**Mary Jean Collins**

**Equal Rights Amendment Reunion Collection – Oral History**

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**Interview Data:**

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**Interviewee:** Mary Jean Collins

**Interviewer:** Marie Scatena

**Location:** University of Illinois at Chicago, Richard J. Daley Library

**City/state/country:** Chicago, Illinois, United States

**Date of Interview:** June 14th, 2019

**Duration of Interview:** 1 hour 30 minutes 30 seconds

**Interview number (file name):** ERAR19\_01\_Collins\_MaryJean\_20190614\_transcript.docx

**Interview Summary:** “We understood we were making history.”

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Mary Jean arrived a little after 3pm on Friday, the day before the ERA reunion events held at UIC. She said she would be interviewing other reunion participants for Veterans Feminists of American (VFA) during events the next day and so her interview was conducted on Friday. Mary Jean was dressed casually and seemed genuinely happy to do the interview. She came with a prepared script which included a timeline of accomplishments and events she wanted to cover. Her narrative flows between memories and perspectives on the present. She gave a copy of notes used in the interview for the UIC archives. At about 50 minutes into the interview Mary Jean shared stories that were not scripted. She added opinions and stories for about 10 minutes after we formally concluded the interview. Videographer Frank Dina who filmed all the ERA interviews kept film rolling so that testimony is a part of her narrative.

Key Themes:

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Catholicism, Democratic Party, feminism, Betty Friedan, power, Phyllis Schlafly, NOW

**Interview Transcript:**

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0:00:00

Marie Scatena: Today is June 14th, 2019, and we're interviewing Mary Jean Collins at the University of Illinois at Chicago, in the Richard J. Daley Library. Mary Jean, thank you so much. My name is Marie Scatena, and we're going to be talking today about your involvement in broadly the feminist movement, more narrowly many avenues with NOW and the ERA, on this weekend of reunion here at UIC for the ERA passing. So—or maybe—and not passing. ERA struggle, I should say. [laugh]

Mary Jean Collins: Yes, that’s a good way to put it.

Marie Scatena: [laugh]

Mary Jean Collins: That’s a good way to put it.

Marie Scatena: So, Mary Jean, could we start a little bit with just you saying your name and telling us a little bit about your early life?

Mary Jean Collins: Sure. Yes, absolutely. My name is Mary Jean Collins. I was born on December 8th, 1939—I like to say the same year Hitler marched into Poland just for a context for my life.

0:01:06 And I was born of Irish Catholic parents, basically. I have one French-Canadian grandmother, but mostly Irish Catholic was sort of the dominant ethnic reality in our lives, and Irish people tend to be proud of themselves. So that was influential. I was born in Superior, Wisconsin, way up north. And my parents lived in Duluth at the time. They had one other daughter, Patricia—my sister, Pat—who was about three years older than I am. So my dad worked in Duluth, so we went to Duluth to live after I was born in Superior. But anyway, so that’s how I got started in life. And yeah. So I stayed there for about five years, and then we moved to a little town called Washburn, Wisconsin. My father was with the railroad. We moved there for a job. It was still after the Depression, and jobs weren’t easy.

0:02:05 So anyway, we moved to this little town, and I went to my first years of school there. Then my parents decided that they really wanted to get out of there, and so we moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and my dad got a job with A.O. Smith Corporation, which was a big company there, which was a big promotion for him and a good opportunity for us. So I started in school in Milwaukee in third grade at seven, and I went to a Catholic school. I have never been to anything but a Catholic school, so that’s another context for my life, and an inspirational one in many ways. So I went to third grade, and the nuns there were the School Sisters of St. Francis. And I mention them because they play a role throughout my early days, and even later days. So I graduated in 1957 at the age of 17 from Messmer High School, and I started to work as a secretary.

0:03:04 After two years of college, my father really—one difference between my—even though both of them were Irish, my father’s family, my grandmother Delia was from Ireland, and very much valued education. So she worked really hard to see that her four kids could get to college. My father went to college for part of his time. My mother’s family, the grandpa was the fire superintendent, the fire chief of Superior, Wisconsin. Much more working-class Irish family. Education was not a high value for their six kids. So after I graduated from high school, my dad was always pushing on me to actually go to school. So thank god I finally did. So I went to Alverno College, which is a women’s college in Milwaukee, and it’s run by the School Sisters of St. Francis, so the same order that I had in grade school. Also the other significance at that time with that order—my sister entered that order at the age of 18 when she graduated from high school.

0:04:06 So my sister became a member of the order and stayed there for 50 years. So my connection to them is on a number of levels. So I lived at home, and was very happy to be there. 1959. I was very happy to be in school. So I went to school in September, and in November, my mother died, which was a big change in my life. So I was 19 years old and my mother died. That was really hard for me. My sister was gone to the convent, so that kind of left me with my dad. My dad had had some problems with alcohol earlier, and after my mother died, really he never—he never really recovered from that. I mean, he worked and he took care of me. He was a good dad and a very smart man and always encouraged me very much.

0:05:01 But he had—it was a hard time. So it was a hard time in that period. So anyway, I want to talk a little bit about Alverno, because it was so life-changing for me. First of all, in a women’s college, and especially from the point of view of someone who became a women’s rights person, being in a women’s college where the women do everything including running the college, including running the science classes and the math classes and all the things you generally associate with men, was quite amazing. And that was true even in grade school where the nuns taught everything. But in the college, it was particularly—you know, particularly inspiring in a time when women didn't do those things in other secular institutions. So I thought it was influential in that respect. The other thing was I met two nuns who would change my life completely—Sister Joelle Reed, who was one of my history teachers, and Sister Austin Doherty, who was another history teacher. Austin Doherty.

0:06:05 Both of them were from Chicago, by the way. Both of them were Irish Catholic. So they were just really inspirational. Sister Austin Doherty taught us American history, and she asked us flat out why women didn't do more. And we were mad. “We have the babies: why are you nagging us?” But anyway, so it was—you know, it opened my mind. So I graduated in 1963. The other thing that happened at Alverno is I was active in the student government, I was the president of my junior class, and then I was president of the student body in my senior class. Again, very helpful in developing my own political skills. And I wanted to mention—my parents were both very active in the Democratic party. My father ran for the state legislature. He didn't win. But my mother was a secretary for the party chair in Milwaukee County. I remember leafletting for a candidate, Andrew Bemiller when I was nine.

0:07:02 He was running for congress. And so my parents’ politics, the fact that they were really involved in Democratic politics, was another big influence over my life. So I guess the student government thing kept—came kind of normally to me. So I graduated from Alverno, and my chosen profession was teacher. I was terrible at it. In fact, I got fired from my first job. So I lasted in a Catholic school with three classes of seventh graders, which amounted to like 150 of them—I didn't know what to do with them. Anyway, I was a complete failure. So now here I am, I'm out of college, and now what am I going to do? So I went back to my old secretary job and did that. At least I’d make a living for a while. And then I got involved in the open housing marches in Milwaukee. This was the age of the Civil Rights Movement.

0:08:01 Dr. King was very influential also in my life. And Kennedy had run for president. And you know, there was a lot of ferment—lovely ferment, in my opinion—in that period. So I went to the open housing marches in Milwaukee, which were held out of a Catholic school. A Catholic priest, Father James Groppi[[1]](#footnote-2), was one of the leaders of the Youth Council of the NAACP. So, I mean, that was like—you know, so I went to my little secretary job, and then any other time—daytime, weekends, night times, whatever—I was at St. Boniface Church and marching around. So that was very influential. And seeing people organize, seeing what leadership looked like, seeing these young men who were off the streets, some of them—they all had a little jacket that said “commando” and they were out marching in the streets trying to demand their rights. So that was very influential to me as well.

0:09:01 So, along comes 1967—’66, actually—and my friend Sister Joelle and Austin, I'm still friends with them after I graduate. So Joelle is in Washington D.C. for some history meeting, and in the same hotel, the women who founded NOW are meeting. She walks herself into the meeting, uninvited. She’s in a modified habit. So Betty Friedan is like all over that. “Oh, we've got a Catholic nun here.” So she became one of the founders of NOW. So to say I got it from the horse’s mouth, right? I mean—so she came home, she called me up, or Austin did, and said, “This is something you'd be interested in.” So we held a chapter organizing meeting at Alverno College for the Milwaukee chapter of NOW. She got elected the president and I was the treasurer, I remember.

