Feminist Oral Histories of the University of Washington

Department of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies, University of Washington
Seattle, WA

Karen Rudolph

Interviewed by
Mary Hall-Williams

April 27th, 2021
Record online over Zoom

Narrator
Karen Rudolph, born 1953 in San Jose, California, is a feminist activist, retired lawyer, and UW Women's Studies Alumni. Though Rudolph spent most of her young life active in then current issues of civil rights and the Vietnam war, she transferred from the University of Puget Sound as a history major to the UW general studies department in 1974 to study women's studies. Over this period, she participated in campus life as both a student and teacher within the department. Post-graduation, she remained active in women's rights issues such as abortion rights, lesbian rights, and later indigenous women's right. Eventually she returned to school to receive a law degree and continued to focus on indigenous rights throughout her career.

Interviewer
Mary Hall-Williams is an undergraduate student at the University of Washington majoring in Medical Anthropology and Global Health. She completed this oral history in the Spring of 2021 as a senior, under the direction of Professor Priti Ramamurthy in GWSS 490. GWSS 490 focused on oral history as a feminist research methodology.

Abstract
Throughout this oral history, Karen Rudolph shared a brief family history centering the socio-political events of her upbringing and her parents' activism and commitments to education through the Great Depression, Japanese Internment Camps, and World War II. Being the child of activist parents and a mother who put herself through college led Rudolph to a life steeped in activism. Karen cites the importance of having a mother who valued education and taught her that she could do more than simply marry as a big factor in her belief that she could be who she wanted and help make change. Karen also offered intimate memories of her college life, having a hard time making friends, joining leftist lezzies, falling in love with women in the program, and the reality the negative ways that women were affected by rape, domestic violence, and lack of access to safe and legal abortions. When referencing her education at UW, she fondly remembers both the progress and frustrations of the time. She speaks of learning that you can make change and take power even when confronted with institutional hierarchies telling you that you can't.

Interview recorded by Mary Hall Williams using Zoom Cloud Recording.

Files

Transcript – 25 pages
Transcribed by Mary Hall-Williams, April 2021.
Transcript has been reviewed and edited by Mary Hall-Williams

Karen Rudolph Interview

K.R: Alright, you have my permission to record this.

Mary: Thank you. So, we'll start out with your name and pronouns

K.R: Karen Rudolph, she/her

Mary: Okay, can you tell me a little bit- I know we've kind of had a slightly deep conversation already, but we'll start again with your personal history. Can you tell me when you were born and a little bit about your family?

K.R: I was born in 1953, in San Jose California. And my parents- my mother was from Anaconda, Montana, but had grown up in Tacoma, Washington and my father had grown up in and around Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. My mom was born in 1920. The year women got the vote- at least the year white women got the vote, and my father was born in 1922. So, they both were children during the depression. My mom's father was an editor at the Tacoma News Tribune and her mother had been a schoolteacher before she had kids. My father's father and I guess as far back as I can see had been construction people carpenters. You know, Woodworkers. He had left school at 16 to support he was the oldest son to travel with his father to construction jobs and support the family. yeah, and then you know World War Two happened ended up being in the army, the US army and he went to- he got sent to officer training school. Which was kind of like a college situation. Most of the people that got sent there. You know these aren't people that were West point or that kind of folks, so he wasn't- nobody in his family ever been to college, but he made it through that and so he ended up being a lieutenant at Fort Lewis in Tacoma in World War Two. He was a white Officer of all black troops and he was training people how to build. How to do construction. So, and my mom had. You know, had worked, since she was about 16. Her family for those days were middle class. You know, they owned a small House in Tacoma. They were one of the few people in the neighborhood who had a phone because our father's job they had indoor plumbing, which was a big deal, a lot of people had outhouses still. A lot of people, you know she remembers a lot of people fished. To feed their families, the women would go fish so that they would have something to eat but her family, they always had something to eat, but she started working at about age 16. Worked in a bakery, worked in a movie theater and then ended up putting herself through college. (inaudible) moved in with her aunt and uncle in Long Beach, California because they had free Community college. She took classes at University of Puget Sound because she could live at home and take classes there. Eventually, she ended up at San Jose State California at that point had a really

great college system that was almost for free. So, she went to school at San Jose State, and she fell in love with California and so she met my father at an officer's club dance at Fort Lewis. After the war, they got married and she talked him into moving to San Jose where she had finished her education and she then put him through school. So, he ended up getting an engineering degree. She had an English degree and her mother and father had gone to the University of Montana. Her grandmother had also been a schoolteacher in Missouri, but you only needed an eighth-grade education to teach school back then. Would have been you know, in the late 1800s.

Mary: Okay wow yeah. As you're referencing your family history, I'm hearing a lot of the political context of the time. Are there ways that having parents who lived through the Great Depression and we're involved in World War II that those kind of shaped your life growing up or what did that look like?

K.R: Definitely, my father's thought the military was totally absolutely ridiculous and idiots were running it. He had like no respect for them, you know. You know, wasn't particularly proud of the fact that he'd been in the army. He did- you know they kept almost sending him overseas to fight, but I think he was a really good teacher and an instructor. So, every time he was about to go, they would change and say no. No, we want you to- you know train the next group. I know that he had been in boot camp in Louisiana, from Pittsburgh, and he was a Union man. Union carpenters. He lied about his age at 16 and got into the carpenters Union. His father was in the Union and when he was in Louisiana he was really appalled. I mean imagine this is like the 1940s and Louisiana. He's from you know, Pennsylvania. A union guy. He goes down there and sees the segregation and he was just totally disgusted by it. Never went back. You know, hated the south. Thought it was terrible. Never went back. So that happened and I didn't find out that he had had been the officer with black troops until, until I was an adult. You know, and I was looking through some photographs and he was talking about some of the people, you know that he liked. So that was him. My grandfather my mother's father, the writer. You know, he was a journalist in World War II. On the west coast, you know, Japanese people were putting in internment camps and her family had friend, family friends who were Japanese. When they originally were put in horse stalls at the Puyallup racetrack- and my grandfather James who- he didn't drive- they didn't have a car- would take the bus all the way out to Puyallup from Tacoma to go visit people. His friends. There was a thing where college students- Japanese American college students, if they could find a place in the Midwest to go to school, they could get out of the camp and go to college in the Midwest. So, my grandfather helped people do that. Somewhere in my fuss, I have letters and photographs from people thanking him who he helped help do

that. Yeah, so that was- you know, when I was growing up the town, I grew up in was probably 98% white. White, middle class, some working class, people who own their own homes. Who grew up in a town that had recently been apricot orchards but housing developments had been built...Yeah so, I don't know how all of that affected me it one thing was my mother was very independent she'd put herself through college, you know, education was valued in my family. So, I kind of had the feeling that I could do what I wanted to do. You know, I didn't have the feeling that getting married was necessarily your goal in life. I think, because my mother had been independent for so long. You know, before she got married. I was thinking about it, you know, she worked for about 15 years before she had kids. She didn't have kids until her early 30s. You know, at that time I think most women were having children in their early 20s.

