INTERVIEW: Gerry Barrons
INTERVIEWER: Sarah Arvey
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Interviewer: **The first questions that we have are about your personal biography and what might have led you in your earlier years to be influenced and become active in the feminist movement. So if you could just start from the very beginning and tell us where and when you were born and maybe describe your family circumstances, economic, and religious.**

G. Barrons: Oh very good. Okay. I was born in Montgomery, West Virginia, which was a small coal town in 1940 and my parents decided to move to Charleston in 1950, which was a big city of a 100,000 because we were Catholics and there was a Catholic school there. I had/have two sisters. My father was a first generation Irish Catholic. The idea of being an Irish Catholic in West Virginia put you immediately in a minority role because there were so few. There were 76 in my senior class. It was very small. We had one Catholic high school for a radius of fifty miles. Then I went to college in the north, which was Columbus, Ohio and at a women's Catholic college — Ohio Dominican University. So, you can see that there was the beginning of a separate kind of life from what was going on around one. In college I had four years of theology. One of the great things that the Catholic Church does, which may be one of the only great things that the Catholic Church does in my estimation, is to educate women. They educate them well. If you take theology, you are asked to question everything.

What happened as a result of having three sisters and mother and father who were anxious for us to excel is that I was an uppity woman. However, as an uppity woman I believed that anything I wanted to do I was going to do. I majored in English and theatre in college and I went to New York to audition for the American Theatre Wing. I received a scholarship for a summer drama program from the Wing at the Cape Playhouse in Dennis. I met my husband, Philip, there, who was also in the drama program. After the summer, he went to Yale to begin his Masters and, since the Theatre Wing closed that summer, I enrolled in the American Musical and Dramatic Academy. I was married after one semester. We were going to do all sorts of really amazing things in our theater careers. The next fall we came to Detroit — Phil had a grant for the first year of the Hillberry Classic Theatre. I had a baby on the first day of rehearsals. So Phil got his Masters degree and I wasn't doing any of those "amazing" things I thought I would. I had a second child in 1968. We used to make aprons with the saying "I spent four years of college to do this?" But I did actually believe that a woman should be able to do whatever she wanted to do and that it was up to her to fulfill her own destiny. Truly has a strong, strong belief in that — my Irish father was a "if you have a dream and you worked hard at it you can only succeed" kind of person. So when the women's movement started

rumbling and I read about it in the news, I was not a strong supporter. I was actually an anti-person. I didn't understand why women were whining. I didn't understand why they were complaining — if they had a complaint why didn't they just change their circumstances? What was their problem? My husband was teaching at community college and was surrounded by a lot of liberal thinkers and involved in the anti-war movement in 1970, and he told me I was being a little hard on "my sisters" and that I should go to a meeting and find out what NOW was about.

Interviewer: **Where had you been reading about the feminist movement?**

G. Barrons: Oh, the papers. I did read the *Feminine Mystique* and I understood what Betty Friedan was trying to say but I didn't find her appealing. I truly thought she missed the point and harped too much on how the environment shapes us. I really much more was a nature rather than nurture person. I really did believe that if you had the brains and determination, you could do what you wanted to do. And then I went to wrap sessions.

Interviewer: **At your husband's suggestion?**

G. Barrons: Yes. He ruled the day, I think, for a few years — but not really. Remember, he was a liberal thinker and believed philosophically in what we were trying to do. But it took me a while to understand. I think Mary Jo Walsh was running wrap sessions. Patricia Burnett was the president; Marj Levin was the vice president at the time. And I remember the very first meeting I went to was about women in advertising — talking about the images and roles of women. I found that really interesting because it was a really intelligent viewpoint. And then, in the wrap sessions which you know I heard all these stories from women and I really I didn't personalize them for quite a while. I just was interested. I was just detached.

Interviewer: **What do you mean by personalized?**

G. Barrons: I didn't attribute it to me. I would look at other women and think, "Look what's happening to them. They might need my help. I could help them."

Interviewer: **And you were an actress at this time?**

G. Barrons: Well, I was doing some acting at the Hillberry Studio, studying voice and Phil and I took some short plays to schools. But actually, by 1970, I wasn't doing any of the things I wanted to do. Which was when the big light bulb went off. At some point I said, "Wait a minute, I'm not doing what I said I wanted to do with my life and why am I not?" And that's the big "ah ha!" It was 1971 by this time and I was just completely angry. I was angry at everyone and everything. I was angry at my parents for having brought me up that way, I was definitely angry at the Catholic Church for what they had done to me. My husband got a

good portion of the anger. Society in general. And I just threw myself into the movement at that point. There were moving targets everywhere and I became an officer in Detroit NOW with Joan Israel and I worked on doing membership and leading wrap sessions. I think for five years I ran wrap sessions. I was completely immersed.

