INTERVIEW: Millie Jeffrey
INTERVIEWER: Sarah Arvey
DATE: July 29, 2003

[TAPE 1]

Interviewer: **This is just to get a good sound copy and audio tape, so if we don't want to use the video tape we won't.**

M. Jeffrey: Oh.

Interviewer: **The camera is just mostly for the voice.**

M. Jeffrey: Oh, okay.

Interviewer: **Okay. So, that was a little test run and if you would try to look at me when we interview and I'll just keep the film rolling. So Millie, the first questions are about your biographical information: where you were born, when, and your family's circumstances if you could describe them.**

M. Jeffrey: Okay. Oh now?

Interviewer: **Yeah.**

M. Jeffrey: I was — I don't know why I have a little frog or something.

Interviewer: **Do you want me to get your water?**

M. Jeffrey: Hmm?

Interviewer: **Would you like your water?**

M. Jeffrey: Yeah, just grab the water.

Interviewer: **Yeah okay. So where were you born?**

M. Jeffrey: I was born in Alton, Iowa. Alton is a tiny little town in northwest Iowa. It's five thousand people and it's in the center of a very rich farming area.

Interviewer: **Were your parents farmers?**

M. Jeffrey: No, both my parents were pharmacists.

Interviewer: **Okay.**

M. Jeffrey: And my father had a drug store with his brother, Uncle Pat, in Cherokee. Cherokee was the county seat.

Interviewer: Okay. And, did you say what year you were born?

M. Jeffrey: Hmm?

Interviewer: What year were you born?

M. Jeffrey: 1911.

Interviewer: Okay, and did you have brothers and sisters?

M. Jeffrey: I am the oldest of seven. So, yes, I had a brother and sisters. One brother and five sisters.

Interviewer: Okay. How would you describe your family economic circumstances and growing up in general in Iowa?

M. Jeffrey: Well, this was a small town and my father had a drugstore with his brother. Excuse me. My father with his brother had a drugstore; it was on a corner, very good location in this town of five thousand people. So, we were middle class, I guess you would say. We never thought of ourselves in those days as belonging to any class. So, lower middle class, I'm not sure.

Interviewer: And your mother was a pharmacist too?

M. Jeffrey: My mother was a pharmacist too.

Interviewer: Was that unusual at that time?

M. Jeffrey: Yes, it was unusual. I don't know, well, yes it was unusual and she was always a very progressive woman, a progressive person.

Interviewer: Did she go to school to get trained in pharmacy, pharmaceutical training?

M. Jeffrey: Yes, she went to Highland Park Pharmacy School in Des Moines, Iowa. That's where she got her degree and I never really learned what prompted her, what motivated her because she was born on a farm outside of Des Moines. Des Moines is the state capital of Iowa. And she, with her sister, came to Des Moines. I said born on a farm in a little tiny town, Kellerton. And she came with her sister to Des Moines. And that's where she went to school and that's where she got her degree. And she worked in a pharmacy to help with her tuition in Des Moines.

Interviewer: **Oh, I see, I see. Did you all have any religious affiliation growing up? Any affiliation, with a religion while you were growing up?**

M. Jeffrey: Any affiliation?

Interviewer: **Religious, religion?**

M. Jeffrey: Oh, oh we were in a Catholic family.

Interviewer: **Oh you were?**

M. Jeffrey: Yeah.

Interviewer: **Okay.**

M. Jeffrey: I was the oldest of seven as I said in a good, church going Catholic family.

Interviewer: **Do you consider — when you think about your younger years were there any influences that might have steered you towards feminist activism later on?**

M. Jeffrey: You know that's such a good question and the answer is I really don't know, but I can say this: in this small town, the family next door to us had three boys, and the block on the other side, where we found our playmates, most of them were boys. So I can't tell you whether that had any influence on me or not. Such a good question, but I suspect the fact that my mother was a pharmacist and she worked in a drug store had some effect. The fact that my aunt, my Aunt Plessey (??) was a single parent of two children and had to work. She worked in a department store in Minneapolis and I remember I had an aunt whose two daughters who are both nurses and all of this may have had unconsciously perhaps some influence on me. I knew women who worked for income, for wages.