Mary: mm hmm okay. When did you go to high school and where?

K.R: I went to- I grew up, my family moved to Los Altos. First off, the first five years of my life we moved continuously because my father worked for another construction company. He was a project manager and about every six months, we would move. We lived in Arizona, we lived all over California, finally we lived in Palo Alto. The town where Stanford is and then we finally were able to- my parents bought a house. A really old, little, teeny house in Los Altos. Which was really considered the sticks, but that that's where I grew up you know. The thing about being- my father was a contractor is you can always build more house, you can always add on, you know, add rooms. So, I grew up with that. There were always rooms being added on, more bathrooms and all that. Yeah so, I grew up in Los Altos went to public elementary schools, went to Los Altos high school and I graduated in 1971.

Mary: What did you- what was your favorite subject or your passion, when you were in high school?

K.R: Yeah, being an activist (giggles).

Mary: (laughing) Already?

K.R: Oh yeah. You know, it was like the first earth day happened and we shut the school down and we did like workshops all day. The whole school did workshops, we invited people to come and speak. And, then the Vietnam War was going on. So, we were- you know, at one point we marched. You know, we were at school. We got a whole bunch of kids together and we marched in protest. We left school, marched downtown, marched to the local park and this was the cool thing. Joan

Baez lived in the hills, Los Altos hills. Which is a different town, but there adjacent. She came to the park with her baby Gabriel in her arms. Her husband was in prison for protesting the draft and she sang for us acapella. You know, it's just like one of my favorite memories. We used to also cut school- before her husband went to prison, he'd be speaking around, and we would play hooky and go listen. You know, go to hang out with the college kids and listen to him speak. He was really a great speaker. When there were sit ins at Stanford, we would tell our moms we were like whatever, going to the library or something. I remember one time; they had taken over a building. We're sitting in on this building and so me and a girlfriend went in the building, you know, we're hanging out with the protesters and we were upstairs, and the word came upstairs. Oh my god the cops were coming, the cops entered the building, and they were going to rouse everybody, you know arrest people. I was like 16 or 17 and I thought, oh no. You know, my mother doesn't know I'm here. I can't get arrested. I'll be in really a lot of trouble if I get arrested. So, we couldn't go down the stairs because the cops were downstairs. So, we went out the window and went over the roof of the next building and somehow- must have been a fire escape- made our way out and then went home. So, we didn't get caught. But there was also a lot of stuff that we did that our parents knew. Like there were these huge moratorium marches. Where everything would shut down for the day and thousands of thousands of people would march like through San Francisco. San Francisco is about 45 minutes away from my house. Also, I knew kids in- well, one of the town's close by was East Palo Alto which at that time was an almost totally black city. There were you know, protests there. Civil Rights protests and buildings got burned. You know, that happened very close and there were big protests at San Francisco State with a guy- the President was a guy named Hyacoua (SP?), who was really right-wing, kind of fascist school- we had a college President. So, there were a lot of clashes between student protesters and Reagan... all of that, you know, Kent State, Jackson State. All of that happened while I was in high school, so I like couldn't wait to leave home, so I could go do more of that and I wouldn't have to come home at night (giggles).

Mary: (laughter) okay. Would you say that there was a culture of activism in your high school and in your community?

K.R: Yeah, not in the community. The community was very conservative but there definitely was activists, we were a subgroup you know. There was also the jocks and the cheerleaders, and you know, the very conservative people. but there was definitely a group of people that were activists and kind of hippy's kind of. Yeah, and then I knew kids from all over the bay area, because I was involved in an episcopal youth group. We would go to like summer camp, you know the church

had summer camp. So, all these kids from all different races and all different economic classes would go to this church camp for a week, and basically just hang out. You know, and we would have these intense discussions about things. The great thing about it was because it wasn't in my high school- you know, high school had the social stratification. There's the in crowd and the prom queen, and whatever like that. So, you had to kind of protect yourself, you wouldn't want to expose your true feelings or your true vulnerability. But at church camp with these kids who weren't from the same high school, we could all be like real with each other. So, those became like my close friends and I just kind of suffered through high school. I mean the terrible thing about high school is you have no choice. You know, you gotta be there, there's only one you can go to, if you have trouble finding people like you, you know, tough.

Mary: Yeah.

K.R: So yeah, college was much better because you had more choice... and being outside of college is even really better (giggles).

Mary: I love that the backdrop is like this church camp that becomes...

K.R: Yeah, yeah, episcopal church camp. I also had gone in like elementary school and junior high- the first time I had ever heard about the Vietnam War was in junior high church camp and they brought soldiers from the local veteran's hospital who like had their face half shot off, you know, extensive burns, all these- you know, I thought they were really old, but they were really 20-year-old young men who talked to us about being in Vietnam. You know, and up until that point, you know, Vietnam, there'd been the Korean War and Vietnam, and we didn't really know much about it. Also, they brought in peoples from Cesar Chavez's farm workers Union to talk to us. You know, they were very into social justice. So my own parish wasn't, because it was Los Altos and very conservative, but the diocese was very liberal an activist.

Mary: That sounds pretty amazing.

K.R: yeah, it was.

Mary: So, when you went to college, what did you study? And how did you choose a school what was going on there?

