[Video: Jeffordsvideo.mov]

JEFFORDS: My name is Susan Jeffords and I'm the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs at the University of Washington Bothell.

JACOBSON: And what was your history at the University of Washington Seattle?

JEFFORDS: It's a long one, I started there at 1985 and I started as an assistant professor in the English department. After that I Chaired the Women Studies program and then I became the Divisional Dean for Social Sciences in the College of Arts and Sciences. And then I became the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs for the University of Washington and then I become the Vice Provost for Global Affairs for the University of Washington, and then I took this job.

[0:00:47.3]

JACOBSON: What was your experience in the Women Studies Program as the Chair? How did you get into that?

JEFFORDS: How did I get into that? Ruth Frankenberg. My predecessor was Sydney Kaplan –who was also a faculty member in the English department – and she was stepping down. The faculty at that time was not very large. I think there was Ruth and maybe one other person who actually had a faculty line, Clare I think. Ruth approached me and said, "I think you'd be a great Chair for Women Studies."

I hadn't thought about it before, I hadn't really seen that has a career path for myself but when someone of the caliber and integrity of Ruth Frankenberg approaches you with something you don't say no right away. And she was very persuasive and I said, "Yes, sure, I'd be happy to put my name in the pool." And I was asked to serve as the Chair.

[0:01:58.8]

JACOBSON: And had you been interested in social issues surrounding women before then?

JEFFORDS: Oh sure. Well, this is an interesting question. So I'm a feminist scholar but my scholarship is around issues of masculinity and so there was a bit of controversy around my work… it may seem arcane right now but there were heated debates in feminist journals at the time as to whether there should be any publishing whatsoever on men and masculinity. And so my work had created a lot of controversy within some circles and there were people who did not believe that—even though I might I was a feminist scholar they didn't believe I was a Women's Studies scholar. It was still an interesting kind of historical tension between those two things. My research was decidedly in a feminist tradition but I did not do work on women's social issues.

[0:03:08.6]

JACOBSON: What were some important issues at the time of your work at the Women Studies program?

JEFFORDS: Certainly one of the important issues for the program was its status in the university. There were a lot of faculty and students who wanted the Women Studies program to be not only more stable but a more visible and important part of the university. And a lot of the significance at universities that units have has to do with their institutional place and their institutional status. One of the things that I worked very hard on was to convert the program to a department. There were still a number of supporters of Women Studies who had concerns that as a program it could be eliminated, as a result of budget cuts or the preferences of an upper-level administrator, whereas is very difficult to eliminate a department. So I set about doing that and it became a department. And then we grew from there and by the time I left I think there were ten faculty on the unit. Sue-Ellen Jacobs was the other person who was on the faculty at the time. So we grew the

department and the status of the department and the number of students and the number of courses that were being offered and the number of issues that the department addressed in the curriculum, and began conversations that culminated in the PhD program, so I started the work on the PhD program. So those were some things that concerned a lot of the supporters of the program and then department, was just to stabilize it so that it could continue to offer a space for Women Studies and feminist scholars to do their work.

[0:05:17.5]

JACOBSON: Do you think there is any sort of disagreement that exists between feminist theory and Women Studies and being part of an institution?

JEFFORDS: Sure. I think that you're not really doing critical feminist work if you're not questioning the very institution of which you are part. And so I think that that's an important tension to be sustaining all of the time. And people did raise questions. I'm a big believer that people or organization strengths' are also their weaknesses, so one of the weaknesses of the Women Studies program at the time was that it didn't have a stable institutional home. Well, that was also one of its strengths, right? From not being embedded in the system, you could offer, potentially, more robust critiques of the system because you weren't implicating yourself in it. At the same time not being in the system at all meant that the only place you would have would be outside the system, critiquing from the outside. And certainly a lot of people do that and that's a really valid place but it doesn't give space inside the university for students to do the kind of work that was meaningful to them and the process of their education.

[0:06:57.4]

JACOBSON: How do you reconcile those two things of being a part of an institution and not because when you were there it became a department, right? How do you think as a feminist you can exist within an institution but still be critical?