Interviewer: **Going on a little further: what kind of education did you get?**

M. Jeffrey: Well we were educated — well I should say we moved from Cherokee, which was a small town to Minneapolis when I was a sophomore in high school. In my elementary school and one year of high school in Cherokee, we were in a Catholic school, a parochial school. And when we moved to Minneapolis — it was a great move — we entered (I say we because my brother Kenneth who is two years younger than I but in the same grade he was very bright) when we moved to Minneapolis it was like a whole new vision because here was the high school (had over two thousand students just in a high school) and it was a very modern, up to date and it was public, public high school and we loved, loved, loved, loved our experience at Minneapolis Central. Still think of it with great fond memories.

Interviewer: **If you will hold on one second Millie, I'm going to change. You can go ahead.**

M. Jeffrey: What did you do?

Interviewer: **What did I do? I changed the battery in the camera.**

[Phone ringing]

Interviewer: **Is that your telephone?**

M. Jeffrey: Yes, but I don't know whether to answer it or not.

Interviewer: **So you were talking about your move to Minneapolis and your education what sort of education you got after that move.**

M. Jeffrey: Well high school was very, very exciting. We had as I indicated earlier, my brother —

[Knocking]

M. Jeffrey: Hello, come in — I was in Minneapolis central —

Interviewer: **That's right you were going to talk about your education and you had moved to Minneapolis, like a switch was a big, big change for you all, you and your brother.**

M. Jeffrey: Yeah, yeah. My brother and I, we both — but anyway well we'll skip that. I loved Central High. It was such a change from a little tiny parochial school to 2,000 — 2,300, actually, students. And we just got in the swim. We entered all the extra curricular activities. Not all of it, many of them. The newspaper, my brother was the editor of *Quest,* which was a literary magazine, and I was the president of the Latin club and participated in — It was just a new world. I don't think we thought of it that way, but we sort of plunged in and loved it.

Interviewer: **Did you plan on going to college or university after?**

M. Jeffrey: I'm not sure why but I always planned on going to University of Minnesota. As a matter of fact — oh, I know why: when we were in Cherokee, I can see my mother yet, in the living room, sitting on the floor with manuals from colleges and universities from — what do you call them?

Interviewer: **Pamphlets or propaganda.**

M. Jeffrey: Well, the class schedules — we were serious. Before we decided — before she

decided, because my father unfortunately was no longer a help. She was the support of seven children and she was going to have to move these seven children by herself. I should say this; she always knew that we had to leave Cherokee. We had to move to a city where there was a university because that was the only way her six daughters and one son were going to get a college education. And to get a college education, I think when that becomes part of a person's life, you don't think of it really as a goal. It was just we were going to go to college. And so she was looking at a couple of things of course. One was she would buy a drug store because she was the sole support of our family and so she was looking for a city in which there would be opportunities for an independent woman running a drug store, and also her sister, Aunt Plessey (??), lived in Minneapolis and that was another inducement for us to go to Minneapolis. Which was fine, it was a great city, a great, great move.

Interviewer: **What did you study in college? And did you go to the University of Minnesota?**

M. Jeffrey: Oh yes, I went to the University of Minnesota — worked my way through. Worked twenty, worked almost forty hours a week all the way through, and I was also active in student affairs. I worked and was very active in student affairs. For example, I was president of student YWCA. YWCA now that doesn't sound impressive now, but at that time, the YWCA was one of the major women's organizations in Minnesota.

Interviewer: **What was your interest in working for the YWCA?**

M. Jeffrey: Oh, I don't remember, it was student activities.

Interviewer: **Did you consider yourself a feminist at that point?**

M. Jeffrey: Well I don't know whether I'm a feminist today. So, I don't think I ever thought of things that way. It was student activities. It was women so obviously I was interested in women or I wouldn't have plunged into the YWCA. Although, that was on campus and the two most active organizations were the YWCA and the YMCA.

Interviewer: **Okay.**

M. Jeffrey: So it was student activities, that's what grabbed me.

Interviewer: **Were you — did you have a spouse or significant other at this time?**

M. Jeffrey: No.

Interviewer: **So you were single?**

M. Jeffrey: Oh yes, heavens yes.

Interviewer: When you graduated did you get some sort of job?

