[Video: Kaplanvideo.mov]

KAPLAN: My name is Sydney Janet Kaplan and I am a professor of English and an adjunct what used to be the Women Studies program. I'll let you ask the questions.

[0:00:27.6]

JACOBSON: When you came here it was the Women Studies program, when was that that you first came here?

KAPLAN: I arrived at the University of Washington in 1971 and the program dates itself from 1970, I think. I'm not sure whether it's from when the first class was taught or when the first— There was certainly, when I arrived, no formal structure yet. It was all in planning. And I got involved with the program very early on. It sort of grew out of some classes, I think some of them maybe had been even through the Experimental College just because of the demands of a lot of young women to start studying something about women. And so it coincided with the development of the Women's Movement. But I wasn't hired to teach Women Studies.

I served as director of Women Studies for eleven years, so I was very involved in it in the years between 1981 and I guess it was '92 when I finished as director. And at time we were a program and it was during the time I was director that we worked up a proposal that had to go through both the university and then the State, the Board that decides on curriculum, to become a real department. And that involved an enormous amount of work on the part of everybody to work up the program into a real department. Before we had, I think, just one faculty—a first director, Sue-Ellen Jacobs. I don't know whether you been able to interview her, she lives in New Mexico but she would be a really important person to—

JACOBSON: I think Amy Bhatt is speaking to her.

KAPLAN: Oh good, because she would know the early history very well. And the program really had to struggle against a lot of opposition from people who felt that it wasn't academic. You know, “This isn't a subject that people should be studying,” “This is politicizing knowledge,” so it was an awkward time. We had many difficult times. They would have meetings in the beginning of the forming—committees forming the program that— they could go on for hours and hours with huge debates and arguments about what the program should be.

[0:04:25.8]

JACOBSON: Did you support the program becoming a department?

KAPLAN: Yes I did. I did, I thought it was time. I think it was almost—I don’t remember now, I guess because it might have been twenty years after it started being a program. So it's a long time to be just a program that's made up of faculty from other departments coming to teach a class, there were a couple people who had joint appointments, Nancy Kenney was one of them. Is she still teaching?

JACOBSON: Yeah, I took Psychobiology of Women from her recently.

KAPLAN: But she was the first hire. The college allowed the program to hire somebody but it needed to be joint appointment in one department and another. And I'm in the English department and I only had the joint appointment when I became a Director of Women Studies because they had to draw directors from other departments as well. But there was a lot of controversy about that.

JACOBSON: Within the program or mostly coming from outside?

KAPLAN: Outside. At least, I don’t remember opposition to it because we knew that if it became a real department it would be considered something more permanent in the university. We were always worried they were going to cut it. In fact, when I

took over as director the big issue was, at that time there was a huge budget crisis in the university and at that time they were eliminating programs and departments. They eliminated at that time several whole departments, they eliminated the whole Home Economics part of the university – it had two parts I think Nutrition was one and the other was Clothing, Costumes and all of that went. And there were people, faculty members who had been here for ages and they lost positions. And they eliminated the whole department of Physical Education and some other programs.

And people kept saying— I would get phone calls from people saying, "They're going to cut Women Studies, they are going to cut it." I never believed that they would. I felt that, politically, this would have been a very stupid move. Everything, you could say the mood of the times was against this. How would it look if you're cutting out everything, it's bad enough that you cut out the programs that did had women faculty, nutrition, sewing, the traditional women's— it would have been a huge public relations disaster. So even though some of my colleagues were just frantic about it, I wasn't. I didn't think they would do it and they didn't. At least it's nice to be right about one thing that you can predict, you know.

[0:07:55.7]

JACOBSON: Did you come here as a graduate student or as a teacher of English?

KAPLAN: No. I was hired as an assistant professor of English. So I've been here my whole career, still teaching, I've been here more than forty years and I'm still teaching. I really love it so I will continue as long as I can. I came in as an assistant professor of English but I had written a feminist dissertation and that was how I— and that was controversial in the English department, so I had to fight that battle in the English department too, among people who thought that what I was doing wasn't real scholarship.

JACOBSON: What was it about?

KAPLAN: It was called *Feminine Consciousness in the Modern British Novel* and it was about five British women writers, twentieth century writers. And it became my first book. I came in at a time when the English department had been under attack because there were so few women in the English department. And in the year that I came, they hired four faculty members and three of us were women and that was sort of the beginning. The whole department, I think, at that time had— it was much larger than it is now – I don't remember, something like ninety faculty members and I think there were like four women in the whole department. And there were, of course, many departments on campus that had no women faculty at all. And it made no sense even logically because studying Literature was a field which you had so many graduate students in English who were on the job market, looking for jobs. Well, why weren't they being hired? I mean it's kind of an excuse, at least that could be used in some fields where they say, "Well, there aren't any women studying so we can't hire any women," but not in English.