0:10:03 So that was kind of it. That was the beginning. And I also met a woman by the name of Catherine Conroy[[2]](#footnote-3), who was an international rep for the Communications Workers of America. She worked out of Chicago. And she always—she had an eye for young leadership. So she must have thought I was special. I thought she was, too. And she invited me to accompany her to the first big NOW conference in 1967. That was the meeting at which they adopted all the major positions of the organization. So I probably had never been on a plane before. I'm sure I hadn’t. So I take off to Washington with Catherine, and I go to this meeting, and my mind is completely blown. First of all, I'm one of the youngest people there. Because the NOW people were ten years older than me. Many of them 20 years older than me. Friedan was probably 20 years older than me.

0:11:01 But I met all these people. I met Betty Friedan. I met Muriel Fox, who’s the vice president of a PR firm. I met all these people. And they all got up—and Pauli Murray—they all got up and they did their presentations on why NOW should support abortion rights, why NOW should support childcare, why NOW should support equal opportunity, why NOW should support the Equal Rights Amendment. So I didn't know, because I didn't know the history—I didn't know anything about the women’s movement. So I didn't know that the Equal Rights Amendment, for instance, was very controversial within the women’s organizations. The labor people were totally opposed to it because it would have abolished the extra benefits that women got on the job that men didn't get. So they supported the ERA, and the labor people walked out—most of them. My friend didn't. Then they passed abortion. Then the whole Ohio delegation went out. They left.

0:12:01 And I was beginning to wonder whether there would be anybody left in the room at the end of the meeting. But there was. And so it was a—you know, it was just a drowning in a brand-new organization with brand-new ideas and a brand-new movement. So it was pretty special. So, I was hooked completely. And so stayed involved in Milwaukee. Meanwhile, in the Civil Rights Movement, I had met a young man, James Robson, and we got involved, and then I married him in June of ’68. He had a job in Chicago, so I left Milwaukee and went to Chicago, just in time for the Democratic Convention here, which was in itself a special experience. And got involved with the Chicago chapter of NOW. That’s when I got involved with NOW here. And my husband James, he also got involved. I can’t even—it’s difficult for me to communicate the excitement and intensity of that period.

0:13:03 I had a job, but I mean—and a lot of the women involved in NOW, they had jobs. The job was the least of their interests, to tell you the truth. Most women at that time were underutilized at work, so they—and they had access to the copy machine and the typewriters and all the rest of it. So we formed all these task forces, one on the—the want ads were still segregated, so we went and picketed the *Chicago Tribune*. United Airlines had some stupid flight that they wouldn't let women on, that only men could fly. A men-only flight, if you can imagine. So we went and picketed them. And then the EEOC wasn’t going fast enough to enforce the employment laws, so then we had a regional meeting, and we regionally picketed—you know, we picketed them. So we’d gather all these people. So we were having meetings, doing stuff. There was a woman, Elizabeth Farians[[3]](#footnote-4), who was a theologian on the staff of Loyola college, and they were about to fire her for being feminist, so we went and got after—you know, it was just one thing after another.

0:14:11 We just—it was a very heady experience. But I mean, we just identified one inequality after another, and you know, we could think them up. So one of the things just that was very visible—we also had people who knew how to deal with the press. And the press actually covered more local events then than they actually do now, I think. So we—Berghoff’s Restaurant, downtown Chicago, had a men’s only grill.[[4]](#footnote-5) So we weren’t having any of it. There was nothing too small for us to get excited about. [laugh] Or too big, for that matter. So we picketed Berghoff’s, and we had a big confrontation with them. There’s some good footage of that.

0:15:00 And, you know, we had a lawyer. Somebody—a lawyer joined the group. People were joining. People were trying to find us. People didn't know—there was no internet. There was none of that stuff. So people were desperate to join women who were—wanted to be active. So we had a couple lawyers join and they looked at the law and said, “Public accommodations is a—” You know, “Discrimination is against the law in Chicago.” So we filed a lawsuit. We picketed Berghoff’s. We got it all changed. Carson Pirie Scott had a men’s-only lunch. So it was all those kind of easy pickings, quick victories, that we went after in that early period. Meanwhile, the Equal Rights Amendment was—particularly the Pittsburgh chapter of NOW, but other people around the country, were trying to figure out how to get it out of Congress. So in short, March 22nd, 1972, the ERA did come out of Congress, with a tremendous vote.

0:16:02 And bipartisan. Totally bipartisan support. So in the not-too-distant future, we got involved in the campaign. As soon as—’72, as soon as it came out of Congress, Illinois started working on the campaign. So for myself within NOW—so I was the chapter president. I got elected chapter president in ’68, I think. ’67, ’68. And then NOW had a national conference. We did it actually outside of Chicago, near O’Hare, because we were mad at Daley, because of the—’68. So we had it outside the city. But new bylaws were adopted by the organization, and we had a new president coming in. So Aileen Hernandez was elected to succeed Betty Friedan, who was going out. And we adopted new bylaws, which included a regional director position in the four regions. So I ran and was elected regional director for the Midwest.

0:17:01 I had 13 states and a hundred-dollar budget, and I organized chapters in at least ten of those 13 states. Driving, whatever. Getting on a bus. Whatever I did. And again, I don’t want to make this sound harder than it was, because there were so many women who wanted to be involved and wanted the opportunity. So I did that for a couple years, and then someone succeeded me in that role, and I went on the board of NOW in 1972 or 1973. And then Jim—Betty Friedan wanted to move the office of NOW out of New York, and my husband was a printer among other skills that he had. So we put together a proposal that the office would come to Chicago—the national office of NOW. And the board decided that was a good idea. So we ran—you know, I was very careful to say that I wasn’t working for NOW.

0:18:04 He was getting paid, our little company that we organized was getting paid, but I wasn’t directly getting paid, because I was on the board. So we did that. So we were like—talk about 24 hours a day—doing that work. So that was a lot. Again, a lot was forming. There were new task forces every day. There were 27 task forces or something. Every topic that women could think of that was unequal, we had to do something about it. There were no priorities. There was just, “Do it. Everything has to be done. It has to be done now.” So we tried to do the best we could, and did a lot of work. Another kind of Chicago institution that we went after was Sears Roebuck. Now, for context, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which was to enforce Title VII of the Civil Rights Act—this was a time when the government actually was run by Democrats.

0:19:09 You know, it was majority Democrat. But even when it was Republicans, it was assumed that the government was going to enforce the law. That that was their job, and they should do it to the best of their ability. So the people who ran the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission decided they couldn't solve one little woman’s or one African American’s discrimination at a time, and they started something called pattern and practice discrimination. So they decided they were going to go after seven big corporations and unions, and do a thorough review of how they were running their company, and whether they had affirmative action plans, and how they treated their employees. Sears Roebuck was one of them. U.S. Steel was one of them, so we went down and worked with the steel workers.

0:20:03 There were five more. One of the big unions—and now I can’t remember: I think the union that represented the men at the telephone company—I can’t think of the name right now. Anyway, so this pattern and practice thing was going on. The government was involved. They were serious about it. And we thought we’d help. So we started a task force on Sears. It’s hard to imagine now what the corporations were really like. I mean, Sears had two categories—college graduate, if you're a woman, you got to be an assistant—a buyer’s assistant. If you were a man, you got to be an assistant buyer. Salary was different. The buyer’s assistant was a secretarial function as well as management. So anyway, the discrimination was total throughout. There were almost—even in the cleaning staff at the Sears Tower, there were hardly any African Americans. It was mostly Polish immigrants working, cleaning up the place.

0:21:01 They were so behind in equal opportunity that they hadn’t even gotten there. Even the segregated jobs weren’t available to African American people. So myself and Anne Ladky, who later became the head of Women Employed, we coordinated this task force and we put together a national campaign in which a hundred chapters participating, and they just went from store to store, and they counted the people, and they counted the departments. And the departments where they sold big ticket items, there was a commission, and they were all run by men. It was almost easy, because you'd go into the store, and you could count the gender and color of the people working there pretty easily. So we did all that, and we did reports on each store. And the chapters loved it, because it gave them something actually to do that would be a part of this. Anyway, so that was a big campaign that we started, among others.