Interviewer: **An organizational role from the get-go.**

G. Barrons: Organizational role in everything that was going on and in any aspect. I think I was much more an organizational person than I was the person out front who'd speak to the media or the person out front to take on a piece of legislation. I wasn't and never have been necessarily a political person. But I would be the person who would support the political person.

Interviewer: **When you say wrap session, other people have been calling it consciousness-raising sessions.**

G. Barrons: Yes that is exactly what it is.

Interviewer: **What were they like and what happened?**

G. Barrons: They were certainly wonderful. We had no idea what we were doing, you understand, because they hadn't happened before. So we made up all the rules. We started out saying, "We'll have this group — anybody can come in at any time and this week we're going to talk about women in advertising." We'd get together and we'd spend about three and half minutes talking about women in advertising and three and half hours talking about what our personal circumstances were and how we were challenged. So as time went on that's what we did. We focused on letting each person in the group talk about her concerns. We used to have subjects that were more open, such as "what will you risk?" That would lead us into discussions about our jobs and life partners. We had methods to make sure that no one person dominated the session. These are all rules now for group therapy probably, but we used to throw in a chip every time we spoke so that if we ran out of chips we didn't have any more time to speak. What we tried to do was simply to offer support because we weren't therapists. But, a lot of anger came out in those sessions and a lot of sharing and absolutely wonderful friendships. Over time, it became necessary for groups to go off by themselves because they formed a bond and then we would have an open session and a closed session. And those sessions became a whole organizational structure.

Interviewer: **Were they organized by NOW?**

G. Barrons: Yes. It was all by NOW.

Interviewer: **And was it nationally, nation wide these things were going on or did you**

develop -

G. Barrons: I think they were, but I don't know. There was a committee on a national level that focused on consciousness-raising. I think we were all making it up as we went along. I think we made everything up as we went along at that time. You have to realize there was nothing, everything was brand new. None of us had any experience in doing the things we were doing and that was absolutely the greatest gift that NOW gave me. I mean I was an actress that was all I knew how to do. I was sure I didn't know how to do anything else. If I could be a receptionist at a company — that might be the highest I might achieve. Because if I didn't act what else in the world was I good at doing? And one of the things that NOW gave me a whole new set of skills. I realized that I am a facilitator and I am a clarifier and I am a person who is organizationally adept. So, I could put together whatever the rally was. I could put together the meeting. I could get everybody organized. I could do the fund raising. I could and it was a wonderful, wonderful experience. I had very, very few negative experiences in the ten years I was highly active.

Interviewer: Were you paid for whatever you did?

G. Barrons: Heavens no. Money? One of my friends used to say if somebody has enough money to pay me what I'm worth than it's probably not a good cause. We were spending an enormous amount of time and the difference about the Michigan group from what I could see from our experiences going to national and regional conferences is that we are very independent group of women. Minnesota may have been similar. What the far west or east coasts would do was very, very different than the kinds of issues we dealt with. Many of the women that I was surrounded by were married, had children, were or had been homemakers, had given up their career while raising children or were in traditional jobs such as teaching or social work. There were some divorces, absolutely were some divorces as a result of our "awakening" and, maybe, anger. But I've been married forty years. We survived because my husband really believed philosophically. I think that practically it was difficult in those early years to adjust but —

Interviewer: Did your husband — so it was difficult for him to support you? Did you have children or helped out [by] your parents and sisters? Were they supportive of you?

G. Barrons: I have two children. Good question. Oh, I think about my sister who's been on her own raising two kids. She lives in Washington D.C. and I used to appear on her doorstep with three or four other people and yank her out of her house and say we have to go marching for the Equal Rights Amendment today. She'd say "I have to do laundry." But I'd tell her, "No, no that's not important." So yes, she certainly supported me! And I took my kids to march for the ERA in Chicago on Mother's Day. I think that was 1980-something. They still

remember that. I have a son that is now forty and a daughter that is thirty-five. So it was, I think, it very different for us in Michigan , trying to deal with bread and butter issues of home, family, jobs — and also in dealing with relationships because we wanted to have the partners that we loved go with us on the journey. And I think that wasn't necessarily the way the feminist movement was ever perceived.

Interviewer: **Can you speculate upon the difference between the coastal group and the Michigan group? What do you think?**

G. Barrons: Well, I think that anybody who works in Michigan would say the same thing. We are very dominated by unions, by people who are into bread and butter issues, such as women and jobs — which became interested in. That was the direction that my life took. But I think that we looked at it from a family viewpoint, from women who were poor, and how we were going to be able to help women be able to pull themselves up and support each other. We weren't into the more esoteric issues at the time; we were involved in the basics. We were trying to get "Help wanted — Female" ads out of the papers. We were trying to do the ordinary things and Michigan companies are so male-dominated because of the auto industry. We didn't have the culture around us that you might have in California or in New York that has a great diversity in industries and professions. You're talking about a fairly different society. So, we just formed the route we wanted to take and that's what we did.