M. Jeffrey: When I graduated? Well one of my mentors, one of my most principal mentors at the university was the YWCA student secretary, Lois Wildey (??). She was a magnificent woman, magnificent woman and very strong and always held up dreams and goals for those young women who participated in our activities. And I had, let's see, I need to come back somewhere — I know: by my junior year I had planned on going to graduate school and that was influenced, largely influenced I would say, by Lois Wildey (??), my mentor. And she had a sister who did graduate work at Bryn Mawr College. So I became interested in Bryn Mawr, just happened it was a woman's school. I don't know that, that influenced me very much, but it was an opportunity for — they had a two-year graduate program and that's what compelled my interest and why from the time, some time in my junior year, I had accepted my cap. Oh, I know why, because Lois — I have to recap. Lois Wildey's (??) sister had gone to Bryn Mawr College and she had loved it. And I never met her sister, but I had heard a lot about Bryn Mawr, via her sister Lois Wildey (??) the YWCA secretary. So I had set my dream on Bryn Mawr when I was, I don't know, was a junior maybe.

Interviewer: What did you want to study?

M. Jeffrey: Well, Bryn Mawr College that's of course such a good question because Bryn Mawr College, as you know, is a woman's school and it had a graduate program for women in industry, and industry — my goodness my memory is slipping. I'm not getting it. It was a graduate program for women, well, men could enter it but it was mostly Bryn Mawr which was mostly women in — I know how I got into this: I was sort of interested in human relations in the work place and that sort of led me into what they might have called — what did they call it in those days but human relations? They didn't call it that. I can't remember exactly. Anyway isn't that funny, I can't remember, you trained to become — isn't that funny and that's what I trained as an undergraduate in the meantime through the YWCA and the wonderful inspiration Lois Wildey (??), the secretary, was and the very advanced program we had for young woman who were interested in the workplace. I had become interested in Bryn Mawr College, because Bryn Mawr had a program to train women industrial relations; it had a better title than that but that's what it was, industrial relations, so in terms of a job opportunity it was like being more than a personnel director, a director of human relations in a plant and that's what I thought I was training for.

Interviewer: And?

M. Jeffrey: In a two year program at Bryn Mawr College and I must say Bryn Mawr was a

marvelous wonderful experience. Here I was from Minnesota who can't believe this I had never been outside of Minneapolis. I never will forget — I took a bus to Philadelphia to save money and I went to Philadelphia, never had been in a big city like that, and because Bryn Mawr of course is just outside of Philadelphia and it was so exciting, such a marvelous wonderful experience.

Interviewer: **And did you get a job after you graduated from Bryn Mawr; was it easy for you at that training?**

M. Jeffrey: Well, I was at Bryn Mawr I was, you could say corrupted, although I had become very interested when I was at Minnesota in workers and in unions and, oh yes, I guess you would say I'd become a radical because I knew I was — I had joined a Socialist party. And when I got to Bryn Mawr, part of our program there was — damn, what did we call it? Oh yeah. We called it Practicum, that meant one or two days a week we would go into Philadelphia to work as could be in a public human relations department or something to do with workers. And we had a little coterie in our department and we were the ones that always went into the city and that was because there was three or four of us who had the same kind of interests more or less and we started going to union meetings, union rallies, all sorts of labor activities and that just one thing lead to another and I became very committed to the labor movement.

Interviewer: **And was it unusual at that point in time in Philadelphia? In the factories was the labor force mostly men, or was it half-and-half, or did it depend?**

M. Jeffrey: Oh yeah, I forgot something. Through the YWCA — it's so hard to recall — through the YWCA during one summer while I was still in school I worked in a Baby Ruth factory in Chicago for three weeks and that was a YWCA student program for college women in industrial plants in industry. So, as I say one thing — by the time I was at Bryn Mawr I had become very interested in labor and of course Philadelphia was a marvelous wonderful experience as I said earlier, but it was a whole new world as far as labor is concerned and at that time the strongest union in Philly was the hosiery workers and I, we went — there were two or three of us from Bryn Mawr; we went every Friday night into Philadelphia to go to the local one hosiery workers' meeting and it was just again so exciting because here was a union and they were — and we met a lot of interesting people, a member of Franz Daniel (??) was one. These were do — I'll say this quote on quote — "do good" people who would come through college and wanted to devote their lives to helping workers better theirs. And the hosiery workers was a very strong union at that time in Philly and it was a lot of English people that is they immigrated from England or Scotland and had settled in Philadelphia and others too.

Interviewer: **Now at that time you were a graduate student not a factory worker so was your —**

M. Jeffrey: Oh, as a graduate student I did, but well in the summer months for example one summer, two summers, I think, one summer we worked for the Pennsylvania Department of Labor in the woman's division. In that job and there at that job, I was an inspector and I inspected home work, home work, because home work — I don't think we have any now, but that was, for example, gloves. They worked on gloves at home and other items and we went out to inspect the conditions in the homes where these workers in these homes — where the work was being done, and that took us in the suburbs (and they didn't call them suburbs then) in the towns in eastern Pennsylvania so that was beyond Philadelphia.

