

INTERVIEW: Patricia Burnett
INTERVIEWER: Sarah Arvey
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Interviewer: Okay, the first section of the interview we have questions about your personal biography; your earlier years to let us know how you would up influenced to your feminist activism later on. So could you please tell us where you were born and when and a little bit about your family life.

P. Burnett: Well I will, I'm Patricia Burnett and I was born in Brooklyn where I lived for all of three months, but I believe as you apparently do that every feminist has a different sort of a background than most young women or young men have and it was true of me too. My mother and father were divorced when I was three and my mother supported me until I was, well twenty-one and I'd live in a matriarchy with my mother and the maid and me and I never saw women being given orders by men. I never saw the relationship between man and wife. I grew up thinking every woman had exactly her way; in her way of living. Of course it was a terrible shock to me the first time I got married but it was an idyllic life. I was very happy and pushed and made to believe that I not only could become anything but that I darn well better become somebody anyway. I have to say, I was brought up to be a star. My mother had such wild dreams, but from her point of view everything was totally with the old-fashioned standards like, "My dear if you have to fall in love, fall in love with a rich man. It's just as easy" or "Never trust another woman because she's your enemy." I know — but that was the feeling among women in those days. So I blissfully had a beautiful childhood and was pushed into being an artist, which totally changed my whole life. I started painting at ten and by fourteen I was selling my first portrait for all of \$25. Now it's \$25,000 I'm happy to say. It took me a long time to get there.

Interviewer: Were you pushed into painting because your mother wanted you to have some sort of talent, which you could use for economic reasons? Did she think you'd be able to earn money?

P. Burnett: Well, if that was the reason she was certainly wrong because I think the only people that make money through being an artist are people who are doing ads and so forth or portrait painters because they do command pretty good prices as they get older. But I soon learned how valuable a dollar is and that's something I think even today that very few women are trained to know that their whole lives depend on their own ability to support themselves and that money is power. And it's sort of a dirty word when you try to tell young women that. Even now they think that they should — well now I'd say maybe a third of the young women today believe in the background that I had that their real true mission in life is to be married. Maybe that's too many at that, I think, but now

young women see so many divorces around them and broken homes that they know they have to be responsible for the children they bear and yet they still don't stop having so many.

Interviewer: **So did you have any siblings when you were growing up or were you an only child?**

P. Burnett: I was an only child and don't ever believe what they say about only children. They're so happy. They after all had the total attention of their parents they and they are used to being with adults. They are much more mature and they just have an easier way in life.

Interviewer: **Did you all have any religious affiliation?**

P. Burnett: Any what?

Interviewer: **Religious affiliation.**

P. Burnett: Oh yes, I was brought up all too many. I was baptized three times, once as a Catholic to please my grandfather, once as an Episcopalian to please my mother and once as a Presbyterian and I'm not sure who that pleased. But they want to be sure I got into heaven and I was sent to Sunday school until I was twelve and then given the choice of whether I wanted to stop and naturally I stopped. And I have to say that right now I have no real religious affiliation. I wish that I believed in life after death, which I don't. I wish I believed that there was a Lord to pray to, which I don't and I just have the cold hard view that we live alone and we die alone and everything depends on our actions and our attitude and our energy. Three things that are nice to have.

Interviewer: **So did you get a college education or did you go to some sort of art school?**

P. Burnett: No, I went to Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland. And before then I lived in Toledo and went to Toledo public schools, which I think is awfully nice if you could go to a public school. It gives you much more of a variety, of an ethnic variety. And you just, I at least in my day learned not to see black or white, I just saw the person more or less.

Interviewer: **So when did you get married?**

P. Burnett: Well, let me think well I was about twenty-four; I fell in love with a man that appeared to have everything. He was a plastic surgeon, a major in the army, a very mature man about twelve years older than I, and we married and I was shocked at the things I was supposed to do. I tried my best, but I think I was a really good wife and finally I got pregnant cause I thought I was losing his love or something. How did I know he didn't like pregnant women, so he said, "Dear you go home to your mother until you have this baby and we'll get

together then.” Well I went home to my mother and by the time I had that baby I was determined I was divorcing that man.