Interviewer: **That's interesting. So your issues that you approached were more local level issues, but at the same time were you able to make connections that this was for a greater good?**

G. Barrons: The greater good, it always was for the greater good. We were causing a revolution, for heavens' sakes. I mean we were going cause massive change to occur. We did. And I think that it is an amazing thing for us to see at this point that people are now taking for granted those things we thought would be just impossible to achieve at the time. Women having their own credit, women being CEOs, you know. I was reading something from an old NOW conference —at some point in the 70's — that said "you know we want women in the house — if women are good as the head of the house how about being the head of the health and education " or something and I thought, "Oh, we are!." I read these stories and say to myself "oh we are, oh women have done that." The pill helped. I don't think we could have done it without Planned Parenthood. But there was an amazing amount of courage and support for each other that occurred during that time because if someone said, "I think we need to do this" there was a group of people who would say "yes" and we would simply tackle it. If it were Michigan Bell, now SBC, and there was a wrongdoing there — well then, we'll just file suit. And if it were credit then we'd just send someone down to the largest bank in the city and apply for credit, without a job. And if it were any kind of rally we had to do —my job at rallies was to sing, because

that was my gift. That was what I could do, besides organizing: I could sing.

Interviewer: **What would you sing?**

G. Barrons: "I am Woman." "I am Woman" in a whole different way than Helen Reddy ever sang it. Much stronger, much stronger. But I think there that — what do you call it? Synergy. I think was a truly amazing thing and I don't know where I see it right now because everything was so new it was a new frontier, with no background experience or any qualifications whatsoever — we just walked into situations.

Interviewer: **What were the issues that most concerned you?**

G. Barrons: Employment was mine and I'm sure that came from the fact that I felt like I was going to become completely useless as a liberal arts graduate in the work force and I don't know if you know this but there were seven of the NOW people: Joan Israel, Mary Jo Walsh, Marcia Cron, Jackie Washington, myself, Harriet Alpern, and Linda Miller, formed a consulting group in 1973 because Affirmative Action was created in 1973 — under Nixon, imagine that. Most of the companies in the Detroit area did not know how to deal with that. And because we had challenged some of the organizations, like Michigan Bell, we did know something. So the consulting group became New Options, Inc. to help corporations with their Affirmative Action. So, that was really clever of us, but it was also taking something that we knew and saying, "There's a way in which we can have this happen and we can help make it happen," and four out of the seven formed a personnel agency to place women and minorities in professional positions. Then because we were the only people doing anything about women and minorities and jobs, the city of Detroit gave us a contract of five years to place women in non-traditional jobs. Anything that had to do with women in employment was really my focus from probably '73 to '83. And all of that was interwoven with NOW.

Mary Jo Walsh was the president of Detroit NOW in '74-75. She was also one of our partners. Carol King came to work with us when she was president of Macomb NOW and both she and Mary Jo served on the national board. I remember a reporter from France, I think, coming in one time to New Options, and as she was starting to interview us about our operation and we said, "Excuse us, we have to leave now because we have a rally at Cobo Hall." We made up some name and called ourselves Women for Religious Choice or something. I think the bishops were around at the time — a national bishops' conference. We held a press conference and made great pronouncements about what the Catholic Church needed to do and what the bishops needed to consider about women's place in the Church and someone in the news media said, "Haven't we seen you all before?" Yes. So there was a great overlapping of all the feminist activities that were going on and the feminists who were running this corporation [New Options]. It was a for-profit corporation.

Interviewer: **Can you describe some significant events that you remember?**

G. Barrons: You know I really tried hard, I really should have kept a journal. Everyone should keep a journal. That's one of the things I should know. Anyone who's involved in doing anything in their life should keep a journal.

