extreme isolation of males and females in the culture. Now, we are talking the 70s. Now we move forward. There was just this extreme experience of men that was over here, the experience of women was over here, and it was just like they don't understand us, we don't understand them and so, it's just not going to not going to work. That was pretty much the attitude of all the women that were involved in the early women's movement is that there was really a big difference in the attitude about this between males and females. And it was, in that that period, openly discussed.

And there was the beginning of the acceptance and a tolerance for relationships of between people with the same sex. And, I mean, it was even people within the women's movement who were like, “I'm not doing that.” And then there was another group that was like, “And what's the problem with doing that?” I mean, there was a big tension for about ten years

inside the women's movement as a whole the huge taking in of all the organizations. Big tension about how relationships with the same sex were viewed. And it even impacted the politics within the organization in terms of who would be acceptable for leadership and who would not be. And as time went on, so we moved into the mid 70s, it became much more comfortable for everyone to be talking about the whole question. Not only as women, but the whole larger question of males relating to males, and then males and females who were relating to the same sex talking to each other about the fact that this is a larger issue than just relating to someone of your own sex. I don't think that it really became commonplace for politically aware people and progressives to have that conversation until the mid 70s. I mean it was just so suppressed. And, of course, for people that were way out there, which I consider myself to have been kind of moderate. Not in my attitude but in my comfort level because of my background, my more conservative background. It took a long time for the local women's movement to really get that all really worked through. Because there were like three or four different tiers of women's organizations in the Chicago area. So, there were there were extremely different views on lots of political matters, not just issues related to sex and same sex relationships, but everything. The war, the economy, unions. It was all over the place. Which, for me, was fine because I had very different attitudes about a lot of different things. I didn't think that it was all one pot. I felt that you had to really work through each of the issues, that it's not just one pot. You just don't throw in it's okay fine, I'm with everything. No, I wasn't with everything. I had to work it through where am I on this, where am I on that, where am I on the other and sometimes I was on the outside.

J.R: How did you first become aware of your sexuality within the feminist movement?

K.B: Aware of it? I think it just evolved. I was working with people and some of whom were of interest to me and we just got together and that's what happened. My life changed and I got married to a guy and I got divorced, I got married to somebody else. I mean, you know, I'm a big believer in each couple decades life changes. Twenty, twenty-five years makes a big difference in what's the priority in your life.

J.R: How are you treated because of your feminism?

K.B: Now that's a good question. I think really poorly [laughs]. My philosophy is the very most important thing in life generally perceived really is about money and economic status. I'm not saying that's right, but I think that that's what is most important to everybody, is their economic status or economic well-being, let's say. And I think that that's really the most important thing. In that regard, women and their increasing competence and increasing excellence and increasing performance capabilities, it was really a big, huge challenge of the huge status quo and has been for maybe twenty-five to thirty years. I don't think it has anything to do with not wanting women to get ahead or being, quote unquote, the old fashion definition of sexism, you just don't think women are competent. It's I think the opposite. It's that women are a huge competition for a certain pile of jobs and certain opportunities and we haven't figured out a way to expand the economy to accommodate everybody who's got potential and capability. We haven't figured that question out yet. We're still competing for a limited number of slots and jobs and opportunities and whatever. I feel that there is a lot of that. I think we are over the, "Okay, I want to go to bed with her." Now we are on the, "Okay, she is going take my fucking job because she is smarter than I am." [Laughs] I think that's where we are now. And I think as a result of that it's a much

more threatening environment and I think that it's at its absolute epitome. It's almost like it had to get absolutely worse before it's going to get better. And, you know, in ten years we will all look back at this and say, "Oh, wow. Wasn't that a fun period we had back there in the mid 2010s or whatever? 2010 to 2020." Because that's really what it's at. It's all about—it doesn't make any difference what your biology is, what your sexuality is, who your living with, who your sleeping with, whatever, it's all about the opportunity. And you got Suzie and Bob which one of them is smarter? Forget that one's a woman and one's a guy. It's who's smarter, who is going to do the job better. So, we almost, almost are at the point of eliminating the problem between for men and women. Almost. Now we got to get into can men and women really be on a team together and can really cook it up together and can they really not be distracted by the sexual interest, distracted by the gender of the person they are dealing with? I mean, at the end of the day, we're going to be competing with China, India, whatever, and blah, blah, blah, we're going to be way ahead from all of these other countries. I'm way too old, but that's the job of your generation to figure out how we are going to do our best work on the world's stage and not be worried about whether or not you want to go to bed with somebody or whether or not this person is a male, female, straight, gay, bi, whatever and that's the question that has to be figured out. It's almost like everybody's got to wear a sack over their head and talk in three-word sentences in order to get rid of that bias. Okay, I'm glad you asked that question.

[Laughs]

J.R: Being on the more religious side did you ever find yourself ever doubting feminism or ever doubting God?