Interviewer: **Really?**

P. Burnett: Yeah. And afterward I did find that I was not his second wife I was his fourth one. And that basically he never remarried after that. I just don't think he cared for women that much, but anyway so I raised my child for about two and half years and then married a man who lived directly across the golf course from me in Detroit. He just happened to follow my car home one day and was shocked to find out I was his neighbor and looked around for somebody to introduce us. And when I first met him I thought “No, no this is not my type at all.” Then I thought wait a minute you went by type first, this time be more practical, so anyway we were married for thirty years, until he died.

Interviewer: **Okay and do you have more than one child? Did you have children with him?**

P. Burnett: Yeah, I have four. One from my first marriage and three from my second. I was very competitive in those days, four was a minimum.

Interviewer: **Can you think about looking back on your childhood can you think of anything that might have influenced you towards your latter activist.**

P. Burnett: Yes, because I was taught that I could do anything I wanted and achieve anything I wanted and also the freedom that I had to make my own decisions and so forth. Yeah, I definitely had a different childhood and I'll bet with your other interviews, with other feminists, haven't you found that out?

Interviewer: **Definitely. So what lead you then to the feminist movement can you pinpoint?**

P. Burnett: Well, I guess I just got madder and madder at my husband.

Interviewer: **What sorts of things were you angry about?**

P. Burnett: Well, that he was repressive and he wanted me to exactly conform to the perfect wife image and that I was really not that important to him. I was sort of an adornment on his arm as it were and it just made me feel as if there was a wide world out there and I had to reach out to it. And so we started and Marjie and I talked about this. Marj Levin, and we were driving to a funeral of all things and we started complaining about our lives and she was married to a doctor and I was, of course, married to the head of a large laboratory, bacteriologist and chemist and so I said, “Why not start a NOW chapter here in Michigan? I know there isn't one,” and she said, “Why don't you call Betty Friedan and see if you can get a hold of her?” and Betty Friedan's name was in the phone book, what a

miracle. And I got her and she said “We don’t have a chapter in Michigan, but I now appoint you as the main creator of the first NOW chapter there.” So, I came home and between us, Marjie and I, invited every important women we knew. We had no idea this was supposed to be a grassroots thing and for the poor women to free herself. We thought this is for the well-educated woman who isn’t expressing herself and so we invited every doctor and lawyer and president of a company we knew and there were forty of them and they all joined. In an hour they joined.

Interviewer: **How had you heard of NOW before?**

P. Burnett: Oh, it was really given quite a lot of publicity, some of it negative as the new feminist movement and Betty was quite prominent in the news at the time. But we had our first meeting and put our dues at \$3 each. So I took my \$120 and went to Washington D.C. to give it to Betty and start our new chapter and I knocked on the door dressed as I usually dress which is overdressed somehow or other. I never seem to be able to match what New Yorkers wear or anybody does. I’m always overdone a little bit and by now I’m beginning to enjoy it. So I arrived in a chinchilla hat and a chinchilla muff and said that I was from Detroit and we were just starting a chapter and this woman who had answered the door said, “My god,” and I said, “Also, a lifelong Republican,” and she called upstairs and she said “Betty you have no idea what we got down here,” and Betty came down and took one look at me and grab my hand and said “You’re exactly what I need.” And I walked into a full press conference in her apartment and there was ABC and NBC and there was a young girl from Red Stockings and another for Black Mothers of America and me. And so they sat us all down in line and they all ask us the same question, you know, “How did you become a feminist?” and every one of us gave the same answer that we felt that women were equal to men but the men just apparently didn’t know it and it was our job to start changing societies’ ideas to what the way women should live and how they should be treated. We certainly did get a lot of attention cause the young girl from Red Stockings had a baby in her arms and the minute the camera went up she pulled up her blouse and started to nurse the baby on camera and of course they loved it. It got a lot of publicity that particular interview. So, from then on I’ve sort of been the apple of Betty Friedan’s eyes and as a matter of fact I just put in a call for her today and found out she’s up in the Hampton and I’ll have to look in another book to get her number.