0:22:03 So in 1974, there was going to be a NOW conference in Houston, Texas, and I ran for president of NOW. So that was the first—so we ran, basically, on a very strong employment agenda. I mean, we supported other things—gay rights and other things, at the time. Lots of equal opportunity stuff. But we really ran partly as the chapter that was really going to push employment discrimination hard. Other people felt differently, and there was a—it was the first contested election for president and so it was an ugly day and a half. Sears Roebuck sent 35 people to the conference. Anybody who walked in and paid their dues could vote in the conference. So anyway, I lost the election, and that was—and I ran on a slate—most of the people—everybody else got elected, except I didn't get elected.

0:23:01 So the turmoil within NOW was pretty serious over that next couple years. ’74. So I didn't win then, and of course we didn't have the contract, so I had to kind of restructure my life. And then I ran again in ’75, and I wasn’t elected then, either. So anyway, the organization—the internal fights in NOW were pretty substantial over that period of time. Anyway, so—but, you know, I stayed active in the Chicago chapter, and went to work for the Illinois Nurses Association (INA), for Anne Zimmerman[[5]](#footnote-6), who was an amazing woman who ran the Illinois Nurses Association. Went on to be the president of the American Nurses Association. And I was a service rep for the nurses—the state-employed nurses, who had won bargaining rights from Governor Walker rather recently. So I serviced that local. So that was another aspect of women’s rights. The INA was also a strong supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment and other equal opportunity stuff.

0:24:02 So I did that for four years. I then decided—it was coming on 1980, and I could see—and I knew national NOW was going to do a massive campaign in four states to try to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, and Illinois was one of them, and I wanted to get back into the fray. So I ran for chapter president in 1980 and was elected, and then myself and Linda Miller, who was the state coordinator for NOW at the time, became the co-coordinators of the ERA campaign. NOW—Ellie Smeal was in the state for the whole time. NOW put millions—they raised millions of dollars for the ERA, and they put a lot of money into the state. The other thing that Ellie did particularly that was her idea, was to try to get—we called it—the change in philosophy was this—for that period from ’72 to ’80, first of all, we had tried to ratify it—it had ratified in 35 states, and stopped cold short of the three necessary.

0:25:19 And each state was—national helped them, but each state was trying to do their own ratification campaign. At that time, Ellie kind of—and the national leadership—said, “We've got to have national campaigns to go into these states.” So we organized a broader campaign. So I had people—so we had maybe 100 people come into the state from out of town. Smeal asked that people take a semester off of work. People around here put up—people asked people for housing. Not a problem. People just put up people for—not a week, not ten days—six months, people lived in other people’s houses here.

0:26:02 They came from Minnesota, they came from Massachusetts, or wherever they came from. And some of those people we'll be meeting again this weekend. So that was a massive campaign to try to pass the ERA. Of course, we had the three-fifths rule in Illinois, which always was an impediment. And the politics of Chicago being the politics of Chicago, it was always—you know if I can just roughly go over that—Daley was tacitly approving of the ERA early on from the ’72 period to whatever period, but he never put any clout behind it. And at some point, one of his kids was in the legislature and he was voting “no,” so you kind of got the idea that maybe this wasn’t too serious on his part. So that was a campaign to try to get him to get off his butt and actually put something behind it. Only Chicago people totally understand why that was necessary.

0:27:02 The Cardinal was against the ERA. We felt that was influential on him. And just, these guys didn't want to vote for it. A lot of the guys just didn't want to vote for it. So—we sent people into every district. They went door to door. There was fundraising door to door. There was fundraising in the streets. There was an amazing campaign to try to pass the ERA in 1980. We had a big march in Chicago. By that time, by 1980, the big snowstorm had happened, and Bilandic got knocked out of the mayor’s race, and Mayor Byrne got elected. So, that was different, to try to deal with her. I don’t think Bilandic ever did anything, but he wasn’t there that long. But Byrne actually cared. You know, she actually cared about it. She wanted to get it done. She would have liked to have gotten it done. But we were trying desperately to get her to come to our march in Chicago, which had 70,000 people, and she came. So you know, each of the—but each of these things over a longer period of time are just building political power for women aside from the traditional sources of political power—running for office or being a member of the Democratic Party in the county of Cook.

0:28:16 Those resources—that wasn’t available to us. We were trying to build an independent politically powered women’s movement in Illinois. And we made a lot of progress, but we were never able to put the thing over the top. So we did a big campaign in ’80, huge campaign, and then—I knew in 1980 it wasn’t going anywhere. But you know what? You've got a deadline of ’82? June of ’82? You can’t just go away, right? You have to keep doing it. Even though I—we didn't have much of a theory—Madigan partly was part of the theory. Phil Rock was part of the theory. And you know, this one would come on, and that one would go off.

0:29:00 Anyway. So we did as massive a campaign as we could do right down to ’82, and it was defeated that year at the end of the year. So that was—so then we all—a bunch of us—like a busful of people went overnight to Washington D.C., and we had a big rally and said, “Never—” You know, “We're going to get you in November.” That was the theory. And there was actually a campaign to try to get Thompson out of office. Susan Catania ran for governor. I mean, it was—and everybody thought we were crazy. And he almost lost. I mean, it was—it turned out to be a much bigger political—anyway, all of it built political power for women in the state of Illinois. The faithful women who were already in the legislature. But more people ran for office. More people went down there and said, “Are you kidding me? I can do this job! [laugh] I can do better than they can do.” So it was really in spite of the loss of the ERA, so much of what came after in terms of building political power for women.

0:30:04 Abortion became legal through the Supreme Court, and the equal pay act got partially actually enforced by the government over various periods of time. And so lots happened as a result of the Equal Rights Amendment battle even though we didn't ratify the ERA.

Marie Scatena: I have sort of a nuts-and-bolts question for you. As you're organizing and doing these campaigns, what did that look like on a day-to-day basis? Because this is pre-internet.

Mary Jean Collins: Totally.

Marie Scatena: This is no social media, no cell phones.

Mary Jean Collins: Right, right.

Marie Scatena: How did you do it?

Mary Jean Collins: We had a big office in the Monadnock Building. We were there for years. And we had a phone bank. We had a dozen or two phones actually installed on big tables.

0:31:02 We ran phone banks every night of the week. People came in and made phone banks. We got lists from the parties or wherever we got the lists, of people to call. That was one important thing. We had a pretty sophisticated analysis of the voting. We did all that stuff manually. You had to keep track—who voted last year, and how to figure out how to target them. First of all, for the legislature. First you tried to persuade them, and then if they were unpersuadable and they always said no, then you would really try to figure out either was there a more progressive candidate running against them in the primary, or could we get somebody to run in the primary. And both of those things happened over time. In the meantime, Illinois was changing their—I forget at what point this happened—the Constitution got changed. We used to—we started out with the three-member districts, so we actually had some pretty decent Republicans out of Chicago, because they had to have one for each district.

0:32:06 That all got thrown out, and it changed the politics of the Illinois legislature a lot. But I can remember people going door to door. We had door-to-door campaigns. We would buy the voter lists. The other part that hopefully Linda Ginenthal[[6]](#footnote-7) who worked as a canvasser is going to talk about in her interview, in one of the interviews available to you, the door-to-door work of actually going door to door to raise money for the ERA—I remember this—they raised a half million dollars, which is unthinkable in today’s terms without an internet, without being able to get everybody to put their five bucks in on a credit card. All of these records had to be maintained by hand. Little file cards. We had file cards, and then file cards based on file cards.

0:33:00 And organized by district, and really with—and getting phone numbers, and putting them down. You know, getting—the reverse directory was our best friend. We would go and look up names and call them and go and knock on their door. It was very intense work. And it’s how a lot of women across the country and here too learned politics. It was before Emily’s List and before Emerge and these groups that have thank god been organized to help women run for office and other progressives. But we did it. And some of our own members ran. Judy Lundquist who was a lawyer, prominent labor lawyer, and she ran—you know, they’d just up and run for the legislature. They didn't often win, but all of that was intended to throw the power structure off balance. You know, “We're going to come for you.” And we had so much confidence. We had—you know, it was all new to us, and I think it’s hard to replicate this—it was all new to us, and we never thought we wouldn't—we thought we would win.