K.B: There is no God. I mean in my mind there is no God. That's a frame of reference for comfort for people, in my opinion. I, you know, worked through my religious background. I don't go to church, I'm not tied to a religion anymore. I know that it was influential for me when I was younger, but it doesn't have any role in my life at all.

J.R: What was the biggest disagreement you had with yourself along the lines of feminism and your religious aspects when you were younger?

K.B: The biggest difficulty that I had was, was God a woman? I mean, I just wasn't getting this whole thing on why is it always a guy, that it was a man. I had to really—and that's how I think I finally threw the whole thing off and I said, "Okay, that has nothing to do with how women and men are treated every day, 24/7." So, I think I worked that through just by saying its irrelevant because the concept of God doesn't fit in my life the way it used to.

J.R: How did your being an activist affect your relationships with friends and families?

K.B: They all thought I was crazy. I mean, I was pretty out there in terms of the stuff that I was doing. I did this radio show for WLS called "No More Shock-Rock, Baby." It was about women and rock and roll. I did this in 1973. It was about women and rock and roll, whole history of women in rock and roll. We had interviews with Grace Slick—do you know Jefferson Airplane? Do you know them? No? Alright, okay—Yoko Ono—you know who that is, right? So, I had an interview with Yoko—Roberta Flack—do you know that name? Okay, then yeah [laughs]. So, I had about five or six interviews with them. [Pauses] Tell me what the questions because I'm like on a, like, a reverie here. [Laughs]

J.R: How did your being an activist affect your relationships with friends and family?

K.B: Right.. So, when I did that show, and I co-wrote it with a rock critique at the Chicago Tribune, Lynn Van Matre, and she was very, very smart about basically about music and rock and roll, in particular. I'm just losing my focus here [laughs]. What was the question again?

J.R: How did your activism affect relationships?

K.B: Okay, good. Right. So, my family did not understand this at all. They saw a column about me in the radio TV column in the Tribune and Sun Times and they were like, "What is this? Why are you doing this?" They were a little taken back. And I'd—demonstrate for this and for that and I'd be right at the front with a placard whatever and they'd be like, "What are you doing?" That was part of the difficulties. That was where I realized that I had something to offer. I was a risk-taker and I felt fairly confident in myself after I had worked through some of these questions. And I had done all of this reading when I was helping Mary Jean in the bookstore, I realized that this is very serious stuff and I've got to get this squared away. I'm fighting for myself; I'm not fighting for all women. I'm fighting for myself and I'm mad as hell and I'm going to be out there in front and fighting about this.

One of the women decided to run for office and I decided I was going to help her in campaign. I was going to be her advance person. I think that was extremely important in terms of, okay, I got to just do this. I just got to get out there and do this, this is a real problem. I went and jumped into the air, and here I've been in the media, and now I go into politics. And I realized that every which way I turn, this problem of women being boxed in and presumed that they wouldn't be able to do something because they are women, was going to get me every time. I turned on the radio, the television, went into the voting booth, went to apply for a job, it was everywhere. So, we're talking mid 70s now. Mid 70s until the 80s. I mean, that's what I did for the next ten years. I just confronted the fact that I couldn't hide from this any longer and because I was more prone to be a little braver, a little more willing to step out there. Because I really didn't feel like I had anything to lose. I mean my family, they were like, "Alright, Karen, well you're going to do what you're going to do, so there is no sense in us getting upset about it." And my friends were like, "Go girl, do what you got to do." So, I think that's why I wound up doing these things, because I didn't really feel at risk. I knew I was going to always be able to earn a living. I also knew that other women were a little bit less willing to take the risk and that if I jumped out there in front, that might bring another few more women along because they'd say, "Okay, well, let's go." We did some things, even like Indians at a war party would dance around a fire with war paint in order to get their courage up it was very challenging. And that's kind of how I felt sometimes is that, okay, we got to do this. It's really going to be scary, but we got to do it anyway [laughs].

JR.: Define feminism in your own words.

K.B: The belief and commitment that wherever you see inequality for woman, you will stand up and fight for it.

J.R: What were your responsibilities in the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment]?

K.B: I was the Midwest coordinator. They hired me to coordinate for the 1980 campaign to be the Midwest coordinator. And Phyllis Schlafly and I would have fights in the Chicago Tribune. She would say this and I would say that, you know? So, there were two to three different articles where she took pot shots at me and I took pot shots at her. And I'm absolutely rabid about the Equal Rights Amendment, I mean, to my dying day, that's my issue, because there is absolutely nothing that will embody the success of the women's movement except getting the Equal Rights Amendment. If we're not in the constitution, the battles not over. That's the way I look at it. I'm a hard liner on the ERA. What is it that they say, "What the hell? What difference does it make, were out there we are getting jobs, we are getting this, we are getting together?" My theory on the ERA, just briefly, is this: if we had an equal rights amendment, they wouldn't be able to do this stuff that they do to us about the about our reproductive freedom, because we say you don't interfere with men's reproductive systems, how is it that you can interfere with women's reproductive systems, if there was an equal rights amendment? And I believe that this is one of the reasons they have resisted it so abruptly, because the choice is such a very difficult issue politically, that if we had an equal rights amendment that would be one of the first challenges that we would see. The point about choice would be moot, because an Equal rights amendment would obliterate the question.