I came in and so there was quite a difficult time and so I aligned myself with the beginnings of Women Studies on this campus because I felt how important it was to women. So I taught the first class on women writers in the English department that had ever been offered in the English department. I think, as I said, the Experimental College— and there were places that I think had some feminist literary classes but not— this was, I mean, for a regular class. And it was a wonderful class. It was heartening, in a way, to remember it because since they had never had a class like this the first day it was packed, and there were all these fabulous people there.

I'm still close friends with one of the people, and in fact I wanted to mention to you that someone who really should be interviewed for this project is Lexie Evans, whose name may have come up, I don't know, but definitely because she

was of the first students who actually graduated majoring in Women Studies. Though she couldn't do it, it had to be— you couldn't really get a BA in Women Studies, it had to be what they called General Studies, but it was really a Women Studies degree. And she became later the director of Seattle Community College and she's now the Director of Student Services but for a long time she was Head of Women's Concerns at the community college. Her whole career— and it was made by Women Stu—and so she is somebody who was a student, and she was a student in that class. And it was wonderful because years later we're still friends, very close friends, I talked to her today as matter of fact.

So there were just fabulous students and many of them, others too, I would hear about who came were active in women's issues in Seattle in various ways. So that was very gratifying. Eventually, it took a while even within the English department, because I taught that class as a special topics class, not a—but then eventually I was able to argue to get it as a regular class and taught for years as Women Writers class.

[0:13:38.7]

JACOBSON: That was going to be my next question. Did you have to fight to get that class put on the curriculum?

KAPLAN: Oh yeah, as a permanent class, yeah.

JACOBSON: What year was the year that you first taught it?

KAPLAN: I think it might have been 1973 or 1974. I don't remember, it would depend what quarter it was whether it was in the Fall or the in Spring. But I think it was in that, because I think I had been here a couple of years when I taught it. And it was so exciting for me because I could finally teach books that I really wanted to teach.

[0:14:19.9]

JACOBSON: Prior to coming to the University of Washington and being involved with the Women Studies program here were you interested in feminism?

KAPLAN: Yes, though I wasn't active yet in any way but I'm of that generation that was really affected by the fact that, you know, you went to college, you get a degree and when you went to get a job, or looked for a job, if you looked in the newspaper all the ads would be “jobs for men” and “jobs for women.” I went to UCLA – even at the student services place where you can get information about jobs and placements, they had “men” and “women,” and the women's jobs were all clerical jobs and the men's jobs were all the other possible jobs even selling insurance for god's sake. I mean anything, there was nothing for women. And I was so angry when discovered this. I thought, I didn’t have to go to college if I'm going to be a secretary, I could have just done that right out of high school. The only option I had was to become a teacher, so I taught. I got a degree, I did an additional year doing the work for a teaching credential and I taught high school, just for one year.

Well, I was right in my class one day, I was eating lunch, I used to eat at my desk sometimes, I started reading someone recommended to me and it was Betty Friedan’s book, which, I started reading it and I went, “Yes. That's right!” “What am I doing? Why am I teaching high School, why are my aspirations there, why weren’t they higher than that?” Because I remembered one of my best professors, when he realized that I was going to teach high school he said, “Sydney, why are you doing this? Why don't you go to graduate school in English?” It never occurred to me. But reading that book sort of got me going. So that's when I went to graduate school.

JACOBSON: That's a book that I think every other woman I've spoken to, and my mom said, “That totally changed my life.”

KAPLAN: Well, it's interesting because looking back on it now, I later didn't like much of what Betty Freidan was doing, she had a very a narrow view, it was quite centered on middle-class white women, [inaudible: 0:17:39.4] for the race issues, she was very bad on lesbian issues, many things. But at that point, just the fact that she was encouraging women to get out of the kitchen. And so that was very meaningful to me – that's, I think, where it started. So by the time I got into graduate school I really wanted to read and work on women writers, rather than— I was lucky that I had a wonderful graduate advisor, a man named John Esby [?], who was very encouraging. Not from a feminist— he didn't have anything to do with feminist theory or anything like that, but he was very interested in all these writers that people hadn't been working on and that people forgotten about. And that started a project for me.

[0:18:46.3]

JACOBSON: Where did you go to graduate school?

KAPLAN: At UCLA.

JACOBSON: And did you do undergraduate there as well?

KAPLAN: Went all the way through.

[0:18:53.8]

JACOBSON: Coming back to the University of Washington, how has the department changed since you've been here?

KAPLAN: Women Studies?

JACOBSON: Yeah.

KAPLAN: It's changed immensely, the very fact that it isn't even called Women Studies anymore I think it indicates that. I can't say that I really know all that goes on here because I'm in the English department and though I'm an adjunct, I haven't really been active in the program for a long time. It's obviously much larger, you have a really big faculty. You have a graduate program – that was a dream nobody ever saw that would happen. It seems very successful to me from what I can see. I get the announcements of all the different events that are coming, speakers that have been brought in. But it has much the feeling of something very established, no one would dream of cutting it out. That was the fear in the first years: it wouldn't survive because of funding, because of different changes in administrations at the university.