Interviewer: **I’m going to pause right here and do a little —**

[Pause]

Interviewer: **Get back again to the story that lead you into the feminist movement were you, you were a homemaker at that time correct? Or were you working?**

P. Burnett: Yes and I kept on with my portrait painting, never stopping. And so in fact here

I am 82 and 7/8th or something like that.

Interviewer: **Oops, can you hold on for a second Patricia there is a warning sign on my...**

P. Burnett: Oh it says no more tape. You have to stop.

Interviewer: **What could it possibly mean, but I do have a phone number I can call if it comes up again of a technician. Ok good.**

P. Burnett: Okay, no warning signs. I don't know what to tell you. I think maybe we were talking about a taboo subject. Okay.

Interviewer: **So, you were a homemaker and you also were continuing your portrait painting.**

P. Burnett: Yes, at home. I first started painting in the kitchen and then I went down to the Scarab Club and got a studio there to their absolute horror because they had no women in the building at all and there were six beautiful studios. So the minute I heard one was free I grabbed it and they punished me by not putting a lock on the bathroom door on the third floor for six months and I tried to seduce them any way I could. I had an open door all the time and open bar and any time any of them went by I said, "Oh come in and have a drink." And they found out I was a pretty good artist and one day I went to the bathroom and there was this beautiful gold lock right on the door and I turned around and hear five heads were sticking out of the studio they were all waiting to see my reaction to it and from then on I was welcome.

Interviewer: **Talk about the Scarab Club a little bit, because I know some of the feminist activities went on there.**

P. Burnett: Yes it was essentially for male artists and started in the early 1900's they had a small studio on Woodward then they built this exotic building, which is quite beautiful right back at the art museum, and it always housed males. They had no women in the club whatsoever. So, when I finally got my studio the men on the third floor said, "Oh my god we have to put on our pants now when we got out the door," and it turned out very well. In fact women saved that club because one by one as the artists grew wealthier they moved out of town and the club dwindled to nothing until they started taking in women. And since more than half are women now and it's doing well, thank you.

Interviewer: **And I also heard from other women some of the NOW meetings were held at the Scarab Club at your studio.**

P. Burnett: Oh yes. Oh we had fun. Then we had our rapt sessions that were held at All Saints Episcopal Church on seven mile and I finally began to look at my

husband with new eyes. I would meet these women who were battered with black eyes, broken arms, bruises all over and they'd come in you know saying that they had nowhere to go and no one to help them and it was unbelievable and then right there I saw real cruelty and anger and I went back and studied my husband and I thought you know what he's just a victim of his upbringing. He's just a Victorian man and I put him to the true test and I said, "Well I've been thinking of divorcing you and now that I've gotten into the NOW movement, I see how some women are really abused and with you it's just verbal and I want you to know that NOW comes first in my heart you're second. If you want to stick with me you'll have to take that for granted or else I'll just leave," and to my amazement my husband really loved me and he started going to NOW meetings with me and hanging out you know and did everything that a Victorian gentleman can do to open up his mind. In fact the last years of our marriage he had cancer and it made him look at me as someone he needed. First time he ever needed me. So the last ten years of our marriage were bliss because I finally felt appreciated and it worked out fine and yet all the other women in the group were furious with Marj and me because they were going out and getting divorces and Marj and I just kept staying married and they thought the least we could do was get a divorce.

Interviewer: **Now did you consider that your husband could be a feminist? Would you have called him a feminist at that point because he attend these meetings?**

P. Burnett: He was sort of a Patricia feminist. He would go as far as I went, but he would never do it on his own you know. I think he was a little bewildered 'til the end. But he was amazed at the change in me because I brightened up and had a mission in life and was so much happier than I was before.