K.R: Well, my mother and my grandmother had both gone to the University of Puget Sound at different points. My grandma had been widowed in her 50s and had to

support herself and had gone back to school to upgrade her teaching credential. So, she'd gone to University of Puget Sound because she lived in Tacoma and she ended up teaching high school at Annie Wrights Seminary, which is a private episcopal girl's school in Tacoma. She moved on campus, had a room, you know, a private room in the girl's dormitory and lived there. That's where I first knew her. So, I knew about University of Puget Sound because we used to go on vacations in Hoods Canal. You know, my mother loved the Northwest and so I was familiar with it, and back in like 1970. The University of Puget Sound- a lot of places were doing this kind of very cool experimental educational forums. So, they had a thing, where everybody would go. There was a group of students, they would all go live in this big old mansion together and they would take all their classes together, and it was kind of this whole you know... educational environment that was different than a normal live in the dorm go to classes with different people all day. It was kind of the whole thing together. There was a lot of- you know, in high school, we had thought a lot about forms of education and how ridiculous the form of education we were getting was. Not so much- well, some of it was content with the way things were taught. So that sounded very cool to me and I had gotten into the University of California, but I hadn't gotten into Santa Cruz, which was a fairly new campus, and they were doing a lot of experimental things there. I didn't get in there, they said, I think I got into Davis, which at the time was like a cow college (giggles). I really didn't want to do that. So, I thought oh I'll go to UPS I'll get into this new form of education. So, I got there, and it had been canceled. I guess they had it for a couple years and then they dropped it. So there, I was UPS and you come to find out- I could not believe this. It had the largest percentage of fraternities and sororities of any college on the West Coast. So, this is 1970, you know, the fraternities and sororities was like a throwback to the 1950s was like hitting a time warp, you know, and I was just shocked. You know, and they would have things where you'd be walking on campus and there would be this, you know 30 women, young students and they'd all have on little, short dresses and white gloves and they'd be like doing god knows what, you know. And the boys, the fraternities would actually have panty raids. Where they would go into the girl's dormitory and steal their underwear and then string the underwear up on like clotheslines. Can you believe this? I was just like... (laughing)

Mary: For what reason?

K.R: I don't have any idea. Some kind of like, you know, animal pelts. You know, and the girls, the sororities had these giant- I was in the basement of the student Union building one day walking around and there was an open door and I looked in the open door and here was this huge room. Every sorority had these big, had like a

living room. A giant living room downstairs and it was all, you know, this beautiful for a minute- it was so weird it was like a really wealthy persons living room with really fancy expensive furniture that all matched and color schemes, and all this stuff, and it ended up that the alumni from those sororities would provide this private entertainment area for each of the sororities. You know, anyway, I was just like amazed. Tacoma in 1971 compared to San Francisco in 1971 it was like a time warp. I was just shocked that I was there, you know. There was like no place to eat, you know, there were a few like burger joint; diners. kind of. It was just very weird, and I was like a hippie, so it's like wow what's going on here. Anyway, so I joined this very small antiwar movement at University of Puget Sound... But oh, you asked me like what I was interested in. In high school I had had a really amazing high school teacher who taught, instead of teaching a year of US history and a half a year of civics, which is what was required, he taught a two-year course of civics and US history together and this man had a master's degree, which was unusual for a high school teacher and he used a college textbook by a guy named Hoffstedor. Which was a pretty standard us history college textbook. Yeah, and I loved the class I just, I really, really liked it. I really like the fact that he opened the class to anybody, you didn't have to be an honors student, because at that point most of the really good teachers and the really interesting classes we're only open to honors students and I was not an honor student. Mainly because I didn't really think it was that important to have good grades. I like, all the way through school, my idea was you know, kind of like do as little as possible to pass, you know. To get a B. If getting an A is going to take me another 10 hours a week, well, that's not a good use of my time. That's how I went through high school. So, I was a US history major, I kind of still am. I'm really, really interested in history, and I liked that class because it wasn't just the rah rah patriotic bs history. It was more real, it actually talked about the real issues, you know. Although almost nothing about women.

Mary: When you got to college, did you find that it was easy for you to carve out your space and your circle coming from such a high activism background?

K.R: No, I was really lonely. My roommate, I had a great roommate, but she ended up getting a boyfriend, who was a, you know, a reading teacher. I guess they had special workshops or guests or something, for people who had reading difficulties. The guy was a, I think graduate student age. He wasn't a graduate student there, but he was a fairly young guy who'd been hired to do this... and they fell in love and she spent all her time in his room, most of her nights in his room. So, there I was alone in the dorm room, and I happened to be in a dorm that was mostly upper-class people, and I was a freshman. Umm, I found out later that my roommate and I were a topic of conversation. I later had a really good friend who

had been on a semester abroad, and she had heard about us from her friends in the dormitory. About how horrible we were.

Mary: (giggles) what?!

K.R: (laughing) Yeah, so we didn't have a lot of friends. You know, it's like oh, this is terrible. yeah, I didn't know-you know people, but what happened is like we'd be sitting on our beds in our room with our door open, because everyone had their door open and somebody would come down the hall and they'd like- 'You need to turn down your music!' and slam our door and our music wasn't on (laughs) it was like whatever was going on we got blamed for it. I don't know why. But I did make- you know the next year I ended up finding my group people, several of whom I'm still good friends with- you know this was, i was like 19-20 years old and I'm 68 now and I still know them even though we live in different states. But where I found my- I was taking US history classes that was really interesting, I was taking religion classes because UPS is a Methodist school, although you weren't required to do anything, religious, but the religion teachers were the people who were the best about social justice issues. You know so things got discussed in those classes that I was interested in. You know and the whole thing about ethics and morality and integrity and how does that all fit together, and how does it fit together with religion. So, I took a lot of religion classes, I took a lot of history classes, and I took a women's history class from Mary Rothchild. Who was at university of Washington. And oh God I loved that class so much you know I found out about Emma Goldman and Susan B Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman. You know, just it was like oh my God. I really liked Women's Labor Union History was my favorite stuff.

Mary: Mmmhmm

K.R: You know, Mother Jones, because you know, I was an activist. You always are thinking about strategy and tactics and what work, and how do you get people involved. How do you change the system? And yeah so, that was all about that and I really loved it, and there were no more classes at University of Puget Sound. So, for my junior- I was there for two years. So, in 1974 I went traveling. The Spring of 74 but in the fall, I moved to University of Washington and became a general studies major, which is what women's studies was under. They didn't have a department yet.

Mary: I see.