Interviewer: **I have to get a little drink of water.**

[Pause]

Interviewer: **Significant events that you —**

G. Barrons: Well, I can think of many significant events. Let's see.

Interviewer: **Tell a story.**

G. Barrons: I think that working in the Affirmative Action employment arena there are some significant things that stay in my mind. And this is NOW-related as well as just feminist related. One is a story that I do like to tell about trying to find non-traditional jobs for women. We went everywhere including the slaughter houses — and that was pretty horrifying. One of my job development assignments was to go down to the harbor terminal, which at the time was a teamster place and meet with the boss at 10 o'clock in the morning — at which time they had finished a half a bottle of bourbon. I walked in looking like me, you know, Doris Day had just walked into the harbor terminal where all these people are big tough guys, and I'm making my case about "women need to be able to have the right to be able to make this kind of money. There are jobs here in this harbor and I'm sure they can unload boats" and they said "women will be raped on the gangplank. What makes you think women could do any of these jobs?" And it was just a horrifying experience. I finally got to the point where I knew I wasn't making any headway and I stood up and said, "I thank you for your time and I want to wish you luck when the revolution comes." And I walked out, stormed out with my head held high and I sat in my car and cried for twenty minutes — because it's humiliating and there were lots of times that we had humiliating situations like that. This happened before people were more covert about their sexism.

On the NOW side, right about this time, I'm trying to think of when it was, probably the mid to late '70's Maryann Mahaffey — one of the first women for the Detroit city council — was invited to the Detroit Athletic Club to a meeting for the Council on Foreign Relations. She went to the DAC and they wouldn't let her come through the front door because she had to come through the side door, because that's where spouses went — the DAC was a men-only club — and she refused to do that and went home and immediately called Mary Jo Walsh and NOW. So the next morning we put together a resolution and called

the troops together and we marched over to the Detroit Athletic Club and we marched in through the doors and we went right up the stairs, and we read this resolution: "Whereas, whereas, whereas the Detroit Athletic Club holds this position of power and is discriminating against women and minorities; whereas we resolve that you do not do this again" — and then we ended and we were standing on the stairs and there was this complete silence. Joan Israel was standing next to me and she punched me in the ribs and said "Sing, Gerry." So we started singing "I Am Woman" on this grand staircase of the Detroit Athletic Club. That will always have some special spot in my memory bank because it was an extraordinary moment. The people looked at us like we had completely lost our minds. Some of the spouses of the DAC members who were looking at us in distaste, with great distaste, and the men who thought it was funny or they were just going to dismiss it. But our action was not seen as something that was appropriate for the wives of members, and Patricia Burnett's husband was a member and Mary Jo Walsh's was a member. And they were called to task. So I feel great joy at this point to see that the new incoming president, I believe, or the current president of the Detroit Athletic Club is a woman this year. It totally warmed my heart to see something like that happen. It was probably an economic decision over time. It made no sense that men were meeting there and couldn't meet with women because we have created this critical mass in the work place and to exclude us wasn't making economic or social or cultural sense. So it changed.

But those are two highlights. I mean they were grand experiences, but it was the day to day pulling down little by little the prejudices and the biases, and doing it, I always felt, in whatever way was appropriate — that is if it were political or lobbying you were confrontational, if the situation demanded we be more facilitating that we help people to understand, then we ran seminars. We did everything that we could to educate people, including the wrap sessions, and to help people to come to the point where equality seemed to be reasonable — that to be sexist seemed completely unreasonable. Once you had so many women coming into the work force and corporations were worried about being sued, they acted in a way that was protective of the corporation, which was to our benefit. We always tried to make them understand that it was the right thing to do but —

Interviewer: **You've talked a little bit about the conjoining of the feminist movement and the affirmative action and civil rights movements. Do you have more to say on those movements and why they happened together? Could you be a feminist and not work for affirmative action or against racism? How did those work together especially in Detroit?**

G. Barrons: No, I think we learned a great deal. I think the second wave feminists learned a great deal from the civil rights movement just as I think the suffragists learned a lot from the abolitionist movement. I think those two things are tied. You're basically talking about a massive number of people who are oppressed in some

way, wake up and recognize that they are oppressed and take action to make change happen and they do it collectively and with great will and courage. And I think, "Did I ever know a racist feminist?" No. I have never known a racist feminist. Do I think that there are women — White women — who didn't understand Black women? Yes, I think that's absolutely true. Do I think there were great chasms between what we understood? Yes. But I think that racism to me is a collective effort to keep a group of people down. Do I think that white women have prejudices against Black women? Yes. Do I think they need to learn a lot? Yes. But and I think that NOW tried to reach out to African American women and Hispanic women but we were never all that successful.

Interviewer: **What strategies do NOW use?**

G. Barrons: I think people saw the leadership of NOW was primarily middle class, professional, white women. That was — that's who the leaders were. The focus was on the Equal Rights Amendment, the focus was on employment. When you're talking to African American women who had been working since they were twelve and they're looking at these white women saying, "We want to be able to have jobs and work outside the home." So the conversations that needed to happen early on between women who were full-time homemakers, between women of different color, didn't happen because we were so focused on the external change. We weren't taking care, in my view, of things we needed to take care of. I think we were a little bit better in the Detroit area because we did have some African American women who belonged to NOW, but really a very small percentage. Should have been much higher and our outreach was always connected to minority/low-income women. Now low-income women are not going to have the time and ability to give to the cause because of their hierarchy of need. They're at the sustaining level, they're at the survival level. But we could have reached middle class women who had resources that could help the movement and who shared our beliefs. I think some African American women were conflicted about their role but that would not be my place to say. But I think what NOW didn't do nationally and even locally well was to make the connections we needed to make among all women — we were so focused on employment, that we lost women who were homemakers.