Interviewer: **What were the main organizational roles that you played in NOW and your other feminist activism?**

P. Burnett: Well, when we first started NOW, I said, "Okay when we start I'll be president, you'll be vice president," and Marjie's eyes sort of crossed and she said, "Well alright," and so I was the president from the start and after several years I ran for the board, the National board, and you should have seen me and it was in Washington D.C. and all these different women were standing up there telling about themselves and whether or not they'd get elected. So. I wore this low cut red jersey clinging you know dress, and my hair all done and a really low neckline and I said, "Oh I'm Patricia Burnett and I'm a full-time life time Republican and I think I could do a lot on your board," and they literally gasped. They couldn't believe this creature in full makeup, and false eyelashes I had too. I guess they thought I was such an odd duck they elected me and before long — and when I went to see Betty Friedan and she said, "Now my dear the world will never be free until every woman in every country is liberated" and so ask right away for the international commission where you can go to organized NOW chapters around the world and well that suited me

just fine and so I asked for it and by then the board members were astonished that they had this odd duck in their hands and they thought sure let her go around the world and start chapters. She'll never be able to do it but we'll let her go. So, I was chair of that. I started, let me see twenty-four chapters in twenty-two countries, there were two in France and two in England, but they were real live, good working chapters and to this day the one in England and the one in Paris are still going, which I'm very proud of. So, I came back with photographs of newspaper articles and so forth that I had been in around the world in Japan and Hawaii and oh well twenty-two countries I went to. In fact, the way I got there was for my 25th wedding anniversary my husband said "Dear what would you like as a gift for your anniversary?" and I said "Bob, I would like a three month trip around the world alone," and I got it. So there you go.

Interviewer: **You mentioned that Betty Friedan when you first went to see her to pay your NOW dues grabbed you and said, "You're just what I need and put you in with more grassroots activists." What do you think she meant by that?**

P. Burnett: Well, exactly what it looked like to show that women from wealthier homes and sort of upper class women, I don't like to use the word, but upper middle class, I don't know were just as harassed and unhappy and abused to those who didn't have a dime to their name. In fact to this day women who are married to very wealthy men who don't work have less money than somebody than some women you'd see on the streets in Detroit, who make their own money and they spend it the way they want to and rich wives don't have allowances usually. They have charge accounts and that might sound like bliss I mean but it really isn't. You don't buy yourself a ticket to go to Timbuktu on a charge account and you don't leave your husband on a charge account either and in a way men knew that. Money is power. So I in those days I worked very hard at my painting and kept the money that I'd save and I really saved an enormous amount when my husband died that I had earned myself and put it all in E bonds so that I didn't have to tell him about it. Very effective way. So I lead an extraordinarily and exciting happy life simply because I got liberated at the right time. So it's been wonderful.

Interviewer: **And you were able to spend a lot of your time away from the home doing these organizational activist activities.**

P. Burnett: Right and I was home painting portraits like mad in-between. I think my husband was just happy I kept myself busy and out of his hair.

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

P. Burnett: At the time it was verbal abuse, which is so subtle and so hard to put your finger on but all I knew is that I felt beaten down unhappy and despised myself

cause I was told every day that I really couldn't do much. I might be pretty, but that was it. That's all I had. And nowadays I see it when I go out, sometimes you go out with couples that snap at each other and I think how could that women have any self-esteem when she's told every day how badly she does things.

Interviewer: **What strategies did NOW and the feminist movement give you to confront verbal abuse and what - did it skills and then did you work on verbal abuse your most important concern for other women? What did you do for them?**

P. Burnett: Yes I did yes. By getting together and opening up our hearts and by revealing what really hurt us we learned from each other and learned when it's smart to stand up to an abuser like that, when to run for cover and get a divorce, or how to educate them to realize what they were doing. And so I attended every meeting and just learned through my skin that I'd always must have been a feminist. I don't know when you're brought up by women what else can you be.

Interviewer: **Are there any especially dramatic or funny moments that you remember in your activist days?**

P. Burnett: Oh so many. There have been a lot of things. I know I was photographed outside carrying a sign that says "Down with the Pants-makers of America." I don't know we were striking against this factory that was paying women less than men and there I was in my ankle length mink coat walking around the street with this sign and a lot of things developed from that. I met — I convened the first feminist conference in the world and asked permission from the NOW board, who by then was they were kind of viewing me as a women who got things done somehow, they had no idea. Apparently I had some pretty good executive ability and I had asked to have this conference and they said, "Oh sure if you can pull it together go ahead," and I at the last minute I started writing to women all over the world. I had a list of 300 names that's recognized feminists and letters would come back with more lists of people and I'd write out again and before I knew it I got 280 women from 28 countries to come and they were pretty important people because the feminists didn't have mostly in other country much money. So, they hand it to somebody above them and above them and who turned up from India but Lachmey Ragamaria (??), who was the wife of the prime minister and she was just astounded when she got there. I must say that at the last minute the college who was going to house it said all of a sudden that they couldn't do it and so I turned to Betty Friedan, who can do miracles and she called up the president of Harvard and said, "I want some of your college buildings. We want to have a conference there," and he said, "Oh all right." So we had it in Leslie College, which is within Harvard and charged \$6 a day. You can imagine what the food was like and in comes Lachmey (??) with her maid and we embraced because we had written a lot and