K.R: But, the other thing was- like the Women's Studies classes. We were talking, you know, it was really easy to make friends. When I came to University of Washington oh, you know, the department. It was like instant sisterhood. People had potlucks all the time in their homes, and you talked about stuff you cared about in class. So, you know, we would hang out together and- oh (giggles) and one big thing was everyone started coming out, as lesbians. You know and I had, before then, I had a boyfriend at University of Puget Sound that like, you know the relationship blown up, kind of in my face. He was a lot more conservative than I was. I remember him calling me a, not a fanatic, but a zealot. (laughs), anyway. You know, but then here's women studies and there's all these women and it's so wonderful and everybody was falling in love with each other and, of course, that caused its own problems. You know, but we all came out. So, there was all that going on too

Mary: (laughs).

K.R: Your only 26- I didn't realize it at the time but later on. Especially when I went to law school and everybody, well most of the people in law school are your age, 26. I was almost 40 you know, and I was amazed at how people could like, be in the law library until midnight every night. Studying, we were all studying, you know, 70-80 hours a week and then they would go out to taverns afterwards and you know, end up sleeping with each other, and there was all that kind of stuff going on and I was just like, woah like how do they have the energy? To do this, I can't believe it. But thinking back to when I was in my 20s, like oh yeah that's like what it's all about you know, like you're working and you're planning your life and doing school and all that. But there's also all that kind of energy going on. So, anyway, that was my experience of it. Lots of drama. You know, at one point the woman I was madly in love with ended up sleeping with another woman that we were friends with, and I was like so devastated I didn't go to school for a week.

Mary: Aww...

K.R: Yeah aww (emphatically) heartbroken. Stuff like that. Then I ended up partnered with another Women's studies student who was an amazing woman- who I'm still friends with- but yeah lots of drama. There were some Women studies professors who were lesbians, and we were all kind of like their fan club. Anyway (laughing), that was going on.

Mary: So, would you say that you kind of, first started identifying or recognizing yourself within a feminist lens once you got to the University of Washington?

K.R: I did before that.

Mary: Before then.

K.R: I started in high school, but there you know, there was magazine articles and different things. There still are like really no textbooks, you know but yeah and it started at University of Puget Sound and then you know, but that's yeah, the whole reason I went to UW. I wanted to be part of that. You know, and to yeah. I wanted to change the world for women.

Mary: Mhmm

K.R: because, it had changed my world.

Mary: yeah, I was just going to say when you were at the University of Washington, what were some of the important kind of political and social issues happening?

K.R: Oh yeah well you know, a big one. Well and that- this was, also at University of Puget Sound was abortion rights. You know, and I can't you know you'd have to look up what the dates were and when things were happening, but you know there were, it was like. First abortion wasn't legal and then there were some doctors and in Washington state & Seattle, I think that would do abortions and then eventually you could get an abortion, if you were a resident and if you were a certain age. I know that, like a friend- and when I was in Tacoma a friend of mine from high school. Who was going to school in Colorado called me up and said that the younger sister of one of her friends needed an abortion and the only way to get it was in Washington. So, they wanted to know what I picked her this girl up, she was like 16, would I pick her up at the airport and you know take care of her and take her to the doctor and take care of her after the abortion and get her back on the plane, you know, to go back to Colorado. So, I did that. We lied about her age and where she lived you know and- you know, and the girl told me. She told me, - I think she was a Chicana. She told me that her boyfriend... Oh, where she got the money to have the abortion was her boyfriend had asked his coach. His high school coach had given him the money to give her, to get the abortion. She told me that, if her father had found out that she was pregnant that her father would have killed her boyfriend, because her boyfriend was black. And she believed, I didn't believe this, but she believed that getting an abortion was killing a baby, but she felt she didn't have any choice. So that’s like, you know. Things were very personal. Access to birth control- when I was in high school the pill got invented. It became available, but still a lot of- there were girls at University of Puget Sound that I knew, that were having sex, but would not use birth control, because if they

use birth control it would mean that they were planning on having sex and that would mean they were a slut. So, they would rather not use birth control and every month be scared to death, that they were pregnant, but at least that meant that they were good girls. You know, I mean it was just like so convoluted. But yeah, that whole thing of- you know, because it was coming out of like the 1950s, where you know, good girls did not have sex until they were married. period. I mean the truth was a lot of girls did have sex and a lot of girls got pregnant. My roommate, one of my roommates at University of Washington. You know, had gotten pregnant in high school, had gotten sent away to the children's home society, and had had a child that was adopted. It was all hushed up and you know, like that. but that was how it was then, like you could not have a child out of wedlock and keep child, in the white community.

Mary: Wow.

K.R: So, those, those body things were a big issue. You know, and at the same time it's all about free love and you know. There were like these conflicting things going on. So, trying to walk the line in between those two push and pull things. I don't know I can't remember your question now. I can't remember, where we were going when I got sidetracked.

Mary: That's all right, I think-

K.R: - So anyway, I want to talk about education.

Mary: Okay

K.R: Okay so, you know, we were very interested in the form of education. Not just -it was very exciting having you know, the content. You know studying, women Union organizers and women's workers, and you know, what happened to women in World War II- oh one thing I don't think I mentioned. That my mom worked at the Todd shipyards during World War II as a draft, drafting. And she made more money than her father had ever made in his life. So, that was one thing that you know was happening, during the war. You know, here young women, she wasn't trained in that, didn't have a degree in it, wasn't an architect, but yeah women could make good money during that time. But anyway, so that was interesting the content was interesting, but we were very interested in the form, you know, like. You know, what's the hierarchy of the university? You know, and who do they say, has the right to teach you something? Or you know, it's not only what you're learning, but how you're learning it. So that was- we really critiqued that, and we would demand changes. You know, we weren't interested in the university saying

here's this Professor, a tenured professor, with a PhD, and because you know, -anyway. We thought that all of us had something to teach and something to learn. That we could learn from each other. At that point if you're just going to have tenured college professors then they're pretty much all going to be men. And the women who were tenured most of them were people who had never had an activist day in their life, you know because they had been too busy. You know, getting their degrees and doing whatever they had to do that, that fit you know the requirements of the male hierarchy of the university.

Mary: Mmmhmm.