J.R: How did you deal with conflict in the ERA?

K.B: I was all for getting on a horse and riding in the middle of the problem. I thought there was, absolutely, a lot of conflict. Not much inside the women's movement. I think everyone was good with the program, we got to have an ERA. But, with the opposition, that was pure politics. And pure politics, you know, the one with the most fervor and the most votes, usually, wins. Maybe it's a short-term thing, but it really is, at the end of the day, you wind up winning. The last election was a case and point [Barak Obama's second term]. We had more passion and more troop and more organization. Whoever gets that is going to win.

J.R: What was the most difficult task you had to endure during your activism during your NOW term?

K.B: The most difficult task I had to endure was this business of helping this woman run for political office, because the other leadership in NOW did not believe that we should get involved in political races and the result was that I, then, was active in forming the Chicago chapter of the National Women's Political Caucus. I, then, realized that in my mind between media and politics, those were the two avenues that I felt we had to be more involved in in order to get the message out and to demonstrate women's power at the ballot box. And that whatever else we did was great. If you want to do something else, wonderful! But, in my mind, in my little box of the way I think, if we don't get the story out and if we don't show up at the ballot box what are we doing here? So, I went that way. That was the big conflict.

J.R: Describe the area that feminists work with that you disagreed with and disagree with until this day.

K.B: Help me understand that question a little bit more.

J.R: Just describe an area that you don't fully agree in within feminism.

K.B: Describe an area that you don't fully agree with about feminism. I wish, let's say that and I don't make a big deal out of this, but I wish that feminists would not get involved in the gender question, I mean the question of sexual preference. That, to me, is sort of like getting involved in the civil rights movements. You can be in coalition, you can be in support, but you can't add to your basket the question that is a different question than the question your trying crack. We are not trying to deal with, you know, the rightness or the justness being able to choose whoever you want to love. That's not what our mission is. And I, to this day, I did disagree at the time and I disagree now that we should not co-mingle those questions. They each deserve ah their own focus in order to bring them to a resolution.

J.R: When did you refer to yourself as a feminist, the first time?

K.B: I think that when I walked out of that first meeting in 1970, I knew I was going to—the phrase is, “Scratch a woman and you'll uncover a feminist.” And Sister Austin Doherty was the speaker, she was just like blew my mind. She did her whole—she was a history political science professor at Alverno [College]. And I walked out of there and I was, like, completely, “I'm with this group. I'm with this crowd, whatever they say I'm with it.” So, there was just no question. I remember -- I did tell the part about the department of labor guy right earlier, right? Earlier, right? The department of labor, the article when I called up—I was mad then. I was like, “Okay, this is too far. This is my tax dollars are going to pay this guy's salary. No!” So, I was pretty hooked and then I went to the meeting and then that was it. I mean, for two years I was just like, that's all I wanted to do was work on the women's movement. And that's basically all I did. I think I got fired from three different jobs [laughs] because I was always on the phone, you know. [Laughs]

J.R: Describe your favorite counter argument to Phyllis Schlafly “Stop ERA” campaign.

K.B: My favorite argument to Phyllis Schlafly's “Stop ERA” campaign. There is a difference between favorite and most effective, you know. I mean, I think that my favorite argument to her—and we only had one debate and it was on a phone. It was a radio show. It was on a telephone thing—and my thing was always, “What are you afraid of Phyllis? What do you think is going to happen if we have an equal rights amendment?” And she'd say, “Well Karen—” It was always some wild abstraction that never really condensed down to anything, but I always wanted to turn it around on her. That was the way I always tried to deal with her to say, “Why not?” I mean, [laughs] she never was able to give a good argument to that.

J.R: Why did you choose to stay in Chicago?

K.B.: You mean now that I moved to Glencoe? [laughs] Staying in Chicago, as opposed to going—

J.R: —going to New York or something like that.

K.B: Going to New York. I like Chicago. And I like Chicago politics. I like the artistic atmosphere. I like the ethnic variety here, and my family is here.

J.R: What was distinctive about the Chicago women's movement?

K.B: Very practical and very intense. I think they were very, Mary Jean [Collins] and Mary-Ann [Lupa] and some of the other leaders, were very astute about—they were both students of the civil rights movement. So, they came from Milwaukee and there was quite a complex civil right movement in Milwaukee and they both were involved in that. So, they were very schooled about the step by step process you had to do in order to get the community recognition, to get credibility, the kind of things you did, the kind of things that you shouldn't do, in order to distract the public's interest in them. So, I think that that was the most important. The most important thing is that they knew—They were very astute about how to make sure that we got our points to across. Mary Jean was a great public speaker, and she was tough. She was very petite. She was, I think, barely five ft. No, she was probably five ft. two inches. But, she was a very powerful speaker, and she spoke in large terms, and I think that that was one of the reasons that the women's movement here did so well.