JEFFORDS: Several things, I think. One of the things that was important to me was to create the broadest ranging community of feminist scholars who were engaged in Women Studies. When I started the program had maybe ten or a dozen adjunct faculty members – faculty who were committed to the enterprise of the Women Studies program and sometimes taught and sometimes participated in activities or worked with students. But that was a small and limited group of engaged partners and allies in the work. I think we ended up with over a hundred by the time I finished because one of the issues for me was not only raising the visibility of the unit but raising the number of people who could be engaged from different perspectives. So that somebody could say, "Wait a second, have you really thought this through? Is that really the way?" So instead of having a small group of people who shared pretty much common assumptions and agreed with each other, to broaden that community and get that community to come together and say, "Is that really the right way to go forward?"

It felt to me really important and more authentic to the enterprise to bring in as many voices as we possibly could and then simultaneously to give students more voices as well. So how could we reach out to students and engage them more in the process and set up committees and conversations with students that would give them more ownership of the program so again it would not become so institutional but embedded that it just served itself but would continue to serve the need of students. I think always trying to attend to the voices of students who would come in with very powerful critiques of, "Why are you teaching this?" and "Why do you make these assumptions?" and "Why do you have these readings?" was a really important piece to me, again of that kind of authenticity of figuring out how to remain true to the critical perspectives that you bring as a feminist scholar without giving up that engagement for the price of institutional stability.

[0:09:37.4]

JACOBSON: What were some other changes that happened while you were there, aside from it becoming a department?

JEFFORDS: I think one of the big ones that was really important to me was shifting from the program being focused almost exclusively on U.S. women's issues to focusing on global women's issues. And that was not an easy shift because when I got there the courses were—the Introduction to Women Studies course for instance was all about U.S. women. And very deliberately, I proposed to the faculty and worked with the faculty and with the administration the get approval for this, hiring colleagues whose work was in international issues. And that created some tensions with students who were not necessarily as comfortable with that issue. I think it may seem commonplace now to think of women's issues as not limited to the U.S. but certainly at that time there were a lot of Women Studies texts and conversations and debates that were really focused on U.S. issues. So to me, one of the big important things that happened was taking that outside of the context of U.S. and beginning to help students frame themselves within broader global conversations about women.

[0:11:00.3]

JACOBSON: Who was one of the first people that came?

JEFFORDS: Saraswati [last name]. And certainly she would be a person that I would really encourage you to talk to because she encountered some resistance from students about this and some disruptions in their comfort levels around issues where she was asking them to reflect on U.S. practices. I remember one of the pedagogical things that she talked about doing frequently was that when she started to teach the Introduction to Women Studies class she would begin the class by saying, "How many international women are in the class?" And a few women who were born outside of the United Stated would raise their hands. By the end of the class

she'd close and say, "How many international women are there in the class?" And every student in the class raised their hand because they came to understand through the course that they were positioned in a very different way than they had come into the course understanding. That's terrific pedagogy that she was able to contribute. And then she developed a separate course in International or Global Women's Issues that I think really added additional dimensions to those conversations. To me that was a really significant issue.

[0:12:39.0]

JACOBSON: What year was it when you became the Department Chair?

JEFFORDS: I'm not really good at these things. I'll look it up, early '90s but I don't remember.

JACOBSON: How long were you the Chair?

JEFFORDS: Not quite five years. I left that job to move into the Divisional Dean job.

[0:13:11.7]

JACOBSON: Did you teach Women Studies classes?

JEFFORDS: Yes.

JACOBSON: What did you teach?

JEFFORDS: I taught the Senior Seminar and the Methods classes.

[0:13:27.5]

JACOBSON: How did you see your students change over the maybe five years you were there?