never met and she said, "Oh my dear I'm looking forward so much to this. Now what hotel do I go to?" and I said, "Oh you get one of the student's rooms. Lachmey (??) there are sheets and blankets over there just go on up and make your bed." And she said, "I never made a bed in my life," and so she made her maid go and do it and she stayed the full time.

As a matter of fact, took me back with her to India to introduce me to Indira Gandhi and Indira said "Well this is so interesting you should come because I'm very unhappy with the portrait that I had done. Could you paint me?" And I said, "Oh yes I could" and so I stayed on in New Delhi in Lachmey's (??) house which totally bemused me. She had twenty servants and one had nothing to do except follow her around while she would dictate a few lines of a book she might be writing. She wrote six books. All of them, I guess I can tell it now because she's passed on, were pretty not so good and well written in the typical Indian way in very romantic terms and so forth. In fact she gave me a script to take back to Double Day and they sent it back and said very politely: this is unpublishable. But anyway, I painted Indira and I painted Madam Ghery (??), who was the wife of the president at the time and just had a glorious time I lost seven pounds because I couldn't eat the food in Lachmey's (??) house, but it was thrilling and so many things have come out of these contacts that I made. In fact, I even had a chance to get in touch with Margaret Thatcher and asked — I sent her my brochure and so forth and I asked if she wanted me to paint her and she signed a contract and did. So she commissioned me to do it and right now it's over her fireplace in London, which is nice to know.

Interviewer: **That's great. Thinking about your feminist activism, who were your personal and organizational allies? Who supported you the most?**

P. Burnett: Betty Friedan and I became close friends, and we've stayed that way all these years and Muriel Fox who was very well known in New York. She was in public relations and was vice president of this very large firm, Gloria Steinem became a good friend of mine, and I painted her too. And I don't know, I just floated to the top somehow or other, and even from there I was asked to be president of the national — let me see what is the name of that — goodness, NAWC, National Association of Women's Conferences. Every state has a commission on women, the fifty of us formed this particular organization, and I went on to be president of that.

Interviewer: **How about your children were they active with you, did they support what you were doing?**

P. Burnett: Well, yes they did. Now I didn't get them out marching in the streets, but I told them that they were not to marry until they were thirty. Especially my girls. I had two boys and two girls, which they didn't, which is wonderful because they married entirely different young men and women than I think they would have when they were twenty-two and both my daughters kept their own names as I have, and they're rock bottom feminists, I think. They don't have men that sass

them back. They better not!

Interviewer: **Did you have any people that were opposed to your work, friends or organizations that actively tried to stop you?**

P. Burnett: Oh yes. I lost about half my friends I'd say and the men were absolutely horrified I remember the Fisher brothers the second generation down asked me to dinner and were plying me with questions about the movement and I could just see their hair begin to curl because it was the last thing in the world they ever believed in. Yeah I was glad to lose those friends because I didn't want friends who couldn't see themselves and their lives clearly.

Interviewer: **Were there any issues and causes you worked on besides women's issues?**

P. Burnett: Well, I've yes for thirty years I was on various commissions in Detroit. I was on the city planning commission, which is quite an important commission next to the council. The Human Rights Commission for which I was sued for thirty million dollars while I was on the board and I think by the NAACP or something. I don't know they were — no actually it wasn't them it was we were sued because we had hired all male engineers to put in the lights around downtown when we were there running the new train through there and so forth and they — we hired a California firm who sent the engineers up to set it up and another human rights group said, "Wait a minute, what do you mean not hiring women engineers?" and we said frankly we said we would, but there is not one women engineer in Detroit that we could have hired. And I was also on the library commission of the prison commission, which was the most fun. And that was when the women lived in houses instead of in northern Michigan's main prison there and they were just delightful people and they put out a magazine or newspaper that had a column that answered any questions the prisoners sent in and you should see the language in it: "Tell me how I tell my blank blank boyfriend who's going to see some blank blank women that I don't approve of and he's not waiting for me." And the answer would be just as colorful. It was fun. But I enjoyed that a lot. But steady for thirty years I have been on city commissions and also I was chair of the Michigan Women's Commission and on that for five years.