J.R: During the 1960s, did you have any serious relationship?

K.B: During the 1960s? Yeah, I had had a relationship. I was very involved in a young man from seventh grade, actually. So, that was in the late 50s, and it lapped over in the early 60s. He and I were very involved. One of the reasons why my mother, I think, decided to move to Oak Park. We were not of the same religion and he was Jewish and I was not, and this disturbed his parents and it disturbed my family. I don't think that they felt anything other than that were both bound to be hurt by the complexity of the situation. So, that was a very difficult scenario. But, that was like big, I would say it was the first, big love of my life. That was probably the reason, and we touched on this a little before, I told you we moved to Oak Park. I think I was very distraught that our families were very against this relationship. And I met him at a science fair, and were both very in-tune. We were both very—we liked each other very much, and were intellectually compatible, and he was as cute as could be, and I just adored him. And, so, that was the situation.

J.R: How did your first husband support you and your line of work?

K.B: My first husband was a—he came from Italy—he had worked for the state police and he came over here after the Aldo Moro murder. An Italian official was murdered and he was on the detail. And they sent him over here because he would be safer here. They thought that they were going to try to kill his whole assignment. So, they sent him over here, and he had a sister here. He had a beautiful voice and he sang, so we went to the opera a lot. And being from Europe, and being he was leftist, so he got it! He got what this whole women thing was about, and because he was, like, not of the culture I didn't view him as a difficulty. And I think that's probably why I chose to continue, although it was an unusual relationship. I mean, he had a language problem, we worked on it, we each carried a bilingual dictionary, you know, but my family was stunned when I married him. They were stunned. They were



stunned. But, he was a very, very nice guy, very sympathetic, politically, very tolerant, very interesting. But, as I said, he came from a left orientation. And, you know, with European politics, this stuff that we did here was baby shit compared to what they did. They were intensely left or right. They made a whole life out of it.

J.R: Why did you choose to get married?

K.B: I think that I was in the mode of wanting to settle down. I was in my mid 30s, and I was like, "Ok, let's just settle down here." He was a good social companion, and a good artist, and, you know, a cultural companion. I mean, you know, because we would go to the opera and do things like that. So, it was a decision of making—like I said, I was in my mid 30s and I thought, "You know, come on its time to find a life companion and settle down. You are going to do you work, you're going to right, whatever you're going to do," and he was very accepting of my interest in women's equality. And I thought that was a good fit in my life and he was cute [laughs].

J.R: [Laughs] How did you come to the decision to not having any children?

K.B: That was a decision made by someone else. I have polycystic ovarian disease. So, I am not able to have children. This is a disease that affects about twelve percent to fifteen percent of women. It's an ovarian function problem and they are not really able to do anything about it and by the time it was clear that there was—I had the surgery; there is surgery available to see if you can make this all work and by the time that was all done with, it was too late for me to adopt. Because, you think, you'd be close to forty years old and then you would adopt a little baby, and the baby is fifteen and you are like fifty-five or sixty. That's is kind of goofy. So, we just didn't think that was a good idea. So, like I said, the decision was already made. And I always thought that if I knew that there was some kind of difficulty because I had irregular periods, and I would go to the doctor and whatever, and he would be like, "You know what Karen? Sometime if you lose weight, you know, your metabolism gets back in focus and blah, blah, blah." I never was that driven to want to have children. But, certainty, after I married Joe, I mean, I definitely thought that should be pursued and they said it's just highly unlikely that there was anything that could be done. So, I didn't want to pursue it.

J.R: What was the scariest situation you had to witness being a woman?

K.B: I am sorry, scariest what?

J.R: Situation that you had to witness being a woman?

K.B: Scariest situation that I had to witness, scariest. Well, I would say, I don't have an answer of that. I probably would have if I saw the question ahead of time, I probably would have recalled something. But, nothing is coming up. Maybe I'll think of something.

J.R: That's okay. What was the experience that you had at the National Women's Political Caucus?

K.B: National Women's Political Caucus. Now, that was fantastic—you know a lot about me, don't you [laughs]. The Women's Political caucus. Yes-sur-ie, that was—I basically took over the organization from some women who were political, but from one party. They were controlling the organization, I thought, for the benefit of men. I think they were put up as one would say. When I joined this organization and I went to Washington DC when they first started the Women's Political Caucus, I went and I was in the room. It was in Liz Carpenter's house and Barbara Mikulski was one of the first women who had been elected to congress and she then became a senator. And I remember the plane comes in and it goes down the Potomac river and then it lands at the airport over here and I was just like, “Oh, my God. Washington DC! Now we are getting very serious about women's politics.” This was after my friend Judy had run and lost political office. And I absolutely realized that politics was where it's at. That's why the ERA was so important, that's why the Women's Political Caucus [was so important]. Because in my mind, I think I said this before, but I am going to say it again, at the end of the day, we are going to be able to get all the legal changes made we need to get made by demonstrating our political power.