0:34:02 We thought—initially, I would say we were kind of naïve, like we thought, oh, well they would give us equal rights if they had ever—they just didn't think of it, and now we have to remind them that that’s what they should do. And then of course as we got more sophisticated, we realized the obstruction. And I would be remiss not to mention Phyllis Schlafly and a particular event that she’s related to. So Phyllis Schlafly—you know, having Phyllis Schlafly in our state was no picnic, because she was really one of the major organizers against the Equal Rights Amendment. And remembering that, we won a substantial number of Republicans coming out of the House and Senate. Only eight people voted against the ERA in 1972, in the United States Senate. Eight. And the Democrats and Republicans were fairly even. Democrats controlled, but not by a lot. So that just tells you how many Republican votes we were getting back then.

0:35:00 Phyllis Schlafly wrote the book on Barry Goldwater called *A Choice Not an Echo*. She was way in the weeds and in the organizing for the Right in this country. So in 1978, Jimmy Carter was president. It was International Women’s Year, and Bella Abzug and a bunch of other people nagged him into sponsoring this conference, government paid-for, in Houston, Texas. Delegates would come from all the 50 states. There would be a meeting in all the 50 states—each of the 50 states—and they would elect delegates to come to this feminist conference in Houston, Texas, to decide on a plan of action for women. This is kind of the apex of the strength of the women’s movement, I would say, at this point. So Jimmy Carter agrees to it. They fund it—Bella Abzug’s bill—and they come. And we got three first ladies. We got Lyndon Johnson’s wife—we got Lady Bird Johnson, we got Rosalynn Carter and we got Betty Ford.

0:36:04 So it was actually a bipartisan meeting of people. So it was quite remarkable. There were 20,000 delegates. There were signs of trouble in Illinois among others. At Champaign, where the delegate meeting was held, somehow the right-wing finagled a—the way the votes were counted, and by the end, we only—our slate was only elected through the letter “L.” The rest of them were all elected from the right-wing side. And they were organizing like crazy in some of these states. The Mississippi delegation was all men and all antis. So I mean, you could see the trouble on the horizon actually in the way the IWY conference went. But we had 20,000 delegates, a wonderful time was had by all, and we passed a plan of action that included everything from the ERA to gay rights. Unprecedented, really fantastic meeting.

0:37:02 Meanwhile, Schlafly was onto it. She was starting to see both that she could defeat the ERA—because she was doing a pretty good job in Illinois—but also that this—if you had to look and see where some of the right-wing power started to emerge, I would say she’s one of the key factors. She understood early how to take social issues like abortion and ERA and work on the fears of the people she was trying to organize, and the housewives, and defending the past as opposed to future. She was masterful at it. So we had 20,000 people; she had 15,000 in Houston. And I remember thinking at the time, “Oh, this is not good.” That was ’78, OK? That’s very close to the end of the ERA campaign.

0:38:00 When I look back, I think about it as a way—as that period—one way to look at it—’72, the ERA passed the Congress with three-fifths vote of both houses, no problem. By eight years later, Ronald Reagan was elected president, and the Republicans had taken it on their platform. That’s how much change occurred politically in the United States of America in eight years. And part of it is a reaction to our reaction. To our initiatives. For the fight for women’s rights, abortion, ERA, childcare. All those issues that went on the agenda. Meanwhile, a fledgling gay rights movement and the Civil Rights Movement already in full bloom, and then the antiwar movement. So the forces against change just built and built and built, and I think you can see that around the women’s issues, particularly in the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment but also in the change in the Republican party.

0:39:07 And that’s 40 years ago. So it’s kind of interesting if you look back. So that was very difficult to live with. I remember being depressed for six months at the end of that campaign. It was really hard to deal with it. Because we had spent ten years on it, and that was a long time. But we put a very positive face to the public— “We're going to win in November.” And a lot of people did really work hard in the next election. People didn't give up. And I would like to think that all of the 10 or 20 additional issues that women were working on—battered women and childcare and all those other issues—that a lot of that energy went into more specific issues and away from the ERA at the end of the campaign. So I decided [laugh]—in 1982, there was a NOW national election.

0:40:03 Ellie Smeal asked me if I would run for vice president. We had kind of made up over some of our other disagreements, and I said I would. There wasn’t something I wanted to do here, and I really wanted to stay working in the women’s rights movement if possible. So I ran for vice president of NOW. As I said, Ellie wanted me to run partly because she wanted to defeat somebody else, but that’s OK. So Judy Goldsmith was elected from Wisconsin as the president, and I was elected vice president. And there was disagreements among the other people who were elected, but we went to Washington. Ellie had converted what had been a volunteer position in NOW—the president and vice presidents and all those other offices—into paid positions. Her model was—she liked the union model, where the paid leader—the leader was the paid person, not the staff.

0:41:04 So that’s the model she kind of got adopted in NOW, and the bylaws were changed for that. So it was a paid position to go to Washington, so I did that. And that’s what got me out of Illinois and into Washington. And I continued my women’s movement work. The term at NOW was very productive. It was also the same time—again, this was a response partly to the defeat of the ERA—Walter Mondale—I mean, there was a bunch of Democrats run, but we picked Walter Mondale to be our endorsed candidate, and we worked really hard with other women’s groups to get a woman on the ticket. And of course getting Gerry Ferraro on the ticket was a wonderful happening for us. Losing to Reagan all but two states was not a wonderful happening, and that's another I think sign of what was coming ahead of us, which we're still I think dealing with to some extent.

0:42:04 So Mondale was defeated in ’84, and then Eleanor Smeal decided she wanted to take the presidency back, so she kind of pushed us aside, best she could, and so we lost for the next election. So I just served for one and a half years. I then went on to work for Catholics for a Free Choice. I went there in ’85 and stayed ‘til ’93. I was the field director and the assistant director there. Good work. But again, field and organizing is really my thing. So then I went on to—I left there in ’93 and went to work for People for the American Way, which is a progressive organization. Norman Lear was one of the founders along with other good folks. And so I worked on a number of different issues, not so much on women’s issues, until my retirement in 1982. ’82? No, no, not ’82. That was ’82. 2008.

0:43:04 So I want to mention too that in 1975, I left my husband and I started to come out as a lesbian. So that was a different—another big change in my life in the women’s movement that partly probably—I'm sure probably wouldn't have happened if it hadn’t been—if I hadn’t been part of a larger group of women and an explosion of people actually trying to find their own identity in that period. So that was important, too.

Marie Scatena: Is there any way you can characterize, more than you have already beautifully done, the sort of zeitgeist? The energy of that period? Maybe a story that might be typical of an encounter or a conflict?

Mary Jean Collins: It’s a little hard to describe, because it was utterly unique in my own personal history, I would say.

0:44:02 There was a feeling that the time had come. I think partly we have to cast ourselves back to the optimism and hope of the Civil Rights Movement, where everything seemed possible. Even though everything seemed hard, especially in the Civil Rights Movement more difficult certainly in some ways, but not undifficult for the women’s movement as well. But that hopeful period. And I think it’s partly connected to the fact that more progressive forces actually ran the federal government and some of the state governments as well. My own state of Wisconsin was a progressive haven at that time for labor policy, et cetera, over the last 40 years in that state. And all of that has gone by the wayside. So people would—I can think of so many of the young women like Anne Ladky and other women who worked at Scott Foresman, as a for instance.

0:45:06 So they joined NOW and got busy doing their women’s movement stuff, and then they went back to their job. And it was like, “OK, ladies, here we all are, in these same jobs.” Excellent writers, doing this stuff, writing books for Scott Foresman. And then they started Chicago Women in Publishing. So things like that happened. Or somebody needed daycare, and they didn't just go and try to find a daycare provider: they started a daycare center, or they called a bunch of women together and started something. There was an emphasis on solutions that I think we've lost touch with for the last 30 years or so, where people assume that they're going to have—first of all, they assume partly more good will than maybe was required to assume of the powers that be.

0:46:00 But the powers that be *were* different. I mean, the government—we were always nagging the government, because they never did enough—HEW[ Department of Health, Education and Welfare] or enforcing Title IX or all of that. We were always nagging them, nagging them. But we assumed that they would do their job, that they could be gotten to do their job. And we also assumed that we could throw them out if they didn't. So the energy and the spirit of people was like nothing I've really seen politically. I mean, I'm seeing more of it now than we have for years, but the enthusiasm that people had—and even the most radical changes that people made—people went to college. They thought they’d never—that their days were over, that they had—but they quit their job, they went to college, they moved across the country, they left a marriage that wasn’t good and went somewhere else and did something—I mean, the energy and the infusion of enthusiasm and the honest-to-god belief that they could make social change, they could make real change for women, and that they should make real change for women.