And Phyllis Schlafly came in and took that group and said, "You see all these women want you to work, they want to put you in the draft, they want to put you in the front lines, they want to take your privileges of having a separate bathroom." We were always so deadly serious. And Phyllis would just sit there and smile and say "They're going to do this" and we lost that group — we had disaffected ourselves from that group, not so much right in the southeastern Michigan area, not so much because so many of us were homemakers —but nationally we absolutely did. They felt very threatened. And they thought they were being looked at as "less than" women who were working — that if they didn't carry a briefcase and they didn't go out there and try to get a full-time job that they weren't contributing to the movement and that was just wrong.

Interviewer: **Interesting. When you think back what were your main achievements personally and organizationally?**

G. Barrons: Wow, that is really hard. Personally it determined my whole life — I mean my whole adult life. I was thirty when I joined. I'm now sixty-three. So for thirty-three years I have been involved in some way in helping to promote success for women primarily in the employment area. I became the founding mama, mother, as they say of the Michigan Chapter for the National Association of Women's Business Centers — because we were in business. I was the cofounder of Sojourner Foundation, which was to help women and girls. I became executive director of the Women's Economic Club for eleven years. So all of those issues that were really close to my heart have been close to my employment, my work, my life, my friendships. So, personally it's shaped who I am. I used to say that the greatest change in my life happened because I had children. I think that's true. Because you are no longer looking at just yourself and it changed everything. The second greatest thing was the feminist movement in shaping who I am today and my set of my beliefs, my principles.

Organizationally, we did so many amazing things. I think that our greatest accomplishments were changing the opportunities for women in employment. To be able to have access to do anything they wanted to do, and any occupation that they chose. And that is now seen as a given — that young women see women in all sorts of roles. And I think that if they could have realized that — I mean I'd love for young women to realize that there was a time when you only saw women in aprons, or as teachers, or as nurses, or as secretaries, and that was what was in the "Help wanted — Female" ads. And now to think about what would you list under "Help wanted — Female." I think it would be the whole entire dictionary of occupational titles. That was my focus so therefore I think of it as a great achievement. I think that NOW and the feminist movement has changed society forever. I think we were immigrants in a new world and I think we changed the world that we came into just as immigrants in this country changed this country. And everywhere we go the culture changes because we're there. And it's really, really fun you know.

There was a time in the '80's when we were all trying to be really androgynous. We were wearing ties and we were trying to look like men — right, big shoulders and ties and not even have people realize we were actually women under our suits. So another great thing now is to feel comfortable with the fact there are differences. And that those differences are to be celebrated and that we all contribute in our own way to making things work. There's a wonderful women writer called Sally Helgesen who wrote *The Female Advantage* and *Women's Style Leadership* and she talks about how women lead differently because men have a tendency to stay isolated at the top and women work more from the center. I must say that from my experience that has been true. So we always change things — the culture of an organization or enterprise in any way

because that's the way we work.

Interviewer: **You talk about all these other groups that you were a member of. Could you list some of them, and were they beyond NOW? What else did you do?**

G. Barrons: Heavens we worked for — in the early '70's there were probably a very few organizations that were starting to spurt up that had a similar focus on women and employment like Wider Opportunities for Women was a national employment network. NAWBO, National Association of Women Business Owners, began as a lobbying group for women entrepreneurs in Washington in the late '70's and I was a member of the national group — because we would be — and then in 1980 they decided to have chapters and I was the only member of the national in Michigan. I think there was one other woman, so guess who got to found the chapter. But NAWBO was one of those great dynamic happenings. It was called The Right Time, the Right Place, and the Right Group of People because women just came.

Managing the organization was a riot because you become an entrepreneur because you don't want people to tell you what to do and then we decide to create an organization where everyone is supposed to have consensus about what you're supposed to do. But, it's still a very, very strong organization. I'm very proud of that group, because there were issues about women business owners always seen as marginal, on the sides. We were supposed to be only hair dressers. I guess we weren't seen as people who manufactured steel. Well, actually we were, that's what we found out.