J.R: What were the direct action demonstrations?

K.B. The direct action what?

J.R: The demonstrations.

K.B.: The demonstrations? For the National Women's Political Caucus?

J.R. Yes.

K.B.: Well, what we did more was education. I set up a program to teach women and their campaign managers and campaign staff, how to run a campaign. And brought in companies that did this for male campaigns to do a presentation and talk about how much does it cost to buy these mailing lists, how much does it cost to have a street crew to cover an X number of precincts. I mean, and really get down to the nuts and bolts. Forget about the fact that, okay, now we do not have to convince each other to run. There is enough women out there that want to run. Then, I stepped aside and took a less prominent role than the chair so that Dorothy Brown could be the president of the National Women's Political Caucus [Illinois Chapter.] And then we did a huge thing at the Chicago Historical Society. We had Carol Mosley Braun, we had this one that one, you know, all the women's organizations. League of Women voters, ERA Illinois, and we tried to put together this group and say, “Okay, now, we're going stick together and we're going to start electing women.” And one of the women that was there was Miriam Santos and she was the treasurer. I don't know if you are aware of this story, but she got herself crosswise with the Democratic Party and she wound up going to jail for some aberration in how she solicited funding for her own campaign. She, apparently, crossed the line. I don't know the details of how all this went, but she apparently crossed a line and there was some push back on that and she eventually served some time. She has since retired from the political scene.

But, at that time, we had several women candidates moving toward higher office. We had already had Carol Mosley Braun in, I think that was '92, and then there was Dorothy Brown

who was on the cusp, waiting to get in there was Miriam Santos was in the audience. I think that, in my view, in my leadership role with that, what I was interested in doing is getting real and realistic about how it is we get women elected. Now, there is two schools of thought on this. And that is some of the reason why I am not as active as I thought I would remain and that is that the leadership of the major parties understand very well the power of women at the ballot box, and so what they have done is they have made their own outreach and in my opinion they have solicited and convinced some women to work with them to the point where the women are not able to be as independent as I, and folks like me, would prefer them to be able to be.

So, I felt that I had done the work that I wanted to do, which was to create an atmosphere that was positive for women to think about running and providing information about how to run, what resources were available. And, since I was not going to run, to then, at the appropriate time or at the obvious time, step back and let things happen because my job has historically been to step out in front and talk about what needs to be done, get people to buy into it, educate them, about okay, yeah, we need to do this you are right, and then get them going. And then I step back because the truth is I don't want to run for office. I don't want to be a star in radio and television. My contribution is to get the big picture and try and organize the big picture, kind of like a business, and get everyone to do something about the problem, and get them cooking together and then, you know, step back. I'm not interested in my getting up there, I'm interested in all women getting up there. It is like, this is my gender, you know, and, it's like, what my contribution is I'm going to help my gender move ahead in whatever way I can. Not just me, it's not really a me thing, you know?

J.R: Describe the most protest you were in during the 1970s?

K.B: During the 1970s. Well, the administration, the city administration, under our beloved major Richard Daley, Richard J. Daley, pulled the plug on our 1971 Women's Equality Day Demonstration in the civic center and there we were blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and the microphones went dead. That was pretty aggressive. They all went inside, and I, basically, stayed outside. And then, at the end, a few of us went inside and fought. The police wouldn't let us go upstairs anymore. We were like, "We want to go up. We want to protest to the mayor," and there were already women upstairs. Mary Jean and crew were upstairs they were dealing with the mayor. It was all about choice. See, we were talking about choice, and that is when the microphones went dead and the speakers went dead. In a million years that would never happen today. Can you imagine? There's no way. They wouldn't dare, they wouldn't dare do this to women today, you know. That was pretty serious.

J.R: How did you feel about that?

K.B: Mad as hell. [Laughs] Absolutely, mad as hell, because we felt that they absolutely overstepped their bounds. There is no question about it. I mean, this is a free country. We are in a public square, here, expressing our political views, let's get real here. And he was violently opposed to choice so. He was, literally, the boss and he was able to get away with it. We were great, we got the front-page headlines and pictures of Mary Jean and whatever. That's all well and good, but the truth is, our politics were that disrespected that they would, in the middle of a public performance public presentation in the center—and the last year, I