Interviewer: **So it sounds like you had a lot of fun, is that correct?**

P. Burnett: Absolutely and a great variety in my life — eventually Russia took a great interest in me and they thought, well here is this apparently wealthy woman who is involved with the women's movement maybe she'd like to be a communist so they would invite me to Russia with several other women and I, still being a rock solid Republican, was perfectly willing to let them try anything they wanted to change my mind and they invited me back four times and flew me 8,000 miles around Russia. I saw a great deal of it and became very close to the women in the women's commission there who were totally

tied down by the conventional Russian philosophy but on their own they managed to have a really good time because they had power.

Interviewer: **Could you talk, you talked about being a Republican some people would have said this clashed with the feminist movement.**

P. Burnett: It does.

Interviewer: **How do you assess that?**

P. Burnett: Reconcile myself?

Interviewer: **Yeah, how do you reconcile yourself?**

P. Burnett: Well, I believe that to change an institution there are two ways to do it: beating on the doors outside or joining the darn thing and doing it from the inside. In fact, while I was chair of the Michigan's Women Commission we changed 5,000 laws that discriminated against women in Michigan. We just sent our lawyers to go over all the laws and one late night on a Friday night when all the rest of the legislature was gone we passed it changing, rewriting five thousand laws and the interesting thing was the legislation didn't really know what we were doing so they okayed it until it got to one and it said, "A women could sue her husband if he abused her in a marriage" and they said, "Hell no," and would not pass that one. They were afraid their wives would sue them so we nearly got it through though and to this day it's never been changed.

Interviewer: **What do you think then you agreed with me when I said Republican doesn't...**

P. Burnett: Oh yes, I have to get back to that.

Interviewer: **It's okay.**

P. Burnett: The person in abortion I'm so totally in favor for it and I belonged to a group that is a group of Republican women that are pro-choice and it's called WISH, Women In the Senate and House, and it has over two thousand members of Republican women here in Michigan and has a lot of power. It's now what is the counter part of that in the Democratic Party? Somebody's list — Shirley's list? — oh I don't know but anyway we've been very effective and have only put our money behind pro-choice Republican women in Michigan so things can be changed and one of these days the natives are going to get so restless the party has to listen but I haven't been too active in this last administration and we're losing ground I'm afraid right now. But fighting it, I hope for the best.

Interviewer: **The next set of questions has to do with your reflections upon second wave feminism and the first question is simply, what is your definition of**

feminism?

P. Burnett: Simply someone who believes that men and women should be equal in the economic world, the social world, and the private home world and that's it. That's all there is to say. And so surprising that it has such fearful connotations to women who think it means they are going to have to pay their own way sometimes but it doesn't it just means they have equality.

Interviewer: When you think back upon your activism between 1965 and 1985, do you think the press accurately portrayed your movement?

P. Burnett: Well it's on and off again. At first they were very intrigued by us and it made good copies and they made fun of us but they gave us a lot of press and then it began to irritate them and they picked up words like Rush Limbaugh's femi-Nazi and things like that and then they've decided to ignore us now. They think it's died and certainly hasn't. I think we're going underground, for some reason or another being a member of the veteran feminist group we're carrying the torches still and will to our grave and yet women are earning enough money to keep me quiet just wait till we, well we're having a real recession and when they can't find jobs and they are dependent on their husbands they are going to realize that we have to be ever-vigilant we have to watch our step, we have to be better than men and not ask for anything we don't deserve to earn we want to be president and earn the right to be president and stick in there. Maybe it takes years and it will take years to catch up to men as far as knowledge goes but the minute that women drop their guard we are going to go right back in the house again and never get out if we don't watch out.