Sojourner Foundation and the Michigan Women's Foundation came about the same time. Sojourner was great because it came from a feminist credit union. We had a feminist women's credit union in Detroit founded by two members of the Women's Liberation Organization. Not NOW members. You know they used to make fun of us because they'd say "Here come the NOW ladies," because I wore pearls. I have a picture of me singing "I Am Woman" at an ERA rally and I'm wearing pearls. But the Credit Union women were strong and out there in flannel shirts and they began this Feminist Credit Union, which then became the Feminist Women's Credit Union, then it became the Women's Credit Union. There was a group that was helping them called the Friends of Women's Credit. And then the Women's Credit Union merged with some other financial organization and the Friends for Women's Credit had a few thousand dollars and needed to decide what would to do with it. So we hosted some conferences. Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem came to Ann Arbor and we sponsored these events and they were very successful and we made a little more money and then had to decide again what were we going to do with all this money. 'Cause it wasn't going to help anything. So, we searched around for ideas, "Oh we'll have a rape crisis center," and the person who was running a rape crisis center said "No — we're doing that — but we could sure use money." So, we formed a foundation and it was called Sojourner, after

Sojourner Truth. That's another thing that is really wonderful about that organization —it's probably the most diverse women's foundation in the nation, I think, because it was founded in Detroit. It was African American women and Hispanic women coming together and it still is. It's still going strong.

Interviewer: **Were there other causes not specifically women's issues that you were involved in?**

G. Barrons: Are there other things that I have been involved in?

Interviewer: **During the '60's through the '80's yeah.**

G. Barrons: Oh I think Jackie's here. Just a second.

[Pause]

Interviewer: **Were there other issues and cause you worked on besides women's issues?**

G. Barrons: They were so very consuming because you then start sprouting out and doing special events and fundraising events for women candidates: Debbie Stabenow, Jennifer Granholm. These women have been very successful, thank you. And Maryann Mahaffey I think I have been on her team for 30 years. There were political issues and political campaigns definitely. I have been on the board of the International Institute in Detroit, which is an organization to help immigrants who come into the Detroit area and help them to get through the legal process as well take care of their needs, and so it's a social service. It's also a place where all the cultures come together, which is quite wonderful and being the second-generation Irish person that I am this touches my heart. Other things have been — golly isn't that interesting I can't even remember all the other things I do. That's really terrible. I started a group with some women a few years ago — again it was women and we called it the Majority Business Initiative — and that was to get women entrepreneurs and women who could be employed to have a piece of the economic pie in the development of downtown Detroit. So I don't think I had a lot of time for things that were outside women. It's been very circumscribed by my passion.

Interviewer: **It also seems that you made the connection that almost everything that you were involved with was about women even though it wasn't specifically, it did effect women in feminist issues.**

G. Barrons: It's true. Right.

Interviewer: **The last question concerning your activism is did you have fun?**

G. Barrons: Oh my goodness. I mean you can tell by the — even though I did cry in my car

at the harbor terminal, I don't think there was a day at New Options that we didn't have one good solid laugh because things were a little, just so fluid. We had no idea what we were doing sometimes — giving you the example we started out in this. Did any of us know about running a business? No. And did we have a card table and a desk and a phone? Yes. Somebody came to talk to us about finding women for their company and we kept running into the offices to call each other so it would look like the phones were ringing. So, there was always a great amount of humor because it was fun and I always think that was one of the things that Elly Smeal, the president of NOW, had a problem with.

On a national level feminists are not seen as people who have fun, who aren't just so overly deadly serious that "Dear god, don't sit me next to a feminist because they'll be really — they can only talk about one thing and they will start to grill me in some way and they will go off on some diatribe about what I should be doing, what I haven't been doing, and what I will be doing." But that really wasn't true. I mean there wasn't a meeting when we didn't laugh. I mean one point when Detroit NOW's board was really large, I think it probably added up to twenty some people because everybody ran a committee and we kept thinking of something new so we'd have a task force on homemakers. So, our meeting would just be forever expanding and they were wonderful, they were great fun, and they were very hard to manage for the presidents. I know, but yeah — there's a certain kind of elation from having done something that you didn't think you could do and there's a great joy in having succeeded in something. There's a lot of sorrow too about and gnashing of teeth because we were coming up against such enormous odds; you take on Michigan Bell, you take on the television stations, you take on the federal government. You are working with the office of Federal Contract Compliance, you're coming up against General Motors. I mean these are not small institutions to try and challenge. So, there's this — somebody used to always say, I think it was Carol King, used to always say, "Our number are legion." We have this little group of twenty people who are going in to talk to General Motors and we did. And there has to be some kind of camaraderie with that and joy at having even done it, or else it would have been really abysmal.