Interviewer: Were you a union organizer or a member of a union at that?

M. Jeffrey: No, no. But when I was inspecting to see what the conditions in the home were that was Pennsylvania law, I should say should [have] been, people supporting that legislation, they worked very hard to get legislation that enabled us to — legislation that then while we were inspecting, see, to say whether or not it was being observed.

Interviewer: And in that case you could look for exploitation and fight for better conditions in which the women worked?

M. Jeffrey: Oh yeah, oh yeah. See the work was in their homes and it was gloves for example and holes too, and our job was too see whether or not whether the home conditions were — whether the owner, whether or not in this system the work was being done under the regulations of the state governing work in homes.

Interviewer: I see, I see. Okay.

M. Jeffrey: Guess it's kind of complicated.

Interviewer: So let's move on and continue talking about the rest of your career. Did you continue working with union and the labor movement unions?

M. Jeffrey: Yes, well by that time I was, I guess you'd say, a radical at that time, and on weekends I lived at Soviet House (??). Soviet House (??) was in north Philadelphia. Kensington at that time — it's very different today but at that time that was the textile area. There were many textile factories in Philadelphia and that's where a lot of the workers lived. Many of these workers were from Scotland, Ireland, England, and so on, some Germans but not so many for these industries. Yes, I guess what I should remember to say: we became involved, I can't tell you we were eager, and every Friday night we would go to Branch One's meeting. Branch One was like local union number one in the hosiery industry, was big in Philadelphia in those days and so we'd go there, it was so exciting. We were in workers' groups and unions and so on, very exciting

Interviewer: **Now Millie did you — let's talk the interview is a little bit about the feminist movement, so you were working for a labor movement, did you also join the feminist movement?**

M. Jeffrey: No there wasn't a feminist movement then. Now, for example, Soviet House (??) was the woman that rented and it I think we could have — it was three stories, it was a huge house on 2nd North, Philadelphia working class area. The person who rented it was Alice Hanson (??). Alice Hanson (??) was the YWCA secretary in Kensington. So the YW was like a predecessor of labor among women, unions among women and was really the outpost for unions in those days before the Amalgamated got really started and so on. So, our house, Soviet House (??), became a headquarters for all sorts of organizations. Now, I just went there on weekends because I was at Bryn Mawr in those days so but I went in almost every weekend to Philadelphia, there was — some of my two or three of my colleagues did too, but I think I was the one that was captured by the bug of unionism.

Interviewer: **And when you finished graduate school did you continue working for the labor movement?**

M. Jeffrey: Hmm?

Interviewer: **When you were finished when you got your graduate degree did you continue?**

M. Jeffrey: Oh, oh after my two years at —

Interviewer: **At Bryn Mawr.**

M. Jeffrey: Yes, yes almost immediately after, not quite, I was offered a job — as I always said the best title I ever had — Educational Director of the Pennsylvania Joint Board of Shirt Workers and Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and my headquarters was in Pottsville, Pennsylvania. And that was a statewide job and I had a wonderful, wonderful boss, David Monis (??), who's very creative and anything would go with him as long as he knew all about it; and he was the director of this Amalgamated, was part of this Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America operation in eastern Pennsylvania. And so we were organizing plants like wild animals, one after another because — I'm going through this backwards — because the plants, the industry this was a cotton garment not, Amalgamated Clothing Workers or men's clothing but this was new ventures for the industry cotton garments and they moved the plants from New York and Pennsylvania, New York and Philadelphia, mostly just New York. They moved their plants to Pennsylvania and where they could open, open shop, open shops and so the Amalgamated said, "You aren't going to escape us," and they were very bright. I think they put on young people to do organizing in these towns all

across all over eastern Pennsylvania; Mauch Chunk and Allentown. And one northeastern or eastern Pennsylvania is where — I'm sorry I'm starting over. The coal miners who are organized in coal mine towns, and there were many coal mine towns, small towns in eastern Pennsylvania like from Philadelphia up to Allentown, Pottsville and so on, and that's — the industry opened plants in those towns because there was a ready women work force. The men were working in the mines and of course the employment was irregular but their wives were also part of the labor force for the cotton garment plants; shirts, men's shirts — and it was all men's — and pajamas and so on. You didn't tell me these things were so long.