0:47:08 There was both the enthusiasm and the optimism that it’s harder to find, I think. And yeah. So I mean, people just showed up. I'll give you one example. In 1970, we had the big—there was a big march. Betty Friedan, when she was leaving office in 1970, in March, outside Chicago, at our conference—you know—this is Betty Friedan. She didn't talk to anybody. She just got up and announced at the end of the meeting that there would be a women’s strike for equality on August 26th, 1970. This was March. And we all looked at each other like, “Oh my god. Now what are we supposed to do?” And that's what—she just said that’s what would happen. And it turned out, when I talked to her later, she was inspired—she was on a plane with some woman from somewhere who was sitting next to her on the plane, who said, “August 26th, 1970 is the 50th anniversary of suffrage.”

0:48:07 Who knew? Nobody knew. Nobody cared. Nobody. So—but this woman told her that. So then she thought that was a good idea, so we should celebrate that. So we should all have a march. But see, everybody did it. It’s like, “Betty says you have to do it. You have to do it.” We had one office in Chicago with one person. We had no staff. There was no executive director. There was nothing. But we did it. So there were 75,000 in New York. There were 25,000 here. When I got up—I was the president—when I got up in what’s Daley Plaza now, and I looked out at that crowd, I thought I was going to have a heart attack. I mean, I never dreamed there would be that kind of turnout—10,000 people or whatever it was—in the plaza. So it was the time. And then this was the other—so Betty had said women were going to strike from their jobs, and we're like, “No, they're not.”

0:49:04 So of course somebody—oh, and you should bring your children to work. I think she said that, too. So anyway, somebody did, right? Some woman took her kid to work. So she got fired. No surprise. So she marches over the march and says, “I got fired.” So we get Judy Lundquist, the lawyer, and we all march over to her—I can’t—I wish I could think of the name of the company. It was a meat packing company or something. Anyway, at downtown—Lasalle Street. We all take 1000 people to Lasalle Street and start hollering at this boss, right? Through the window. And he’s up there somewhere. The lawyer goes up with her, and of course they get her job back. I mean, but it’s that kind of spontaneity. And, because the energy is there, you can actually get something accomplished. So I'll never forget that day. Yeah. It was quite amazing.

Marie Scatena: That’s a great story.

Mary Jean Collins: Yeah.

Marie Scatena: It sounds like that during this period, many people like yourself—you had all these external changes that you were trying to make happen in the world—

0:50:07

Mary Jean Collins: Right, right.

Marie Scatena: —but you also had a lot of internal changes.

Mary Jean Collins: Right.

Marie Scatena: And so how did that manifest in people?

Mary Jean Collins: Well, it was not just myself who was changing. And for the first time in our lives, actually having the opportunity to really look at a different model than our mothers’ model—that’s the revolutionary part, in a way. Our mothers all were mostly homemakers. They stayed at home, whatever they wanted to—you know, there’s a handful of people who did something different obviously, and some of them were founders of NOW, and I want to mention that too. But people are looking at their family structure—this is in one generation—the changes between my mother’s generation and my generation. I mean, a lot of people did what their mothers did, but a lot of people didn't.

0:51:04 Or they went to college and they took their career possibilities more seriously. It’s such a change period that it was astonishing. The other thing that happened—there were publications written. There were little women’s liberation groups that wrote poetry or people wrote books. People did analysis in a different way than they had, about the role of women. And the most outrageous thing could be put on the table for discussion, because people wanted to challenge the traditional roles, and at least think about them, and at least reaffirm them in a different way. And, you know, just think of the challenge to men to do more daycare, and what a changed world we have today.

0:52:00 That many more men—and people are happier for it. So those were the kind of changes that—the personal was political, as people say. People use that term. And it totally was true. It was a personal commitment, and it also could be a political—I mean, a personal or political transformation as well. So I think that’s part of the heritage. Really amazing.

Marie Scatena: How did your immediate family—how did you deal with them and vice versa?

Mary Jean Collins: Well, I mean, it’s kind of interesting, and I honestly don’t know, if my mother hadn’t died and my father hadn’t died, and the woman I became later, would they—would my mother be unhappy? You know, I never had kids. I can’t imagine that that would have made my mother happy. So my cousins were pretty far away. So I have to say that I created a family in NOW and in other places.

0:53:06 I had a very small family anyway, me and my sister. I was very devoted to my sister. She stayed in the—she lived for another 50 years. She was a sister in the School Sisters of St. Francis. And Sister Joelle and Austin were part of my extended family. I saw them every Christmas. The day after Christmas, I always spent with them and a couple of other feminists. And so they were busy building a women’s institution. The college still exists as an independent women’s college, which is kind of remarkable in today’s world. They have—their whole mission is to working-class women. They've now become a Hispanic-designated special place for women. So they've changed again in a smaller—I mean, not smaller, but in a different institutional way, that I think the women’s movement also inspired them to revolutionize their own institutions that they were associated with, and bring that fresh approach to an old project.

0:54:10 So I think that’s pretty exciting too, and I'm sure it’s done in a lot of other places. I just happen to know—it’s why I mentioned the School Sisters specifically, because I mean, that’s—that’s another whole story, but the whole nuns are disappearing from the earth, and what a contribution they've made over 100 years in this country to women’s education and women’s well-being. It’s pretty remarkable.

Marie Scatena: Would you characterize them as unsung heroes?

Mary Jean Collins: I would. I mean, I think much more needs to be understood about them. Yeah. I mean, and some of them had to be women who didn't want to live their mother’s life, right? I mean, they're on a farm in Wisconsin. They're looking at eight kids and a big pile of whatever, and that’s not what the—they were smart, and they wanted to—they would never have been educated if they'd have stayed in Beaver Dam, or wherever they were, right?

0:55:04 I mean, they—the convent and the mission—the mission that the Catholic church represented in the best way in those days was to give these women an opportunity to become educated. Yes, they took their vows, but they also had very rich life. For girls and women particularly who didn't see themselves fitting into that ‘50s pattern of what women’s lives should be like, it presented an alternative, which is of course why people think it’s in decline, for a lot of reasons with the church, but also because more opportunities exist for women. So we'll see in coming generations, as they kind of shut their facilities down, which is getting—you know, will happen in the next 20 years or so. But anyway, for my sister, it was—she didn't want the traditional married life—this was a great life for her.

0:56:01 She had a very good life. Yes, she gave a lot, but she also got a lot. And so it’s interesting. It’s just the creating the alternatives for women in every aspect, whether it’s politics or family life or being able to have kids or be a good aunt or whatever. You know, all the things that—the expanded roles I think has been very critical, and good for the society.

Marie Scatena: Because this was such a big part of your life, I just have one more question.

Mary Jean Collins: Sure.

Marie Scatena: It’s time then for Vatican Council II.

Mary Jean Collins: Right.

Marie Scatena: And how did that affect you personally? And then was NOW able to somehow intersect with some of that momentum or some of those figures?

Mary Jean Collins: Yeah. I think that’s a really good question. Thank you for asking it. It’s interesting—when we were doing the Chicago chapter, and Elizabeth Farians was on the faculty at Loyola—she was a feminist theologian—that was a contradiction in terms in a way—but you know, very feisty. Very.

0:57:06 I'm very Catholic. I'm an Irish Catholic. That’s part of my identity. And so I grew up in the Catholic church, and I—the fact that the open housing marches in Milwaukee were out of a Catholic church made it very easy for me to transition. Then, the other thing—radical education about—the Dead Sea Scrolls[[7]](#footnote-8)were discovered. Reinterpretations of the Bible and what the Bible actually meant. So I had these wonderful teachers who were exploring all of that, and what God meant, and what Christianity meant, et cetera. So I felt very enriched by all of that. And then I felt, “This is the thinking; this is the doing.” So all of those seemed very logical to me, even though I—you know, when I went to that first meeting and they were talking about abortion, I was like, “Oh my god, what am I doing here?”