JEFFORDS: One of the changes that I saw and one of the commitments that I felt really

profoundly was to shift the conversation also to be more inclusive of issues and participation of students of color and issues facing women of color. Not to suggest that people were not open to those conversations but it wasn't as active a part of the dialogue in the unit. And I think we moved very decisively in that direction, added courses, added faculty. Francine Winddance Twine was a very important figure in that, I think she added a lot to the curriculum and developed new courses. And, importantly, she also was firmly placed in the issues of mixed-race and that was her research area and it was an area of her teaching and she brought that to the conversation as well. So I think as a result of some of the new faculty hires along with faculty who had been there – Shirley Yee for instance, of course was terrifically important in this; Angela Ginorio, clearly. That to raise more prominently issues facing the women of color in the curriculum and in the conversations in the unit was a very big deal at the time.

[0:15:00.3]

JACOBSON: And how did the students respond to that?

JEFFORDS: I think that over time we saw increasing participation in the courses by students of color. I think they began to recognize that the program was actively engaging them in issues that mattered to them. And the faculty became important members of a dialogue for them and participants in a dialogue that was important in their education. But I think, again, for some students there was level of at least the initial discomfort that comes with new learning.

[0:15:43.3]

JACOBSON: When you were there the department was just called the Department of Women Studies?

JEFFORDS: That's correct.

JACOBSON: And now it's called Gender, Woman, and Sexuality Studies. What do you think about that name change?

JEFFORDS: I think that's a really interesting question. We discussed that at the time when we became a department: should it be changed to say, Gender Studies? A lot of programs around the country were changing their names. And at the time I felt that it was politically really important to hold on to the Women Studies name. That was the history of the movement, it was the history of the program, and it said something really importantly politically about the commitment to women and the space for that within the institution. I think times change, obviously, and conversations change. I think that name may seem anachronistic now, but at the time I felt that it was still really important that we say, "There is a need for a space committed to Women Studies in higher education." But I think that there has increasingly been so much embeddedness of that conversation across the institution; that the nature of that need and of the kind of dialogue that a unit inside the institution should be supporting and sparking and enhancing has expanded well beyond the name of Women Studies. And so I think that changing the name was really important for indicating the role that you want that unit and that set of faculty and students to play in the larger conversations at the university.

[0:17:37.3]

JACOBSON: Going back to before you were the Chair, when did you first became involved with feminism?

JEFFORDS: This is indicating how old I am. When I was in— well, certainly when I was an undergraduate I took Women Studies courses but it wasn't possible to have that as a major or even as a concentration when I was an undergraduate. When I was in graduate school I had a number of faculty mentors who were feminist scholars and really important in the work of— There a combination of women who were really important within their discipline area, subject area traditions of focusing on

women's work, women's writing, women's production. A very small handful who were very engaged in feminist thinking and then another small handful who were incredible powerful women scholars, without necessarily being feminist scholars or Women's Studies scholars. Still, of course, in the significant minority among the faculty.

So I had the opportunity to work with a lot of fantastic women faculty mentors when I was in graduate school, but there was zero opportunity to do feminist work. There were no courses, no research that could be done, no support within the department for doing any of that work. So my dissertation was a theoretical dissertation but it wasn't a feminist dissertation. And it became an important part of my scholarly career that when I left graduate school I did a lot of work on my own to become more trained as feminist scholar. And in spite of the fact that I had opportunities to publish my dissertation, I chose not to do that because I didn't want to be known for that book because it wasn't a feminist book. So my first book, actually, is something that I wrote entirely independently after I left graduate school which is not always the way. It's not always the ideal advice you give somebody when they leave graduate school, is to abandon their dissertation and start something entirely new.

[0:20:16.2]

JACOBSON: Where did you go to graduate school?

JEFFORDS: University of Pennsylvania.

JACOBSON: What sort of stuff did you do when you left? You said that you did work to become more of a feminist scholar.

JEFFORDS: I just started doing a ton of reading and talking to people and going to conferences. It's the process of self-education, right?

JACOBSON: Were there any things you read in particular that—?

JEFFORDS: Oh gosh! You know, along with so many people I was a huge Andrea Dworkin fan.