think they were still mad about the year before because that was 1970 when, literally, you have seen pictures of this, the entire thing was completely full. It was just one of the biggest demonstrations that they had ever had there. I think that nobody really realized how big that 1970 demonstration would be. We were leafleting people as they came. We really understood what we were doing in 1970, because when they came on the trains from the suburbs we would be there with leaflets. So that when they went to lunch, they would see it because the women's movement was still kind of freaky at that time, in the 1970s. It was kind of freaky, like, "Oh, these women, what are they going to be doing?" That when we really understood how that really worked. Just getting women to—I mean, literally, I ran leafleting classes because women were afraid to hand out leaflets. Don't forget, not everyone was an anti-war feminist, okay. They were not all young college kids who were upset that their buddies were being shipped off to Vietnam. A lot of the women in NOW were women in their thirties—thirty, thirty-five, forty—In that range. Literally, just being able to get them out there and say, "Okay, I'll go with you, it will be you and me." There would be this sea of people and you'd see women holding on to the guy that they were with, you know. They didn't want to take the leaflet. It was someone your age range. I'm sure you think that this is just like impossible that it was ever this way, but it was. It was hard for women who would not really be publicly, because, you know, NOW is a centrist organization, centrist, kind of, politically. These women that were attracted to NOW because of the moderate natural position, the rational thought that went on, were not probably, did not have experience in public demonstration of their politics and nothing in the leaflet was provocative. It was all basic stuff. I mean, nothing, you know, hairy about it. It was all done up very nice graphically. It was very attractive, it didn't look threatening or whatever. It was pink, blue, and yellow paper it was, you know. But, that is how extraordinary it was for some of these women. And a lot of these women will remember that the August 26, 1970 thing, when Betty Freidan declared this Women's Equality Day, it was their first experience with public politics.

J.R: Okay [laughs].

K.B: [Laughs]

J.R: Why did you become an activist?

K.B: I think that I became an activist because I was so damn outraged at the reality of the position of women. It's like, "This cannot be—" I mean, if I don't stand up for myself, who is going to stand up for myself, you know? It was, kind of, a personal, you better get out there kid because, you know, that's what is. Many a time I was scared. And many a time I was insecure, but I also knew, really—Are we going to talk about my business? My contracting business? You got something about that? Okay.

Because, in my mind, it's the experience in the business world that, thank God, I had this experience earlier in the 70s and 80s. Because by the time I got to the business thing, forget about feelings, now were are talking about cold hard cash. Now we are talking about women [bangs hand on table] taking money right out of the hands of men and that was very serious. That's when a competitor said to me, and this was the ultimate expression, "You and Robyn"—this is the women I worked for she had the business, and I ran the government

contracting section of her the business—"You and Robyn better get out of this business or you're going to find"—and get this—"You're going to find yourselves in a trunk," meaning that they were going to kill us and put us in a trunk of a car, and then when it smells so bad someone was going to open up the trunk and find two dead bodies. And I was like this guy totally means this. This guy, he was a competitor, we had been beating the crap out of him by pennies, half pennies, quarter pennies and that is how this game is played. It's thousands of thousands of thousands of cases and, so, the difference between one bid and another bid is a very small amount of money and our philosophy was, "Hey, let's bid low because, you know, we need to get the business and then build it up." He and his family had the business for decades and he was just beside himself. We were just kicking his butt all the way down the line. Everybody was just like, "Who are these people? Who are these women? Who are these women?" All feelings aside, I felt, this is a perfect example, that if I did not fight him hard, they were going to kill us, literally. Not because we were women, but because we were competitors who happened to be women but this was unheard of. This was unheard of that women were going to beat the crap out of them toe to toe, nothing about affirmative action. We just happen to be women toe to toe competition and we were going to bid lower. It was low bid and that's all that there was to it. And that is the arena that I am playing in now. Huge quantity of products that are sold to the government and it's all in food, it's all food stuff. And the B part of what has been done there is that I am a big believer in affirmative action. I think that is an extension of all the civil rights questions that we are dealing with. I felt that, now, in the last eight to ten years, I've been working to build relationships with African Americans and Hispanics and white women in order to create a sharing of information and technique and strategy, and being able to, instead of working against each other, being able to work together in order to, and in this case and economically extremely important—this is how jobs are created in the inner city. Why should we let somebody from outside of Chicago take out tax dollars? To me that is just stupid. But, if we do not cooperate and we don't coalesce and we do not have joint ventures in order to make this happen, then it will never happen. So, that is what is going on now. But, that was the absolute scariest thing. And, ironically, had the Women's Movement not given me the education of how to go about dealing with government, I would have never said to Robyn, "Hey, you're pretty smart about the food business, why don't we get certified and see if we can't bid to some of these contracts in Chicago?" I would have never done that. She would have never done that. So, my experience and her experience came together and we were able to make a job. And before she sold the business we created twenty-three jobs, all of which, except for like three, were Black, Hispanic, or women jobs. Because that was part of the mission that we were on. Not only to learn together how to do big business, but how to create local jobs [laughs]. I've got to take that all back to where we first started, is that there was definitely an influence, an attitudinal influence in me about that if you're going to do something, do something that is going to make an impact. I think that that was part of what I took away from my experience with the Methodist church. Fine, do something, but it should have a component of greater good attached to it, not just for yourself.