And then I think some of the really funny things in the middle of the women's movement had to do with women's sexuality. We had women's sexuality conferences and so forth and I remember walking into one — and I think we had these at the churches — where women were demonstrating how to use a speculum, which meant you were inserting it into your vagina. And you walked into this room, in this church where this woman is sitting there and showing it and I'm thinking "oh my god I can't stay here" and I'm trying to be really smart about this and say "oh yes… speculum right ." And then moving on. And I'm sure this is an extremely important thing for us to all know, but it was — remember I went to Catholic women's college and I was just so liberated. So, yes a lot of funny experiences and wonderful experiences.

Interviewer: **That's great. The next set of questions asks you to reflect upon second wave feminism from '60's through the '80's. The first one is: what's your definition of feminism?**

G. Barrons: Feminism is the philosophy that women have the opportunity to be whatever they want to be and that they legally, culturally, socially, politically, economically and every other way have that opportunity and that it never ever be barred. It's really what the Equal Rights Amendment was talking about — that our rights should never be abridged on basis of sex. And feminism is simply a belief in women. It's very interesting that you even ask that question because I have a friend that sees herself as pretty much on the right wing of things and I kept saying to her, "You're really a feminist." She was in the Women's Economic Club and president on the board of a spousal abuse center, and the Michigan Women's Foundation, and she says "Oh, I don't think so, oh I don't think so," because people define it as having to follow a certain set of tenets: you have to be pro-choice, you have to be, probably have to be Democrat, you have to be on the same side for all these things. It's not true. You can be a feminist and hold different ideas. I think that the pro-choice issue is fairly defining, as most feminists who call themselves feminists would say that they are pro-choice. That's a huge issue and a very worrisome one. It's been a very worrisome one from the time of Roe v. Wade came and it still is.

Interviewer: **When you think back upon your activism and others activism do you think that the press accurately portrayed what you were doing? Your motives?**

G. Barrons: No. Heavens no. They you know — I shouldn't even say it that way, there were some wonderful writers in the *Detroit News* and the *Free Press* who got it, from the very first moment got it. Eileen Foley comes to mind and some other women who covered everything we did and were very fair, were trying to be fair but they were really on our side. But I think — besides them — I have a whole stack of articles I have that I just started to go through and I think, "Dear god" — well I'm even surprised at what we said — the fact they misquoted us might not have been a bad thing. But I don't know, I think that it is no, they just didn't. What they did was portray that most extreme element. They only covered those things that we did that they thought were newsworthy in their view and those issues were going to the Detroit Athletic Club and marching, and having parades, and rallies and that's when we got front page coverage and so a lot of people felt like, "Oh I don't want to have anything to do with this," where in the background what we were doing on a very steady day-by-day basis was trying to make, change laws. I think we had something like fifty laws in books that we were trying to change at one point, dealing with the Title IX, with Affirmative Action, it never got covered. Never, ever. So it was in some ways worse on the omission side than on the commission side.

Interviewer: **Looking back more broadly on that wave of feminism, what do you think were the main achievements and is there anything you would consider a**

failure?

G. Barrons: Yes, I think I talked about feminists — that we did not have the outreach to women of color that we needed to bring us all together. We would have been a truly formidable entity had we been able to do that and do it earlier on. I think that the greatest achievements — definitely the issue about legalized abortion is absolutely key — women were dying, and the fact that that is still on such tenuous ground is horrifying because it — people now don't remember what it was like not to be able to have that option and that women who are exercising other options were killed. So it is, I think, that was a major, major achievement. I think that all the areas of employment were major achievements, but once we opened the doors and Affirmative Action started to change the way that critical mass came through and it's changed everything, I think. So employment was a huge issue. It's what we focused on. It was "for every dollar a man makes we make 59 cents" and it went to 60 cents, and I think it's 79 now — but I think that is a major achievement.

I think that we've moved into, in the later '80's we moved into more of a support for the absolutely non-franchised group of people, which were the gays and lesbians. The problem with that is that because it became so much a focus that other issues have sort of gone to the side. Equal Rights Amendment was a horrible failure. It was a horrible failure. I used to say two guys kept us from having the Equal Rights Amendment. I mean we came that close and I understand it's starting again and it should be, and I think that that consumed us for five years — we had red alerts and yellow alerts and amber alerts before they had these [terrorism] alerts, because every time there was something going on, on the Equal Rights Amendment area , we were on call twenty-four hours a day for that issue. The fact that we couldn't get it through was a terrible failure. And not because we didn't try and not because we weren't organized, it was because we had such enormous opposition and those two factors, the fact that we didn't get that Phyllis Schlafly group early on, and the fact that we didn't reach out to African American women and have them as part of our movement as much. I think that those two elements [contributed to the failure]. And if those two guys had wives who would have been behind us they may have. But there will always be that conservative element in the United States and we just needed to be able to make that link with that conservative element, to make them understand that it [ERA] was not a threat to their way of life, and we didn't do it. Or we weren't successful in counteracting the charges people were making that we were going to do that.