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JACOBSON: During your time as the director what did you do to really establish the Women Studies department?

KAPLAN: At the time we were very busy developing some new classes, adding classes, trying to get more adjunct faculty to be involved. As I said, all these budget issues took up a lot of time. The biggest event that occurred during the time I was director was that we put on the National Women's Studies Association Convention, a big conference. We had fifteen hundred people come on campus from all over the country. And that was a huge endeavor that everybody on the program was involved in and people in the community were involved in. And that's where I think we began to have to deal with the problems between activism and academics because there were many community activists who came to the meetings. And we had huge fights about things because they felt that they weren't included, this went on— I could probably spend hours talking about all the events that went on during the putting on of that conference. But we got through it and I guess it was a success (laughs). Sometimes we look back and we think that we were just crazy because the amount of work that was involved was phenomenal.

JACOBSON: What year was that?

KAPLAN: That was 1985. We had to deal with the housing, the dorms that they were staying over in – I guess it was McMahon, or was it the other one next to McMahon? The sessions—and we weren't computerized yet. I mean, we had a computer that somebody loaned to the department and it was one of these old computers, we couldn't even tabulate all of the proposals that were coming in. And the registration, it was a nightmare. Lexie Evans was the coordinator. So that's another reason you should—I mean, she really could tell you these stories. She's just an amazing organizer and has a very calm way of being with people that can bring sides together in ways that people who are a little more hot tempered like I can be don't always handle so well. But she was like the full-time coordinator. I was still, of course, teaching my classes and running the program so I couldn't devote every moment to the conference but it felt that way. We were here for a whole year – the whole academic year – we were here every night until 6 /7 o'clock at night or later working on organizing of it. So that was the biggest event.

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JACOBSON: Would you talk about the fight in between the academics and activism? Is that something that you still contend with today?

KAPLAN: Not any— I mean, I don't personally anymore. I think so much of all this really has changed, from what I can see. As I say, since I'm not really following the events that are taking place in the program now, I don't know if that still goes on.

[0:24:52.6]

JACOBSON: Do you consider yourself an activist?

KAPLAN: No.

JACOBSON: Did you in the past?

KAPLAN: I never saw myself as an activist, as going out into the community outside the university. My work was within the university and supporting feminist issues from in the university. I know I was on the Senate Committee on Women for a while – I mean the University Faculty Senate – but no, I haven't really worked on it as an activist. It did always coincide with my politics, so that was good.

[0:25:50.9]

JACOBSON: I spoke to Clare Bright and she considers herself a radical feminist and she talked about the difficulties she had of being a radical feminist but still wanting the Women Studies program to be part of the institution of the university. Was that something you had to contend with at all?

KAPLAN: Well, I think that was always a problem, how much the political interests of people in the program would cohere with being an institution. And we always had to fight that battle about everything because we had to conform with—I mean, the very fact if you're going to be an academic program, there are things you have to do. And that has to depend on even some of the kinds of courses that could be offered, and who was to teach them. Because when the program was just beginning, a lot of things: people would just come in from the community and teach a class without quote “credentials”. The university wants credentials. We want to have somebody who—“If you’re going to hire a faculty member they have to have PhD,” well this leaves out huge numbers of people who could probably very well teach certain kinds of classes, but that was the tension. And I think Clare could probably explain that better than I, because she always did view herself as a radical feminist and I didn't view myself as a radical feminist, I was a feminist but I always was an academic.

[0:27:56.3]

JACOBSON: When you first discovered that kind of you identity – feminism – what issues were most important to you?

KAPLAN: Initially was having the ability to have a career that was fulfilling and not just chosen because I was a woman. That would be the basic area that I was concerned with. And then it was the inclusion of the study of women in the university. And in my own field, it has to do with the development of feminist criticism, of which my work was part of. I remember writing an article—I did a review article for *Signs,* the feminist journal in… it might have been 1975, surveying feminist criticism in literature – what was happening. Now it would be such a big topic you couldn't—at that point I could read just about everything that had come out that year, it was a lot but still, no more.

[0:29:32.3]

JACOBSON: Do you think you reached those goals, those issues that were important to you as a young woman?

KAPLAN: Yes and no. In terms of academic success, I think women who were working in feminist areas have done very well. I think that that part has. What disheartens me is that it hasn't spread. Feminist principles have not spread as well as I would like to have seen among students and I'm very disheartened to see so many students who speak disparagingly of feminism as if it's kind of some old stuff that you don't have to be concerned about. And so that makes me sad. I hate to think and to see the whole way lots of women have fallen back into the "main goal in life is getting a man" syndrome, and the beauty issues, and the make-up, and the clothing, and all the things that in the '70s we were trying to do about. Like, throwing away— you know, the bra burning always was used as a silly example, but it went much deeper than that, of being, of rejecting definitions of "woman" that—

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