K.R: So, we really- we were really against that you know, and we would. If we got in a class and the Professor thought that's what she was going to be doing, we would quickly change her mind. We would not allow it. You know, like no we're not going to do it that way. This is how we're going to learn; you know this other way. The women's studies department had an advisory board that was made up of staff and students and instructors and professors and community people you know, and that board ran the department, you know- decided who was going to get hired, what classes were going to be taught. You know, and I was a student, a student representative on that board and I had as much say as anybody else in what was happening. Now, looking back on it, I realized that the people who were running-you know, Sue Ellen Jacobs. Dr. Sue Ellen Jacobs you know, was quite a bit older than me. She was in interfacing with the power structure at the university and the goal was always to end up with a department. You know, to have a women's studies department. She was interfacing with them, but she did not say oh well I'm only- you know what the university would like is oh we're going to be like any other department it's all going to be run by tenured faculty. They're going to have their own little private meetings, nobody else will get invited or be allowed to come, you know, the students will have minimal or no input, like every other department, and if you follow all the rules and do everything, the way the university wants, we will let you be a department. You know, so yeah, we really wanted to look at everything. You know, just like you would look at marriage. I mean, like what's that about? Like, what's the history of marriage? What happens in marriage? You know, what's really going on versus what people tell you is going on. You know, all of that. You know the military, you know just to not accept the way things are in society, but to really critique it and if we didn't like what was happening, to feel like we have the power to change it. We'd go sit in or demonstrate. Go complain. Take the power into our own hands. And the thing was, you know, I really value the things I learned. Like women and the law and the history and all of that has helped me in my life, but what I really learned was- what I really learned was that it's possible to question authority. It's possible to

take power, even when they're telling you, you can't. You know, I learned how to organize and how to be an activist and that- yeah. So that that was the message, you know, what changed the rest of my life. Was always feeling like you know, I don't have to accept the way things are and to look at what the power structure is.

Mary: I'm wondering Is this how you ended up teaching? Before in our phone call you mentioned that you were an undergraduate who was also. teaching women's studies classes.

K.R: Yeah.

Mary: Can you tell me more about that?

K.R: Yeah. Well, that was an example. We felt that- This was the introduction of women's studies- we felt that it was really important to model, what we'd call it this then, but to model relationships between women. Friendships between women and to not have this hierarchy of here's this person at the top of the pyramid and you know. So, we, so that class was always team taught. One of the people would be usually a graduate student. You know, so many classes are taught by graduate students- would be a graduate student and the university would be paying them as their graduate whatever they call it, you know, instructor. And then the other person, which was me would be you know their undergraduate assistant, or something, I can't remember what the title was, but the truth was in the classroom we were equal. We were team teaching, there was no hierarchy between us and the person who the university was paying more money to. Paid part of her paycheck to the other person, to me. You know, so we would figure out okay we're going to have even money and how do we make it even is this person is going to give this one some of her money, some of the paycheck. Yeah, so that, that's how we did it and I just think it worked really well. You know, and we brought in lots of people from outside. But yeah, and how I got hired was I applied to teach, and they had a hiring committee, and you know, they interviewed me, and they thought I would be good. So, I got hired to teach, and I taught with several different graduate students over the years. I kept getting rehired and I just kind of never bothered to finish up my undergraduate degree, because I was always too busy, you know, kind of living my life. I remember it came down, umm and I had some incompletes, and I had written my senior thesis. You know I got that stuff. But there were still university credits- the last one was I needed some math credits. So, I went through the catalog, and I found this class -I only needed like two credits and there was a class on teaching arithmetic for elementary school teachers. And it was you know, now they call it distance learning. You know, it wasn't one that you had to go to class. Yeah so, I took that class and I went in-

there were two finals that you had to pass and I went in and took them one after the other. You know, because it was arithmetic. Five times five, you know (laughs). Yeah, and I passed, and so I got the last two credits I needed and was able to finally get my bachelor's degree. But yeah, I just kind of didn't need it before then.

Mary: Over the course of your time kind of in the department, did you witness any dramatic changes, maybe even in the shift from like aiming for an actual women studies, as opposed to general studies or?

K.R: Yeah um, you know we finally got, we finally got- oh, the university is going to, let us have an actual tenure line faculty position because up until that point all the professors were actually professors in other departments. You know, like you Sue Ellen Jacobs was anthropology and Cydney Caplin was English and you know they were all different people, that had, I guess they call it like joint assignments or whatever. However, they call it, but then we finally get all good we're going to get this person who is going to be our professor and who could actually get tenure eventually and they hire Nancy Kenny. Who I guess is retiring last year, or this year and we were incredibly disappointed. Us students were really disappointed because she had like zero history in the women's movement. You know, she was like straight up academic and gone all the way through school, uhh doing everything, had gotten her PhD, but with no community experience or any connections. We were like Oh, you know yeah that's kind of what we thought. It's going to go that way. It ended up that Nancy, you know, actually, this is not due to me because I was gone pretty much by that point, but it ended up that she became, more of an activist and became more of a connected to the community. You know and learned- you know I think the department, the people in the department influenced her and taught her. So, she's been this great asset, you know, to the department. Yeah, but that's- what I've noticed it in my life is that's how things often happen, you know you fight like how to get a woman of color hired into a position, and then the woman that they hire, you know it's not somebody who is not going to move the cause forward. You know it's like, you want a black person on the Supreme Court, and it ends up being Clarence Thomas. So anyway, I mean that I've seen that kind of thing happened a lot in my life.

Mary: Yes, it still happens quite a bit.

K.R: yeah so, and you know and it's hard with academics, because often they're you know, they were straight A students all the way through school, and they were very narrowly focused on their career. You know, their future career and they really don't have time for anything else, and so they have just like no experience

you know outside of school all they all they know is academics and that's all they can really teach their students. You know why- in construction you know I ended up owning a large construction company that was all Union and the problem we had, and the unions had was in high school, the people that were teaching high school didn't know anything about the trades. You know, and so all they all thought, oh the way to make it is you've got to go to college, you've got to become an expert in computers. I live in Silicon Valley, you know, and so they point everybody in that direction, and not everybody should go in that direction. But you know, the truth is, I think they have very little respect for people that work with their hands

Mary: Mmmhmm.

K.R: And all they've ever known is going to college, so they don't realize there's other paths out there.

Mary: I see. Kind of coming back to women studies and your own feminist praxis, could you speak to how you developed that or how that looked in your teaching of women's studies and then after you left the university?