[0:20:52.5]

JACOBSON: What issues were most important to you when you first started doing that work?

JEFFORDS: One of the things I did learn from my faculty mentors that was incredibly important to me, even though I didn't have feminist classes I took from them, they taught me not only to be a rigorous scholar but to be an authentic scholar. So it became really important for me to do work that was of relevance to the people that I was writing about. And if wasn't able to do that, then that seemed to me to be not the kind of scholar I wanted to be. So part of it for me was really thinking about how my work could engage communities that were not just scholarly communities but communities whose lives were being impacted by the work that I was doing. And that's one the reasons that I ended up doing work on masculinity because it also seemed to me that there was a lack of conversation among feminist scholars about the impact of our work on men.

So to me, when I wrote my first book which of course was about the Vietnam War and the soldiers in the war, of course, were principally men, that they were really important members of that dialogue to me. And that the book—I shared the work with them, and even though it was kind of a densely theoretical book at some points, it was really important to me that they were able to read the book and say, "Yes. This is it. You got it. You really understood how I was positioned within issues of masculinity and manhood and expectation about what it meant to be a soldier and what it meant to be a warrior and all those sorts of things." So that seemed really important at the time.

JACOBSON: And do you think people got it when they read it?

JEFFORDS: Yeah, I think so.

[0:23:14.4]

JACOBSON: What are you working on now?

JEFFORDS: I have a book coming out that is a co-edited work on global media and Osama Bin Laden. Trying to open up the conversation about how media positioned Bin Laden… There's a very common perspective on how Bin Laden is represented in this country, which doesn't match the representations in the rest of the world. And so I worked with a colleague who is at a university in Kuwait to collaboratively invite scholars from all over the world to write about media and Bin Laden. And then I'm working on a book on anger in America.

[0:23:55.6]

JACOBSON: Do you do any feminist work outside of the university?

JEFFORDS: It's hard for me to separate what I do every day from something that I would call feminist work.

[0:24:17.0]

JACOBSON: Do you think you achieved the goals that you had when you were a young feminist?

JEFFORDS: Well partly, but there's always more to do.

[0:24:36.4]

JACOBSON: What are some of your goals in the future?

JEFFORDS: I think both as a scholar and as a teacher one of my principal goals has been that somebody could walk away from either the work that I did or the classes that I taught or the conversations that we had and say, "I didn't see things that way before and I've changed the way that I see things." And that work is never done. Or for me – I need to keep changing the way I see things too.

[0:25:20.5]

JACOBSON: What do you think are some things that are going to happen? Future predictions for feminism as a whole?

JEFFORDS: Wow, that's a really big question. I'd love to hear your answer to that question too, at some point. I think that it's still the case that feminism needs to continue— I mean, has been and will continue to be challenged by what feminism means around the word and also what feminism means generationally. And those issues are not going away and I don't think they've come to any stable resolution and may not. But there is still a big gap left in our ability to think about and understand and engage with deep understanding about what feminism means around the world. We are not done with that work.

[0:26:20.7]

JACOBSON: What issues are important to you now that maybe didn't occur to you when you first started?

JEFFORDS: When I first started I was really not thinking about global issues. I think that was something that I came to understand later in my career, and I was pretty U.S. centric in that, and that was clearly a limitation in my thinking. That probably is the big one for me.

[0:27:10.8]

JACOBSON: Would you consider yourself an activist?

JEFFORDS: No.

JACOBSON: Why not?

JEFFORDS: It's an over-used phrase to describe yourself as a public intellectual but I feel like I am a scholar who is engaged in public conversations. I don't think that is the same as activist. To me an activist is somebody who really is committing a significant portion of their life to deep political engagement, and I'm not. I'm in a university, I'm teaching.

JACOBSON: But you consider yourself a feminist?

JEFFORDS: You bet.

JACOBSON: I think that's all my questions, unless you have anything else to say.

JEFFORDS: Nope, that's good.

[End: Jeffordsvideo.mov]

JACOBSON: Thank you.

JEFFORDS: You bet.