Interviewer: **Now moving on to think about the next generation of feminists: what do you see are the outstanding issues that the next generation of feminists' activism? What are they going to have to deal with?**

G. Barrons: You know, it's going to be very interesting. I think there's probably quite a divide between young people who were children of feminists and young people

who had no contact with that. There is an acceptance among young people, and I'm talking about men and women, that this is way things always were. Women could do whatever they wanted to do. The pill was never an issue but what I see is, I think that women need to be very vigilant. I think they're not. I think because there hasn't been in the Generation X, or even a little older, activism — if you didn't join an environmental group there hasn't been an activism role for people. So things are slipping away and the people who have been activists, who have been vigilant are getting older, like me, and tired and we're not seeing the [younger] people picking that up. I think on the environmental edge, absolutely true, on human rights and civil rights issues, not so true. So if you aren't very vigilant the new head of the Food and Drug Administration will be someone who doesn't approve of the morning after pill. If you're not vigilant you are going to have it become harder and harder and harder to have a pregnancy termination because doctors will not do it because their lives are endangered. If you aren't vigilant, you're just going to lose so many of the gains.

I look at women — you know we always wanted women to feel good about themselves and their own sexuality and then I look at *Sex in the City* and I say, "Oh my god, did we really stage a revolution to have this happen?" To talk about the most shallow things in the world anyone could talk about. Probably yes, you know. Yes, you should be able to stay home with babies and have twelve of them if you want to, and yes you can go out there and talk about absolutely nothing and be completely shallow and only be concerned about what new dress you are going to buy for your date with the next guy, and marry a millionaire. Oh dear god. But somehow or another we're losing the balance — you know where are the Murphy Browns and the Mary Tyler Moores? They're gone.

So, because somebody's not paying attention and someone, some group, and that has to be young women because that's who they're looking at, are not complaining about the fact that they don't see themselves up there and they don't. I mean I don't know any women, certainly not my daughter who's thirty-five, reflected in any of those roles on television and that has a great impact, and on films. So, I think that vigilance is what I'm looking for and an element of activism when things are wrong that they can act collectively. Because they act individually, but they don't act collectively and they don't have the skills, they haven't learned the skills. That might be one of our legacies — we'd be happy to teach anybody how to have the skills. But, you really just have to pay attention because it very, very easily can slide back.

I'll give you an example: in 1980 and the Reagan administration came into office we were still in New Options and we had this contract to place women in non-traditional jobs and we had women on construction sites. And from the minute Reagan came in — not believing in Affirmative Action, which he stated — the whole scene changed within four to five months. New Options went out

of business in 1983 — it was a bloody hard road to go against when corporations felt they had to do something. It was almost impossible when contractors didn't — General Motors was going to be — General Motors was going to do what they needed to do because they had a whole system. But in every other kind of role, the trade unions and so forth, they were the hardest bastions to get through — and when they felt they didn't have to they just didn't. And they were fairly cruel about it . So I could see how you could lose ground very rapidly if you aren't paying attention. And we were pretty young then and we were still trying to make those inroads, but we need to have people that are doing that now.

Interviewer: **We have about three minutes left on this tape and I just wanted to know if there was anything else you wanted to talk about, or feel like maybe I should ask some different questions of the rest of the feminists I interview?**

G. Barrons: On the other side of me, what am I doing about singing? One of the other great things that happened was that one of my partners in business [New Options] opened — became the owner of the tavern that her grandmother had owned and I got to sing. You see how this happens? That's why I said the feminist connections shaped my life. I got to sing for nine years. So you see.

Interviewer: **Is that the Woodbridge Tavern? Marcia Cron?**

G. Barrons: Yes, at the Woodbridge Tavern. It was truly wonderful because everybody came together and we all just sang together and it was a great communal place for all of us, men, women, everyone, but it was because I had that connection with someone who's been a life long supporter. So, that was I think that basically, I'm a different person than that young woman who grew up in that coal town in West Virginia. My Catholic roots are there culturally but not, no longer religiously. Although I am a spiritual person, the institution of the Roman Catholic Church is too oppressive for women. So, I've become a different human being and hopefully a more fulfilled human being because of what happened in the movement.

Interviewer: **That's great. Thank you very much. I'm going to take a few still shots of you so if you'll kind of hold still and smile. Sustain that lovely smile. Oh my gosh. I think hear it. Alright**

G. Barrons: Okay.

Interviewer: **Great that's great. Okay. Thank you very much.**

G. Barrons: Thank you that was fun.

[END]