Interviewer: What do you think were the main achievements and also the main failures if you consider anything a failure of the feminist movement?

P. Burnett: Well, of course our achievements are so subtle in some ways the way a woman expects to be spoken to and lawsuits against Edison and against a number of large companies in Detroit alone we found out. We wanted to know why women were paid so much less in Edison so our solution is easy to find out call the secretaries. They were all women, they all had access to the files and within a day I had on my desk literally every salary of every man and woman at Edison company here in Detroit and it was wildly different one from another doing exactly the same thing and we got them to strike and they had to even up and in the airways American airline wouldn't allow stewardess' to be over thirty because they were too old then and boy did we change that in a hurry. So we brought a lot of lawsuits and our law department was incredibly good but we made great many many many changes that are almost intangible and where we failed is that we are slipping on our abortion, our right to have an abortion and it's not in a way it's our fault because we aren't organized well enough and the far right is certainly organized and what they did is take official jobs in minor things like getting on the school board and doing all these so called

mundane committees where they could have their influence and could stand up against us.

Interviewer: **When...I'm sorry, some analysts of second wave feminism have characterized it as overwhelmingly racist or appropriating the concerns of middle class, white women it's a bunch of bored housewives...**

P. Burnett: They're saying this now?

Interviewer: **Some analysts yes?**

P. Burnett: Really?

Interviewer: **Does this describe the women you worked with and does this describe your activism at that day?**

P. Burnett: Well at the time, I think there were two women that had any money in the group and we certainly contributed as much as we could. No, with our rapt sessions I began to tell my problems that I wasn't free in my own household and they began to understand and we even arranged for all black women to meet with NOW members. They weren't members of NOW they were just outspoken, pretty well known women that would tell us the truth and we were astonished at the answer and maybe you will be. At the time their answer is because you are taking our Black men away from us and we don't have enough to go around as it is and I thought who me? And I began to think and it is true the Black men really liked to go out with white women and the liberated women were much more likely to go out with them then little housewives that stayed home and we thought well what else beyond that and we got down to it and there was no difference between us in what we wanted out of life but that one barrier was a big one. Isn't that surprising to you?

Interviewer: **Did you make efforts to ask women of color, black women, Hispanic women, Asian women to join the feminist movement or to join NOW or did they have separate feminist organizations?**

P. Burnett: No, they didn't and yes we did. Fact: we have more Black members in NOW in Michigan than anywhere else in the country and we went out to recruit these women. We eagerly wanted them — it was so interesting when the O.J. Simpson trial went on. We all got together to discuss whether or not he was guilty and I'm sorry to say on that one thing we really differed all the Black women thought oh no he's not guilty at all, while all the White women thought he was. But, we didn't part on any other issue we were very in accord with each other and during my work on commissions I've had such opportunity to meet the cream of Michigan women, Detroit women. They are so well educated and so smart and such a joy to know and it was my one access. I wouldn't meet them socially so I met them that way and we've remained close friends.

Interviewer: **And what do you think about that assertion that the women's movement originated with bored suburban housewives did that fit the profile of women that you worked with?**

P. Burnett: I would change one word to *abused* suburban housewives and it's true it was a middle class, middle-income wave of women who had the time and money to put into it and we were so surprised at one of our conferences when a whole group of lesbian women came up and said, "Hey you are totally overlooking us. We're women and you should be representing us," and we had a conference and I think it was Betty Friedan that said, "My god they're women, of course they belong in NOW." And so we changed our whole convention we had to have a special room for them to have their meeting and to air their problems and so forth. And so they began to join more than before.