J.R: As an activist—

K.B: I hope that answered some question [laughs].

J.R: It did [laughs].

K.B: Okay [laughs].

J.R: As an activist, what keeps you going?

K.B: I think what keeps me going is that I believe what I invested in emotionally and economically is productive. When things turn out well and progress is made, I feel that I am accomplishing something, so then you just want to keep doing it if it's going well. It's like if things don't go well, you're like, "Okay, let's try something else." This is going well. I've been doing this since the late 80s, so this is twenty-five years—90s, yeah—this is twenty-five, going on thirty years of this. Unless I'm going to be too sick—now I have someone that does the daily grind work for me, because I just cannot do this all these calculations and this kaka, you know. So, I deal with the customer relations, supplier relations, and the politics. When anybody gets their feathers ruffled, I kind of step in and say like, "Okay, let's talk about this." And my second husband, who just an extraordinary guy, and he was in politics too. We just have a huge common interest. He was very active in the civil rights movement and very active in progressive politics. We have a common view of what you need to be doing with your life; you need to be doing something that has a larger meaning than your own pocket book. That makes the work have a little bit more at the end of the day because you have someone to share war stories with. It makes it feel, makes both of us feel, that it's right. He just retired from being a forty-sixth ward democratic committee member. He was committee member for eight years, so we had years of Oh, my God, everything that went with electoral politics. I mean, it was all of that stuff. But, that makes a big difference, when you have someone who understands why the work is more than just work, because it's not just work.

J.R: Today women make .seventy-seven cents to the male dollar—

K.B: Still. Still. Still, right? It's amazing!

J.R: Yeah, your feelings about that.

K.B: My feelings about that are more women need to get into business. If business is not paying them, then women need to find partners and get into the entrepreneurial side of the business, so that they can get out of the economy what they put in. And that's A. And B, I was a big supporter of unionization. I did a couple of projects with the Communications Workers of America. We were trying to unionize clerical workers and I'm a big believer in the fact that people got to know their value in the market place and they've got to be able to hold out for that value and don't settle for less. And it's tough when the economy is bad. It's tough. That's always a very difficult situation.

Certainly, the Equal Rights Amendment would have something to say about that. I mean, it's all great for people to talk about the Lilly Ledbetter Act, but what that does is that allows revelation documentation, that's not the problem. Okay, fine. You can sue, but I'm saying we shouldn't even have to sue. Let's not have the discrimination from the get go. Education, certainly in the old days, it was like, well, women were going to work a few years, and then they were going to make a family. Now, that is just not true anymore. That is just not the guiding schedule for women anymore to determine their work life based on whether they're

going to have children. And, so, now there is child rearing, sharing between couples are much more progressive, much more sophisticated. Fathers, they will need to take a couple years off take care—This is a new world. It's a totally a different world and I just find it almost impossible to accept the fact that the needle hasn't moved anywhere from seventy-seven cents. I mean, it was seventy some cents when I was young. What is this problem? You know, I hate to sound like a bomb thrower, but do we need to go into the department of labor and, like, you know, review these statistics. What the hell is the problem? You'd think that we would think that we would be able to find out what the problem is when we looked at the statistics. Is it because that technology is taking over and women are not moving into technology as a career choice as much you know? Because that's where, you know, a lot of the rewards are. But, I would love to see someone do a study on this and figure why are we at a standstill still in this disparity of income. It undermines women's options. Just hearing that, it's just got to make young women, like you, it's just got to make you ape shit. How is this still, after all this time. The first convention for women, 1848, and here we still are, what the hell is this? Does it make you mad?

[Laughs]

J.R: Yes, it does [laughs].

K.B: Right. [Laughs] What do you think should be done about this?

J.R: Something should be done.

K.B: Yeah! And it's not right. Okay, good, we all agree on that. Let's have a demonstration tomorrow.

[Laughs]

J.R: Why do you think men and women tend to distance themselves from the label "Feminist" today?

K.B: I think Phyllis Schlafly did a damn good job of painting feminists as some, you know, wacko, hair flying, radical human who has no relation to anybody else. I think that the feminist name was manipulated by the opponents of progress and gender equality. We have other fish to fry. We haven't been able to -- okay, fine, we are not going to do anything about the other problems that we have. We are going to sit down and get people to think differently about feminists. It's just ridiculous. So, I think that it is unfortunate, but they did a really good job. I'm sure they spent a lot of money on PR. They knew exactly what they were doing. They had a lot of money. And that's another thing about our side of the equation, is that we do not have the financial resources that our opponents do. Because it's all about the money, it's not about our bodies, it's not about anything except the money. It is about the money. Let's not forget that, let's not forget that [Laughs].

J.R: What did the recent election season tell us about the status of women's rights today?