K.R: yeah um. You know, a bunch of different things, one thing is, we wanted to make it possible for the students to learn from each other. you know, so we wanted to have a lot of opportunity for students to talk about themselves and their own life experience, because we figured hey that's, you know, that's great to do that, you know and we don't want just people coming in and class and taking notes, you know it's like unscrew the top of your head pour in. You know, my ideas and then you vomit them back out at me and then okay that's an education. Like okay, no that's not that's not good enough, so we always had one day a week discussion groups. We always had students write journals that they turned in every week, they write journals about what their own personal reactions were to the topics we were covering in class, because all of the topics were personal. You know, in the end they might not seem like it right at the beginning, but they are. You know, we had a week on women's health, we had you know, I can't remember, women's history, we had a week on women in the arts and literature and you know, but everything. You know, is stuff that they had personal reflections on so they'd have the discussion group, and they would write in a journal. We also did not have grades because it's like, how do you ohh your life is, we'll give you an A but your life, we'll give you a D, you know it's like pass fail. Because we wanted people to have the freedom to feel like they could express what they really thought and were feeling and not just like oh what's the test right. I remember, we would have, you know this is years ago, but we had students coming out of China, and those

families live in China. They'd come and they'd take the class and, and we would drive them crazy because their form of education was you gotta psyche out what the Professor wants you to say, and then you repeat it back to them. And that's it you're good you know, and so the idea of them expressing their own opinion on something really was high anxiety for them, because that was not part of their educational experience. Expressing you know what they thought. So, they were always trying to like figure out what I wanted them to say. You know which is like heart wrenching. yeah, and I still remember, I mean I'm friends with some of my former students, but I can remember, I remember one woman she had shot and killed her husband. And she was living, uhh you know in some kind of like halfway house, prison halfway house and she'd done all this time, and what happened was she was a domestic abuse survivor and he'd been coming for her one day and she shot him. Not meaning really to kill him just to stop him, and she, then she got found guilty of murder. So, you know just all these people, I remember- we'd talk about rape and women would say my boyfriend in high school on Vashon Island, you know, we drove out to a place that make out and he raped me, and I never told anybody. Anyway, so that was a lot of it and we'd bring in lots of people from different community groups to talk and other people from women's studies to talk about different topics that they were expert in. I remember one thing, I said okay- you know, what's hard about talking about history is, it's the things that are left out. So, like when you talk about lesbian rights nowadays and talk about it then, it was so different then that it's hard to understand it, because the whole society around it was so different. I remember, we had these little- they were little enamel pens that were two women symbols touching each other, and that was a little signal for being a lesbian. I told the class, in lesbian week or whatever it was, that for a project, you know, they had to do so many projects, and so one possible project was to wear one of these pens for a day and then write about like how it was. So, I have this class like 100 people- this is the easiest ever project, no research library required. Only one person took up the challenge and she wrote that she wore the pen on her blouse and then spent the whole day with her coat on over top of it.

Mary: Aww

K.R: Never took her coat off all day. Which was- that was very interesting.

Mary: Mmhmm

K.R: You know, she learned a lot about herself in that. But yeah, I had I lived in the Fremont district, and I was walking down the street one day holding hands with my girlfriend and by the time we got back to our house our windows had been

broken and they had thrown lavender paint at our front door. So that's, that's what was happening, you know. It wasn't like now with Rachel Maddow on every night, you know, and gay marriage legal and all of that. I mean that's something, we thought marriage was like a really patriarchal idea. So, we were not fighting to get to legalize lesbian marriages. We were more fighting for no marriages for anybody, you know- not we didn't, we weren't fighting for it, but we were very critical of it and we were definitely critical of the military. so, we were not- you know, we thought it was great that women were not getting drafted, and we just wanted to make it so men didn't get drafted either. Which eventually we got but yeah, we definitely weren't fighting to get gay people and lesbian sent to the military.

Mary: Thinking on kind of the future generations and controversies around feminism and what it means to be feminist. Do you have any kind of key differences that are based in kind of the differences in time that come to mind?

K.R: yeah, I don't know really, you know, I spent years being on the Executive Board of the national women's studies association after I moved to California. Just because I wanted to you know, I wanted to like hang out with feminist educators. But what I found after I left there, but sometimes would go back and listen to plenaries and stuff was that the language that was being used was completely inaccessible to the average person. I thought here I am with a master's degree in urban planning and urban studies and eventually, a law degree and I could not understand what they were talking about. And I felt this is sad, because there's so much that needs to be done for women in society, we're so far behind still, we faced so many issues and problems and yet what I saw there was women's studies and feminist academics, we're off on some you know, maybe, eventually- whatever they were talking about and the research, they were doing would eventually help average women, but I, I could not translate it. You know, so that. I don't know if that's my own prejudice about it because I haven't like really studied what's going on and what's being written and all that. I was very excited about you know, there was a group of women of color graduate students who did a panel. I don't know if you watch that.

Mary: I don't think I saw it.

K.R: Who had been in women's studies. I guess, they were like the first cohort of the graduate, women's studies graduate students. And it was lovely you know you can tell, they adored each other, and they were all excited to talk to each other, and they were thinking back to you know the good old days. When they had worked, they'd been students together, and now they're like spread all over the country and a lot of them are professors at different institutions, you know, but they had that

you know wonderful energy of sisterhood you know, and I thought oh there it is. You know, that's how we felt as undergraduates 15 years before them or whenever it was. That was really encouraging I thought yeah whatever they're doing their research on and they're getting published, so they can be professors and all of that but that there was still that that love and excitement and dedication to improving women's lot in the world. So, that was good. It's good that it's still going like that.

Mary: I'm wondering today, what do you see, as some of the most pressing issues or things that kind of we're still working toward when it comes to women's event advancement?