Interviewer: **Now if you think about the next generation of feminists, what are they going to have to do, what are the outstanding issues that they have to confront and what advice could you give them?**

P. Burnett: Well, I think our very closest weakness is going to be changes in the abortion law and you know Gloria Steinem said if men could have babies, abortion would be a holy sacrament and she was right but they've got to stem the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* or we are in deep trouble. We could have a country — there is so much power in having a country where there is no smoking. We could ban abortion and have it impossible to get. And then we're back with the coat hangers in the back alley treatment and so forth. Well, that's very important. Another is the glass ceiling, which is still there. A few companies have removed it or allowed women to reach the top, but not very many and we still receive unequal treatment when we are equally trained as a man and yet can't get a vice presidency let alone presidency, so that's a big one. And I'm happy to say that women in sports have made such a breakthrough and I just painted Jackie Joyner-Kersey and only there you go I wanted to do her in shorts going over a hurdle — what does she do, insists that she be painted in an evening dress. So anyway, it's not a feminist portrait though, I do have a portrait of her. In fact, that's one of the main things, goals in my life to paint as many great feminists as possible. And I have painted Gloria and Betty and have quite a few I want to do at least twenty if I can for the Women's Hall of Fame in the Seneca Falls, New York I'd love them to have it or, let me think, Radcliff's library would be a wonderful place for them.

Interviewer: **These are really all the questions I have but there is still some time on the tape for you to tell any stories or talk about anything you might want to. Do you have anything else that we haven't covered?**

P. Burnett: Well, for me the women's movement has opened up the world. As I said I was invited to Russia, and of course maybe for political reasons, but I didn't care. I

went there and influenced as many people as I could and then I was also invited by China to be their guest for three weeks and believe me it's no dream to be the guest of any country — you're up at five and breakfast at six and you have five factories or schools you have to see that day, but anyway I now I feel that there are so many countries that I can call a feminist and say, "Hey I want to see you," and have a friend in that country. And locally it's a password among women. If you say you're a feminist and don't flinch that means you really are and you immediately have an accord with another women who is a feminist because they step beyond their narrow view of life to a realistic view of life and I agree with Betty Friedan that women are not liberated in America until they are liberated all over the world and I'll never live to see it. I'll never live to see women equal in America. I'm sure it will take years and years and years of concentrated goals that they want to reach and that is to have women equal and as long as they keep it in mind and not give up just because their salaries almost as good as the man next to them or they are allowed to marry and work and bring up a family. That's not equality I mean the men have to put in as much time ha! What a dream doing housework and taking care of the children as the women do and until that day we aren't equal.

Interviewer: **Well I hope that happens tomorrow.**

P. Burnett: Me too!

Interviewer: **I'm ready for that. Well thank you so much I really appreciate you taking the time to do this interview.**

P. Burnett: Well it was fun, you ask good questions.

Interviewer: **I'm going to take a little still shot of you, so if you'll just smile and we can do this with these cameras now you just punch a little button and it stops everything and Patricia you told me that you were Miss Michigan and runner up to Miss America.**

P. Burnett: Oh yes that's another thing I announced when I ran for NOW and they were certainly non-plussed (??) by the whole thing but this is a picture of —

Interviewer: **If you'll just hold it up I'll get a close up of it.**

P. Burnett: Miss America and me.

Interviewer: **What year was that 1942?**

P. Burnett: Just a few years ago and let me think if I have there's a wonderful one.

Interviewer: **Were you a feminist when you were Miss Michigan?**

P. Burnett: Was I what?

Interviewer: A feminist when you were Miss Michigan?

P. Burnett: Yes, I was and I had no talent what so ever. Except for painting. This is my bragging section here I'd have to say even being a Republican the best president was, that I liked, the best was president Carter because he was a true feminist. He and I sat and telephoned states asking that they vote in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment. Let me think is there anything, oh yeah, here I am with Indira Gandhi and here's presenting my portrait to Betty Friedan. I don't know if you can see that

Interviewer: It's hard to get.

P. Burnett: And here's my portrait of Margaret Thatcher and she's sort of assuming the pose as it were and Martha, let me see the president of the Philippines, and alright you just about did it, and that's Joyce Carol Oates who I deeply admired. Here she is here; in fact she dedicated a book to me.

Interviewer: And what book is this?

P. Burnett: Oh this book is *True Colors: An Artist's Journey from Beauty Queen to Feminist*. So you really didn't have to interview me at all you just had to read the whole middle of the book which is about NOW and its wonderful adventures that I had in it.

Interviewer: That's great I'm glad we got this down. Thanks again Patricia Burnett.

P. Burnett: Thank you.

[END]