0:58:00 Because I had never thought about it, and I was shocked. But I could see that the whole package was the right package. And the empowerment of women, even though I didn't understand all the nuances, I understood that that was a direction to go. And I still feel that way. So the Catholic part is very important to me, and even though I don’t—I'm not a steady churchgoer every day or every week, I feel like that’s my—that’s how I was educated, and I have a great deal of respect for that kind of education. And honestly, the church occasionally does really terrible things, and in terms of the women’s movement, the anti-abortion stuff, they spent—you know, they had conservative popes, and they’d spend all their time and money on that. Now there’s a more liberal pope, and he’s doing more for migrants. I mean, the philosophy is there.

0:59:00 There’s better philosophies than spending all your time beating on women. There’s worrying about the poor and—you know. And so, there is a solid core of some decent values that can be maintained. You kind of pick and choose. They can call it cafeteria Catholics if they want, but I think that’s not outside of what people should be doing.

Marie Scatena: Well, you've sort of alluded to this idea of theory and practice and how that comes together. Or not. [laugh]

Mary Jean Collins: Right.

Marie Scatena: So in terms of organizing strategies, were there regional differences during this period with NOW and the ERA?

Mary Jean Collins: Yes.

Marie Scatena: I'm particularly thinking of Milwaukee and Chicago, but anywhere.

Mary Jean Collins: That’s a good point. I think there are and were regional differences. I think part of what happened in Houston in ’74 when I lost the presidency was a clash over which values should be—over values and also activities.

1:00:09 We were—and I'll try to describe the difference, if it makes any sense. So here we are in the Midwest—that’s the kind of people we are—where employment is very important. Labor is very—labor movement is very important. My mentors—very supportive of the labor movement. And so that was—and I wanted a movement of every—I wanted the most women you could get in. I wanted political power for women. So I wanted those women who worked at Sears typing and should have been in some other job—I wanted them with us. I wanted them to see the value of what we were saying, and that that’s the way they would get political power, whether they did it through a union or not, if they organized, that they would bring something of value. We went down to the steel workers—steel workers union and sat with those women.

1:01:01 And we brought in all the government agencies so they could file discrimination cases if they wanted to. We tried to bring the law to them so that they could actually embrace the tools. So when we got to Houston, there was a different philosophy, I would say on the East Coast and West Coast, just to oversimplify that too. But the idea—and the Equal Rights Amendment sort of represents this in a way. That’s an ideal of theoretical equal rights. The Equal Rights Amendment is a statement of equality. People state that now. “Why can’t we have equality in the law?” Without—and when we were trying to do the Equal Rights Amendment, trying to say what the ERA would actually do and how it would actually change people’s lives. We had some—we did that. We had the little 59-cent button as how it would improve our salary pay. But it was very easy, in some ways, for Phyllis Schlafly—not to underestimate her—for her to say—to distort all of the things that equality—the unpleasant things or the uncertain things.

1:02:06 So the theoretical equality never appealed to me so much as the organizing people to get in and demand their own equal justice in whatever institution they're talking about, whether it’s—you know, I'm an organizer. I think of political power the way I think of the democracy. That that’s the way this—it’s supposed to work. And that’s the way it does work. And you can’t let these institutions, whether it’s government or corporations or whoever it is—they can’t be allowed to just do whatever they want to do. There has to be participatory activity by the people whose interests they're supposed to represent. I mean, every day that we get people more involved—A, it’s incredible that half the country doesn't vote. And why don’t they vote? Because they don’t get—they really don’t understand that if they don’t vote—I mean, you're only in power twice—once a year, on election day.

1:03:01 I mean, that’s when you have actual power, in a way. And people don’t—people have forgotten that. So I think the same thing can be said about the women’s movement. There was the theoretical equality and then the kind of practical, and I think the Midwest is more practical always. I think of it that way. And then—you know, we were scared of the gay rights bill. I mean, the gay rights part. There was a huge fight in New York over gay rights. And it was splitting the movement, and it was—Friedan was—I think overstated the problem and called it the Lavender Menace. So that was disruptive. And so, I mean, I think conflict—for people asserting themselves and trying to get equal rights who have not had equal rights, who are not confident in their own equal rights, it’s easy to fight inside the organization and with your own kind, than to fight the bad guys out here.

1:04:08 So a lot of exercising of power within the institution, taking power within the institution, seeing what that’s like. Women weren’t powerful. They weren’t powerful, period. Not in the society. So I think there was a lot of that. A lot of people. I wanted power, too. I wanted to be the president, right? So of course—I wanted power, right? I wanted to make the decisions for which way the direction of the organization was going to go. And somebody else didn't want me to have that power, either for negative reasons, or because they wanted to take it in a different direction. So it was ironic; I was beaten by Karen DeCrow who was from Syracuse, New York, but she was actually from Chicago. She had a Chicago accent. So it was kind of funny, the two of us. So they accused us of being the Chicago machine, so that was kind of funny.

Marie Scatena: [laugh]

Mary Jean Collins: But you know, that was people learning how to do tactics who had never done them before.

1:05:01 So they both learned more inside. And it was destructive, sometimes. It was destructive. And then people learned to use things against other people that, you know, are separating, not bringing—not unifying. But it’s a struggle. It is a struggle. And it turns out more than I would have thought, that it’s a struggle internally as well as a struggle externally. I think they're related and they both go on.

Marie Scatena: Some people called it growing pains within an organization. Would you say that was a fair way to look at it?

Mary Jean Collins: It’s a little more harsh than that. I mean, I think that’s right. I wouldn't deny that. I think it is growing pains. I'm still trying to figure out whether when you get past the growing pains, whether you also get beyond the cutting-edge aspects of it. And I think on the one hand, the big fights within NOW and other places were painful, very painful.

1:06:07 On the other hand, that energy we had at the beginning of the movement where we would take on anything or anybody, when we were extend…particularly when we were directing it to the poor guy who ran Berghoff’s. You know, we were all over him. So that energy focused on the opponent was extremely powerful and extremely moving. It moved people. And taking—and again, having the government too—Lyndon Johnson amended the federal law to say that women had to be included. First he did it for African Americans. Any federal contractors had to have an affirmative action plan for Blacks and women. It started out with African Americans, and then he amended it to say women too. I mean, all those tools given to us, we learned to use them. We learned to understand what they were for.

1:07:00 We learned to use them against our opponent, and use them for us. But then our opponents have learned the same thing. They’ve learned how to do—you know, we had all these massive class action cases that went to the Supreme Court—boom! Title VII cases that just were huge. The case against Sears Roebuck was pretty sound, and a charge was filed against the corporation. It was 1980. The head of Sears in Chicago was the head of Reagan’s campaign in 1980, and it never saw the light of day. So the use of power—keeping it externally focused to begin—you know, to not have it take down—or to settle for lesser goals, because the—maybe there’s nothing wrong with that. Maybe you have to settle for lesser goals in a period where politically you're just not going to get the bigger goals.

1:08:05 And maybe after that big splash for ten years, where we were identifying every piece of bad thing that ever happened to a woman in the United States of America or the world, then once we've done that, and once we've put our marker down, and the opposition forms against you, then maybe incremental change is what you're going to be able to do over another period. But I'm hoping that a new generation—always hope for the next generation to be able to put a new agenda in front of us and push the door open a little more in each generation. I think it was unrealistic to think it would be done in one generation. But it will never be accomplished if each generation doesn't do their part. So I think that's important.

Marie Scatena: I'm a little bit torn on how to go here. [laugh]

1:09:00 To go back a little bit to feminist ideology, which is maybe not the thing that you would rest your laurels on, perhaps. From what you said, you're more of a—

Mary Jean Collins: A doer.

Marie Scatena: A doer.

Mary Jean Collins: Right.

Marie Scatena: And tactical fighter. [laugh]

Mary Jean Collins: Yeah, yeah.

Marie Scatena: But when there was the debate about the feminist ideology and the feminist movement sort of petering out—and I believe you were quoted in a local paper saying that feminism was over. This wave of feminism was over.

Mary Jean Collins: Huh.

Marie Scatena: It was something in the ‘70s. I'll see if I can find it in my notes as we're speaking.

Mary Jean Collins: OK, all right.

Marie Scatena: But there was a moment in the ‘70s, mid ‘70s, when it seemed like, “OK, this movement has lost its energy.’

Mary Jean Collins: Right.

1:10:00

Marie Scatena: Now we have a situation where we have women’s marches that were in opposition to—

Mary Jean Collins: Right.