K.R: Domestic violence is huge. I did work at a women's shelter in Seattle some but also just being a woman in our society. I have a sister-in-law, who was murdered by her partner. yeah, that's a huge issue that really- You know, some women can't get themselves safe. They try to leave and that's the most dangerous time for a woman in an abusive relationship, is when they when they're leaving. So that that's a huge issue I think another one is women in the workplace. Working class women, you know, unions. I think we really need a strong Union movement in this country. My life, is different, was different because my father was in a Union. You know I probably wouldn't have gone to college if he hadn't been in a Union and been able to get into the middle class. I think that's a huge issue for women and it's you know, gone backwards in my lifetime. So, yeah those are the big things that I can think of, and they just affect so many women. And of course, immigration. You know I live in a state that's like 40% Chicano. You know and yeah, so that's a big a big issue. Lots of people I know are in mixed families. The mother doesn't have documents, some of the kids don't have documents, some of them are US citizens and just kind of the damage that does. Most of my life I've been working alongside the native communities, so all the issues in the native community with oil basically, with the land being polluted, with the oil pipelines and copper mining and all of that which becomes- you know, it's big issues for women that are trying to. You know, live on those reservations and raise their children on those reservations. Your kind of froze. Your picture is froze

Mary Am I back? Just a minute Uh Oh. Can you hear me?

K.R: What did your parents do for a living?

Mary: um my mom was self-employed so she ran she owned preschool she started within in daycare when I was born and then by the time I was in middle school she had preschool buildings, two of them in South Seattle. And my father, he

passed when I was very young, but he was in ministry and then he did kind of homeless outreach and those kinds of things.

K.R: I'm sorry to hear that he passed when you were young.

Mary: yeah.

K.R: I worked at a homeless shelter in downtown Seattle, for a year. It was a good, you know good experience. Again, changed the way I looked at people that don't have a roof over their head for the rest of my life.

Mary: I did a bit of homeless outreach as well in high school but not very much. I had another question for you. So, you talked about kind of being at UW and in our previous conversation being a member of leftist lezzies. When it comes to kind of the way the world looks now, I guess, this is in two parts I'm curious about changing tactics, you mentioned, you have an interest in the tactics of activism, and what is effective. So maybe I'll ask that part first have you observed how tactics have changed when it comes to achieving feminist aims?

K.R: Well, you know some of its due to technology, you know I mean it's so different. it's so different have. Just I mean. I sound like this old. fart. You know, but it's like oh back in the day, you know what I was thinking about this, I was talking to a friend who spent several years traveling around, a white woman. Driving a medicine man around all over the United States and Canada because he was doing ceremonies and thinking about that, and all of that time cellphones didn't exist. So, you'd be like out there on the road, and nobody really knew where. I was thinking back to when I graduated high school, I borrowed my father's pickup truck that had a camper shell on it and me and three other girls went on a month-long camping trip. So, we're 18 years old, one was 17 and we drove from San Francisco to Yellowstone camped out in Yellowstone. Eventually we went to British Columbia camped out there and Washington, Oregon. We would just call home once a week. You know, make a collect call on some pay for some place and say okay, this is where we are, you know. Now I just think oh my God, you know my mother like I didn't seem to be worried about us. You know, there we were out in the world in a different country, and you know calling in once a week. She had the license plate of our truck. You know, it was like well all she could have done is like call the local highway patrol and give them the description of the truck and the license plate and see if they could hunt us down if something happened. You know, and a big thing when I first started working with native people a lot of times they would- I lived in a one room apartment in what was considered the Central District down the edge of Capitol Hill behind a place called the cherry tree

tavern, I can't remember the street, that it was on. Eventually cherry tree tavern got shut down because there were too many shootings in the tavern. But oh, people would come and stay in my apartment. And they would call home, which would be like South Dakota and North Dakota you know or Arizona and then I would end up with these huge phone bills. You know, hundreds of dollars long distance phone bills, but that was the only way we had to communicate. So anyway, cell phones are great you know email and computers and all that. You can organize through Facebook and Twitter and all that. What I've done the last decade is I decided okay I'm an old fart you know I'm really old, and the young people, the people in their 20s are doing things, they're interested in different things and they're doing things in different ways. So, I need to like step aside because it, you know it's just so stupid for me to think that my way of doing things and my issues are what's going to inspire the new generation coming up. They have their own ways and just like I you know when I was in my 20s like ya know, we had our own ways of doing things on our own things we were interested in and so I decided, I was going to step aside and I was going to. listen. Listen to see what the young people were up to and be supportive of that. You know and see how they tie together the issues, and one thing I found was great interest in permaculture. That people are just like passionate about this. That was one thing, the whole thing at standing rock. So you know we went to Standing Rock, I took my sons to standing rock because I could see okay, this is going to be the Alcatraz of this generation. You know the same way; I look back in Alcatraz in 1969 and everything that came out of that. You know with native rights and treaty rights and all of that. I could look back and say oh yeah sometimes it seems like you lose, like Alcatraz they didn't get to do what they wanted to do on Alcatraz and they eventually got taken off of it but you can draw a direct line between that and the fact that the Mulkishoot tribe has a casino and that my great nieces and nephews are learning their language, and their arts, and their history, and they have medical clinics and all that. You know, you can trace back to that. I think standing rock is going to be the same way that a lot of things are going to trace back to that over the next couple decades. yeah, I mean hopefully stuff is going to get traced back to George Floyd and Brianna Taylor. You know, people will say yeah that's where it started. You know or not started, but that was the impetus you know that then led to this other thing but it's not people my age that are going to tell people where they should go with all that.

Mary: (giggles) Okay.

K.R: You know, but I'll show up. get our sides and I'll show up and put my body there and write checks. See where it leads.

Mary: I know that we kind of talked about some things in our previous conversation, but I would love to get kind of on the record, formerly how feminism and your activism continued beyond the University of Washington and teaching.

K.R: Oh yeah well, I could talk about it, I mean. Like my whole life, you know it led to me meeting my husband, I mean that's kind of odd because he's a native American man who was in prison, you know but women's studies. You know, led me into native rights work and then that led to meeting him. yeah, so there's that whole thing, but as far as like how I made a living. We had to move to California, because the state of Washington wouldn't parole him if he stayed in Washington state, because he was as they said infamous even though he'd been acquitted, so we moved to California and we had to make a living. And my father owned a construction company in the Bay area and despite all my issues with my father over the years, my parents were divorced. You know, he would always give me a job, hire me. Big company, so there was always that. So, he hired my husband as a labor construction and hired me as like a clerk. You know a secretary basically.