K.B: Well, I predict that something is going to happen. Maybe the last election results will make someone say, “Well, you know what, we’re playing with fire here. Because when you take a look at the demographics of the vote for the winning candidate it is absolutely clear and obvious, that women overwhelmingly went for re-election for the president. That ought to tell somebody something, that this is the largest demographic in the Northern Hemisphere. I mean, really it is. Because Hispanic women went substantially for the president and I think that this was a good thing. I was thrilled when I heard this news, that women’s vote was substantially with the president. I thought it sent a clear message. Anybody who doesn’t get this does not deserve to be in office. And if the Republican Party doesn’t stop trampling on women’s equality economically and our right to control bodies, they are just going to fall off the end of the earth. So, I’m expecting them to come back with some women candidates. I believe that Carly Fiorina, she is back on the scene again, I will not be surprised if she is in one of the two top spots next time they run. She is very smart, but, unfortunately, she is still mouthing the politics of the Republican Party. I think that the same politics will lose as big as it did this time.

J.R: How has your definition of Feminism changed?

K.B: It’s much more comprehensive and flexible than it was initially. As one sees more in life and has a bigger picture of life, you get a better understanding of the fact that everybody is not just like you. I’ve met women who are feminist and who identify themselves as feminist and don’t agree with me on lots of my positions. They’re still a feminist. You know, you don’t have to be like me to be a feminist. I don’t have to be like Heather Booth to be a feminist. Feminism is women who believe that we’re not treated fairly yet. I think that when that happens we will not need feminists anymore. I’m sure that there will be some still lurking around [laughs] if I’m still alive I’ll probably still be a feminist. That’s the real change here. Change will come when we get full equality. And I think that’s still a generation away. When I say generation, that’s twenty years. It used to be 2020 was the hundredth anniversary of the women’s right to vote. In my mind, if the Democrats could figure this out, I just don’t think there is enough time to get an ERA campaign, but that’s what we were recently shooting for by 2020 the hundredth anniversary of women’s right to vote that we would have a constitutional amendment. And you know who wrote the ERA, of course, right? We know who wrote that?

J.R: Would you like to mention who wrote that?

K.B: [Laughs] Alice Paul.

J.R: Yes.

K.B: She was a saint, I must say. I got some video with her when she was in the nursing home and President Ford calls her something and she says, “I don’t want to speak to him.” She is just fascinating. Have you seen the movie about Alice Paul, you know, the modern movie?

J.R: I have not, not yet [laughs].



K.B: Oh, you haven't seen? I can't remember what was the name of it? I can't remember, it's an absolutely fascinating movie. Okay.

J.R: As of now we are done with all my questions.

K.B: Okay, good.

J.R: So, is there anything that you would like to add in addition to let anyone listening know? Anything that's been on your mind?

K.B: Well, just two things: Business and Politics. Those are the two things, I think, that we need to concentrate on going forward. Once we achieve parity in politics, parity in the business world, I think that the question will be resolved. I think that's the end of the problem because everything basically revolves around those two issues. That's where the fighting was the hardest. Of course, we have the Equal Rights Amendment, but that's, as I said, about the economic issues. But, I think that if we keep pushing forward the way we are in the political arena and in the business arena that we're definitely going to get there. There is just no stopping it.

[Laughs

J.R: So, I just want to-

K.B: And with women like you, I mean I think this is a wonderful project. I'm very impressed with what you all are doing. I think this is wonderful. When I was young, a woman like you would just be completely like, you know, "She must be from outer space." You have classmates who doing the same thing, right? That there is a bunch of you out there doing this and then there is more women beyond that. It's just amazing to me how popular feminism is. This a good thing when you say you're a feminist. This is a positive thing, "I'm a feminist," you know. You didn't let anyone know this when I was your age, in my twenties; what the hell did I know in my twenties? [Laughs] I enjoyed this very much. I'm thrilled that you all are doing this. Now, tell me what will happen with this? This interview will be available—

J.R: I just want to thank you for your time with me, actually answering these [laughs] tedious questions. It really means a lot to me, my class, and also the Chicago Area Women's Council and it will be in the archives.

K.B: Oh, yeah, wonderful!

J.R: It will mean so much to the people that will be actually looking at the archives and looking at this in the future, so that will be great. This is just great! But, this is just great.

K.B: So, you will get your credits, or extra credits?

J.R: Yeah, it's—

K.B: How many women are doing these? Yeah, these interviews.

J.R: There's ten people in our class. There's actually two boys in our class.

K.B: Really? How's that coming?

J.R: It's pretty great [laughs].

K.B: Really?

J.R: They're really into it.

K.B: That's wonderful, that is wonderful.

J.R: Yeah, they really like it.

K.B: So, they'll be in the archives? Wow, that's just wonderful.

J.R: And, you can also contact Mary Ann Johnson because she's really interested in like the documents and the different kind of artifacts also.

K.B: Oh, yeah, I got artifacts. I got a basement full.

J.R: So, just in case you want to get some out there. [Laughs] Definitely.

*[End of recording.]*