Marie Scatena: —presidential election, 2017.

Mary Jean Collins: Right.

Marie Scatena: 2018. What kind of advice can you give to the women who are now organizing and trying to keep the momentum going, and taking different issues perhaps and using that as their fuel?

Mary Jean Collins: Go forward. I mean, I think—I'm encouraged. I was encouraged by the Women’s March. I think the assumption that Hillary Clinton was going to win that we all made, including Barack Obama made and Joe Biden made—they all made—and you know, when McConnell refused to open that Supreme Court justice, when you look back now—all wise by hindsight—it’s a travesty that we didn't make more of a fuss before that happened.

1:11:03 And we were relying too much on the one man—the one—the presidency. We neglected the House and the Senate. We thought we could do it without—that he could somehow save us by himself. Brilliant, beautiful man that he is. But he can’t. And we—and that’s—I think Obama and others before him—and I think Howard Dean really had the right idea in terms of rebuilding the Democratic Party. Obama didn't do it either. He created his own organization, which I can’t even remember the name of. It still exists, I think. But I mean, he didn't build the party. And I think you have to have institutions of power, and you have to have things that people can join and get some instruction from the older people on how to actually do this. But if you stop at all—if you stop moving forward, you will move back.

1:12:03 That’s my belief. If you are trying to accomplish a goal and you get tired and drop out, unless somebody else comes along and does your part, it’s not going to happen. So I think—so what did we learn from that? So the march was fabulous. The organizing needs to be done—and I think Indivisible is one of the groups that I'm most admiring of, because they've done district—congressional district by congressional district. It’s not some theoretical little bag of power that you get. It’s such hard work. And that’s what happened—and in the last years of the ERA campaign, the hard work—we didn't win the ultimate goal that year, but we built—we got a lot of women elected—or interested in being elected. We built organizations—childcare, displaced homemakers, women being beaten up.

1:13:06 All those institutions received a power infusion from that energy. And you can’t stop, ever. You have to figure out a way to keep the party going. Keep the energy going. And people say they get tired or whatever. Well, if they're tired, then you gotta find some—you gotta find a way to appeal to the next generation. Maybe that’s impossible. Maybe our generation just going at it 100% then maybe the younger—the children of our generation are exhausted just watching us, and maybe they have to get some rest in between and then another generation can come up and take it over. But there is no room for complace…I mean, you can’t keep power if you don’t keep seeking it. Just whatever institution or organization it is, if you don’t work it, if you don’t feed it, if you don’t make people have fun or enjoy it or bring new people in, it doesn't work.

1:14:08 And people get old and lazy and you know, they get tired and comfortable. These things can really be fun. And I think the women’s marches were fun. And I think the women involved in them know that it’s fun. But there has to be an energy blood, a life blood, coming into it, even that some way, people can participate, even when they get busy with other aspects of their career, their family, or whatever. There has to be a way to stay connected, and I think that’s hard, but I think it’s necessary.

Marie Scatena: In your role as the chair of NOW here, do you have maybe a story you can share about a particular situation where it felt like, “Oh, this is—everybody’s tired. Nobody has any oomph to do the next thing”? Could you share a story maybe about how you inspired people to keep going?

1:15:10

Mary Jean Collins: Well, I think in the—particularly in the—well, the ’82 campaign, I'll give that as an example, because in my heart of hearts, after the ’80 campaign, I was—I cannot—I mean, I didn't tell anybody this at the time—I was not hopeful. But what did I see? First of all, that we had fought to get the extension until ’82. What would be the message to our opponents if we just walked away and did nothing? That would not be a good message. And then I always look for the other byproducts of getting more people involved, raising more money, organizing in particular districts, talking to the legislators, getting women to talk to the legislators, calling women up, telling me “We need your 25 bucks. You can’t go on the bus, but you could pay it for somebody else to go on the bus.”

1:16:05 So that they are involved. That they're part of that family of change that keeps them interested. Maybe in some more passive organizations, you get a little button or a—somebody’s always trying to send you some little thing to put on your car or whatever. I think you have to feel the connection to other people. So I would say the ’82 campaign was hard from the get-go, because the chances of the—the likelihood of getting—we tried with Mayor Byrne. That was our new kid on the block. But she had less power than Daley, certainly, with the Chicago machine people. And some of them—Tony somebody; I can’t remember his name—anyway, every time the ERA came up, he checked himself into the hospital. So we went there and said—he’s in the hospital again—she made him leave the hospital and go to Springfield to vote for it.

1:17:00 I mean, but that’s the—I mean, how much work is that, to get one guy, right? I mean, and she tried to do the best she could, but she didn't have the power that a Daley had. And I'm sure with the new mayor. You know, it’s different kinds of power. And that’s not even the power we want somebody—we don’t even want the mayor to be able to do that. You know, to drag people around. But we want them to have the power of the leadership. And that’s what we're trying to teach other people to do. So anyway, so in the ’82 campaign, I would say we did a really good job of keeping people’s spirits up. And part of that is—and Ellie, the national organization did this to come extent. The big rallies in California, Norman Lear would be there, and all these Hollywood people would be there. You know, just feeding people to believe that they're part of something bigger than themselves, and that they need to do their little part. But first of all, they have comrades that are doing their part, and that it matters.

1:18:06 And I think there’s a certain skill involved in that, that I was fortunate to have a little of, and a lot of other people had too.

Marie Scatena: Well, among your many skills, you're an accomplished oral historian, so it’s a little intimidating to be asking you these questions.

Mary Jean Collins: [laugh]

Marie Scatena: But I did want—I did just have one or two more questions.

Mary Jean Collins: Sure.

Marie Scatena: Thinking about the power of storytelling and women telling their own stories, could you talk a little bit about how and why the storytelling process is important?

Mary Jean Collins: This has been very—and you know, I'm—Veteran Feminists of America is an organization about 25 years old, and I'm working on these oral histories for that project, to make sure that Second Wave Feminist stories get told[[8]](#footnote-9). I have a complicated answer, in a way. One thing that happens commonly is that women tell me, “Oh, what I did wasn’t important. I don’t need to tell my story.”

1:19:06 So there’s that. And then you know that—you know, we've made a lot of progress, but not today. That people don’t even—aren’t willing to come forward and tell their story, because—because they don’t know it’s important, or they didn't think it was important. I'm hoping that the process itself, where they do come forward and they do tell their story, and then it’s put up on a website, and then we ask them to tell—you know, and this takes work, too— “Send it to your kids. Send it to your neighbor. Send it out here. Send it out there.” And I want people to take more of a pride in what they did do, and how much two years of work on a very important outcome—it’s not the most important thing you ever did in your life, but it’s not nothing, and it’s not a small thing. And then what’s happening—as we talk to people, they begin to dissect or recall how that little piece of their life fit into the rest of their life.

1:20:07 And I mean, I can do that easily, because I was a lousy teacher, and now what was I going to—and I was a pretty good secretary. But what was I going to do? If my mind hadn’t been opened up and that opportunity hadn’t come along—I mean, both the inspiration of the Civil Rights Movement, I got that. But I was a little follower. I was doing stuff. I was carrying signs and walking around and picketing people. But I was not running the thing. And to make that transformation to where I became an activist and I learned to run things—you know, I managed 17 people at People for the American Way[[9]](#footnote-10). What’s the chances of doing that if you hadn’t had these other kinds of experiences? So it gives you a lot. It gives a lot to the larger issue and to the larger society, but it really gives the individual a lot. And I want people to remember that, too, that they gave something, but they also got something, and that it really led to a greater understanding, something they can appreciate and send—give to their kids or future generations.

1:21:09 But the other thing that is a challenge—the younger generation right now, a lot of them, they don’t look—it’s hard to get people to read these things. I know because I'm enough of the history major and I read books, and I can see—I just read a book by a woman about the American Revolution, and she had taken all stories that—what do you call them—memoirs that people had written, and that was the basis of her book. So if she didn't have those memoirs—A, she wouldn't have a look at what had actually happened in whatever year—18-whatever-it-was—and we wouldn't know that either. So that’s what I'm trying to inspire people with. That even understanding how they got—you know, somebody in 2060, how they got where they got, and where did I—you know, who—not just my ancestors, but how was I brought to this point?