Okay, but so how feminism and my women's studies education influence. You know I looked around at the structure of that company and the structure of construction in general. Which is pretty much almost 100% male. The people that build the physically build the buildings were men, the engineers inn the company were all men, the Vice Presidents were all men, the only women in the company were secretaries. you know, often older women secretaries. So here I come, you know come in and so I'm looking, at not only just what's happening with the company and how it's getting things accomplished and making money, and so, but what's the position of men and women in that company? What's the position of people of color in the company? You know, the labors union was almost all Chicano, my husband was Native American, and he fit right in you know it's like- There was only one Chicago Vice President, that was almost all white men. You know, and my brothers both work for the company I have an older brother and a younger brother, so we were all working there. I did not intend to stay; I did not intend to ever- I mean I didn't like my father. I didn't get it, we didn't get along you know, but I had to pay the rent and so I was working there, and the company was big enough that we had very little interactions with each other. but I watched what my brothers were doing and my husband, who was a Native American man who'd grown up in foster homes and had a GED you know, he was like Karen. Basically, in so many words you have access to all this privilege, you know you're a smart as your brothers- actually he said you're smarter than your brothers. so, why don't you take advantage of this? Why are you downwardly mobile? He was like if it was him, he would be taking it, you know, he was taking advantage of everything he possibly could. He ends up being a journeyman operating engineer,

which is the top of the construction trades people. But you know it was like yeah why don't I just take advantage of this? You know, do I trust myself to do the right thing and to do it good you know. Do it in a way that's good for people and I decided- I kind of took it as a challenge. At one point my father, this is all before I became a lawyer. They were trying to figure out what the next step was with the company, because my father and his partner wanted to retire, and so, who was going to take over the company. And how was that kind of happen, and it was very confusing, and they kept hiring consultants of lawyers and they couldn't do it. so, my father asked me like well, where do you want to end up because you know my brothers were going to end up in an upper management. And I said, well, I would like to be in Upper management. In upper management and he said, oh no the men will never accept you. You can't be in upper management, because the men will never accept you. And I thought, I didn't say it yeah but I thought watch me. Watch me that was like.

Mary: Challenge Accepted.

K.R: You know, F you. What ended up happening was my younger brother and I ended up figuring out how to buy the company from my father. First buy at his partner and then my older brother decided he didn't really like being in construction, so we've had to buy him out, and then we bought out my father. Then the big thing was- and so that was really fun, because then we got to run it the way we wanted to. You know, but all along, because my last name was the same last name of the company, I got to advocate for women in the company all along, you know which was really fun, and my father was always very pro-union. So, and I got to work with the unions, and they loved us, I got to work, in a lot of companies' managements and the unions are like at loggerheads with each other, and what I saw and there were other local contractors like this. I saw well really the Union contractors and the Union workers; we should be all on the same side. you know who the enemy is isn't the workers, the enemy is the non-Union construction companies. You know who are paying their people shit wages and no benefits, and we need to get lobby for laws that make us more competitive. My father said anybody can be competitive by you know screwing over the workers, you know that the trick is this to be competitive and make a profit and treat the employees right and I think he felt that way because he had been a Union carpenter. So that was always I think- how do we do this, you know how we treat the secretary's right? how do we go out and find women engineers and promote them up? yeah, how do we- You know the fun thing is, we used to give 10% of our profits to nonprofit groups and we got to pick them. So we financed a taj mahal concert, all the money went to the native American friendship house. We supported the national Hispanic University in San Jose. We donated the foundations, the actual

foundations, concrete foundations to buildings for a county run program for women attics, rehab for women addicts, where they could have their children with them, while they were going through rehab. You know it was great fun, you know all the stuff we got- we had take your daughters to work day where we would send a bus to East Palo Alto and pick up a whole busload full of little girls and bring them to the office for the day and talk to them and take them out to a nice restaurant for lunch. Talk to them all about you know joining the unions, you know, and that was very exciting because their moms you know their mothers were like house cleaners and cafeteria workers and their dads were gardeners and they had those little girls they had never been in an office. They were so impressed that like oh look at these ladies, they're in an office and its air conditioned and they're all wearing really nice clothes, and makeup and like you know they- Like Oh, this is a possibility, maybe this is a possibility of being one of these ladies instead of cleaning houses for a living. Yeah, so all of that. We made sure that, before gay and lesbian people could get married, we made sure that the that we would give an employee extra money to buy health insurance for their partner their gay partner. Even though that that's not how the regular health insurance worked at that time. Stuff like that, so that that's how it influenced the rest of my life.

Mary: Okay I'm hearing that you were able to kind of apply a certain activist social justice framework to everything that you did. I'm wondering as a final question if you could pass down like any questions to think about when entering spaces, when it comes to like holding on to that. I know these days with the younger generation and kind of the school debt complex and all of the things we're constantly having to balance, you know going after a living

K.R: Yeah, exactly.

Mary: And kind of staying active in our communities and in the greater work, we want to do. I'm wondering what a framework for kind of application to any area, if you have any thoughts

K.R: Yeah, it's rough because you got to make a living. You gotta keep a roof over your head. So, I think one thing is that it's Okay. You gotta make a living. you can learn something from any place you are, you know you can have a terrible job you know. That you don't really want to do, but you're going to learn a lot at it if you keep your eyes open and using the framework of your politics, you know. You'll learn things, you'll hopefully grow your network, you know get to know people get to find out what their lives are like and all of that will become an education. You don't really know how down the road that's going to help you out. Yeah it's

hard I've thought about that because I did not have student debt, you know and now everybody has student debt, and nobody has a $200 a month apartment. You know, even in the worst part of town it's a lot more than that. So. yeah. I can't I wish I could waive the wind. You know and make it. make it easier for people.

K.R: But yeah, you kind of- There were times when, for a year, I pumped gas. I learned a lot pumping gas and I kept a roof over my head. Sometimes you have to kind of go on those little detours. You know because you have to take care of your family and feed yourself and stuff. You know, I made it back. It's one reason I became a lawyer, I just was really bored with what I was doing, and I thought I'll get some more education and then that'll give me more options. You know and that's always been true. You know, for me at least getting an education gives you options.

Mary: Okay. Well, I think that's it then. Thanks so much for your time, I enjoyed getting to listen to bits of your life.

K.R: Yeah, I- I Think, it's been very nice. You know, getting to think about it ahead of time and then blab and blab

Mary: (laughing)

K.R: So, thank you, I really wish you well in your graduation and the final stretch.

Mary: Thank you very much.