1:22:06 I hope we're still on the planet, but, you know, I think those are important—I find those important, and I think to place yourself in the universe, I think they're important too. So that inspires me to do it.

Marie Scatena: Well, we've kind of gone through quite a bit here. [laugh]

Mary Jean Collins: We have indeed.

Marie Scatena: Is there something else that you'd like to cover that we haven't covered?

Mary Jean Collins: You know, I think we did a pretty good job, don’t you?

Marie Scatena: I think so.

Mary Jean Collins: Right. The organizational stuff we talked about. Yeah, that’s important. The government. The different role for the government over the years. Very important. I think that’s it. I think that’s it. I think that’s good.

Marie Scatena: OK. All right. Well, thank you so much.

Mary Jean Collins: Thank you!

Marie Scatena: I really enjoyed it.

Mary Jean Collins: Thank you!

[break in audio]

1:23:00

Mary Jean Collins: You know, one of the things that I think has changed, and I'm wondering if we need to get back to it as a value to some extent—I can remember when we—Sister Austin Doherty was one of the thinkers in my life, in addition to Joelle Reed. She was from Chicago, by the way. Her father owned—her parents owned a bar. They were from Ireland, and they owned a bar in Chicago. She went to Catholic schools and then—yeah, anyway, the rest is history. She was brilliant. And the order told her she had to go become a psychologist. You know, they often did that. They told you what to do. So she was both history—she loved both history and psychology. So when things got started with the women’s movement, she said—we were talking about women, and I may be able to find this tape someday, and what women would do.

1:24:02 And she said, “Well, surely, they're not just all going to go to work.” She said, “Surely they're going to use that additional time to make a bigger contribution to the community.” So she envisioned, and maybe for both genders, the idea that I think is really important, and there’s too little of, which is that everything can’t be for pay. That there has to be people who are willing—and people do this. I don’t mean that people don’t donate their time or contribute to things. But not so much—and somewhat in the political too, especially running for office, people will contribute to that. But the energy that we had in the early days of NOW—no one was paid. There was no staff. And we were working every day and night, and we had committees and we were inspired by each other. I can remember we had a religion task force in Chicago and Mary Daley—you know, the great theologian—came by for our meeting.

1:25:02 She just happened to be in town. So that kind of exchange of ideas and energy isn’t always going to be on a planned agenda with a moderator or somebody guiding you through the discussion. Some of it is the spontaneity of people actually being engaged in an idea. And there were a lot of good—there were a lot of groundbreaking ideas in the early days of the women’s movement, where people were really exploring what the role of women should do, throughout history and now, and how do things change, and what do the institutions have to do. And there is so much work that has to be—there has to be energy in this. There has to be hard work. And more and more people have to participate. It can’t just be somebody paid to, you know, to put out a newsletter or do whatever they do. There has to be, I think, more involvement that we get of people actually talking about the fate of the country, the fate of themselves.

1:26:01 I mean, a lot of people talk about how awful Trump is, but then what—we're seeing this a little bit, I think, with the Democratic presidentials, and I hope this continues. But what do we want? You know, when you read back to the Roosevelt administration, if we were in charge now, what would we do? What would we do? Because I think if we can draw out that image to the people we're trying to organize—there has to be something that people are for, and not just a list of platforms, but a vision of where we're going here and how the country could be different. And if you have taxes, why do you've taxes? Reagan said we should all be against taxes. We shouldn't all be against taxes. The things that people want to do in common have to be done with common money. So how does that happen? And why not engage people more in that discussion and conversation, and not take the prohibited notions off the agenda, and put on some possible agendas and hopeful agendas?

1:27:01 Because until we get that kind of engagement—you know, when people don’t vote at all, it’s because they're not engaged. They're not engaged in the discussion. They don’t even get, apparently, what their role is, as a person in a democracy. And it’s not theoretical. This is very practical. And this is for you and for your kids and the kid down the block, and the kid across the street. And it’s not out of a sense of—it can be a sense of wonder as well as a sense of obligation, I think. So anyway, Austin Doherty was one of the inspiring people. Anyway, she said, “Why would people just accumulate more money?” And that’s a good question. But how do we replace that value system with the notion that being super-rich is the best thing you can be? And with having a richness of what you contribute to the society as an alternative to that kind of vision. I think that’s important.

1:28:00 I mean, that’s kind of what the nuns had that was interesting, too, to go back to the good old nuns! They were a model of people who were selfless in many ways. Educated, smart, committed, supportive, friendly. We could have more of that. I think that would be good.

Marie Scatena: You mentioned Katherine Turk.

Mary Jean Collins: Yes.

Marie Scatena: I wonder if you could tell us that story about— [laugh]

Mary Jean Collins: Right. One of the people that inspires me, and that actually helped me get going on this project—Katherine Turk is a young historian. She’s at UNC. Right now, she’s on a sabbatical writing a book about NOW. She’s at the Schlesinger Library. I met her almost ten years ago, when she was just getting started. Her mother’s a lawyer, and she was planning to be a lawyer. And she came by the University of Illinois—I guess she was doing a paper on women’s studies. I hope I haven't got the details too off-base here.

1:29:00 But she looked at the Chicago NOW collection. And U of I has all the papers from Chicago NOW, from the get-go. I mean, we—I was a history major, and other people too said, “No, we've got to put this somewhere.” See, I think that’s—let me just deviate for a minute—that’s how much we understood we were doing something important, is that we would even think about that. That this was something noteworthy and history worthy. That we would go to the University of Illinois and make sure that they knew about our activities. We understood we were making history. We really did. So anyway, so Katie apparently did this paper, and it inspired her to think about changing her major, and she ended up getting a PhD at the University of Chicago, and she has taught at UNC, and she had another place she taught before that. She has written one book on employment, and she’s now writing the history of NOW. So I'm inspired by her being inspired.

1:30:00 And she then—I said to her, you know, “I'm getting old. What do we need to do here, with the veteran feminists?" She said, “Tell us the stories.” And so that’s the project for me.

Marie Scatena: Wow. Well, that’s a beautiful way to end it, don’t you think? [laugh]

Mary Jean Collins: [laugh]

Frank Dina/camera: Yeah, I think so.

Marie Scatena: OK, I think we nailed it.

[End of recording]

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1. Father James Groppi (1930-1985) was a Roman Catholic priest and Civil Rights activist who was an advisor to the NAACP, participated in national marches and organized protests in Milwaukee. His papers are held at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Catherine Conroy (1919-1989) was born in Milwaukee, WI and was a founding member of the National Organization for Women and the Coalition of Labor Union Women. Conroy helped organize the Communication Workers of America (CWA) in 1949 after working as a telephone operator. She was part of President Jimmy Carter’s Advisory Commission for Women. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Elizabeth “Betty” Farians (1923-2013) was a radical Roman Catholic feminist theologian, professor and activist. She was the first head of the National Organization for Women's Taskforce on Women and Religion. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The Berghoff Restaurant located in downtown Chicago on 17 West Adams Street was opened in 1898 by a German immigrant, Herman Berghoff. His family continues to operate it in this location. Gloria Steinem and NOW were the first women to be served at The Berghoff’s bar in 1969, ending the establishment’s male only policy. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Anne Zimmerman (1914-2003) was a nurse, activist and civic leader who fought for workers right and elevated the nursing profession. Zimmerman had leadership roles in Montana, California and Illinois Nurses Associations. Awards include Living Legend award from the American Academy of Nursing, honorary doctorate from Loyola University and was the first professor named to the Niehoff Endowed Chair at the Marcella Niehoff School of Nursing at Loyola. Her papers are archived at the University of Illinois Chicago, Special Collections and University Archives.. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Linda Ginenthal directed the 1980 ERA Campaign in Illinois with Linda Miller. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Dead Sea Scrolls are ancient Jewish religious manuscripts found in caves near the northern shore of the Dead Sea in Israel. They were first discovered in 1947 by a Bedouin boy. Subsequently, other scrolls have been found in the same area. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. The Veteran Feminists of America (VFA) <https://www.veteranfeministsofamerica.org> is collecting and archiving oral histories of second wave feminists. Mary Jean is an interviewer for the project titled, *The VFA Pioneer Histories Project.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. People for the American Way Foundation was founded by television producer Norman Lear, Congresswoman Barbara Jordan and other civic leaders in 1981 to promote democracy and fight right-wing extremism. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)