Interviewer: **When did you move to Michigan?**

M. Jeffrey: How did I get to Michigan? Oh, I got married. My husband was in a labor movement. It was the war and we got jobs in Washington D.C. as part of the war effort, labor in the war effort, and then from there my husband, Pikerly (??) — and I was delighted and we were married by this time — wanted to go to the auto industry was just organizing, was just organization. The Reuthers, and we knew the Reuthers — Roy had lived in our house in Washington — so we knew the Reuthers. So again, everybody who were in the labor movement, we went to Detroit, we went to Michigan. That's where the organizing, that's where the excitement was, that's where there was the action! We came to Detroit.

Interviewer: **You and your husband, did you have children?**

M. Jeffrey: By that time no we didn't have any children. I have two children; they were both born in Detroit, but after we moved here.

Interviewer: **So you came to Detroit to work with the labor movement and the auto industry?**

M. Jeffrey: What?

Interviewer: **You came to Detroit to work in the auto industry?**

M. Jeffrey: Yeah.

Interviewer: **And with the labor movement and to unionize that and did you continue working for the labor movement?**

M. Jeffrey: Well, I would say we came to Detroit principally because of my husband's interests. There were always opportunities you know in those days, even for pay or not for pay, but it was an adventure. It was very, very exciting.

Interviewer: **And in the — so that must have been in the late 1940's?**

M. Jeffrey: Well, I should say, of course, Walter Reuther I didn't know — I knew Roy. I said Roy had lived with us, Roy Reuther. So, we were connected with these people, these were Socialists pretty much. We had connections as well, had connections. We knew people in a lot of different cities.

Interviewer: At what point did you start working for the feminist movement and women in labor?

M. Jeffrey: Well, we never called it the feminist movement.

Interviewer: What did you call it?

M. Jeffrey: Well, they don't call it the feminist movement today. They don't really. Only in certain circles.

Interviewer: And so it was no different than what you were doing?

M. Jeffrey: No, no I was offered and appointed as the first director of the women's department of United Automobile Workers International Union. And Victor Reuther appointed me and so that's how I got into the UAW. Many years ago.

Interviewer: What were you supposed to do as director of the woman's division?

M. Jeffrey: I could do anything but — and I worked for Victor. There was a lot of political division in the UAW at that time that was the great sweat when Reuther finally won. What was I going to say? Oh, your question was — well it was a wide-open thing because I was appointed because it was during World War II and the UAW had never hired many women workers. With the war effort and the men going to overseas, women were hired and so the union said, "We have to do something about these women who are coming into the plants! We better get them organized." So that was my job. Everything affecting women: organize, education, getting women to conferences, getting them recognized in their local unions.

Interviewer: And were the women accepting of the unionizing efforts?

M. Jeffrey: Oh, by the answer to your question is yes. The question is how many participated, but to the answer did they, no well — (unintelligible). And the thing to do when there is a union in the plant and the UAW everybody joined the union. So, I don't remember any resistance there may have been some, but I don't recall it. Part of my job was to get women active, to get involved in union activities, women's activities but also just general union. Recreation. Get a women's baseball team.

Interviewer: And was that successful, were your efforts successful?

M. Jeffrey: Hmm?

Interviewer: Were your efforts successful?

M. Jeffrey: Oh yes. Oh, you know it was — I don't know quite how to describe it but there was a war and women had been recruited to work in the war effort, to produce the materials of war for our men overseas. There was a lot of patriotism but there was a mood and excitement that was very positive.

Interviewer: So what happened after the war? Once the war was over did the women stay in the factories? Did you keep your job?

M. Jeffrey: Oh, that's such a good question of course. Good question because A. the first thing management tried to do and did do very successfully was let the women go. The women were fired. They were no longer needed, they hadn't been needed before the war and they weren't needed now and so part of it was easy to do because there was conversion from the war material for planes and whatnot to back to the auto. So, there was an adjustment period and women were just laid off like that. And in some places women I remember one woman, Trilby Ryapell (??), out at Local 600, that's a Rouge plant (??). I remember saying to Trilby (??), "Hang on." I think she was placed in seven different jobs. They were trying to get rid of her and she just hung on and she stayed there. She retired from Ford Motor and there were X number of women like that but for the most part, well, one reason was the war was over and they were ready to go back to their homes. I don't know how ready they all were. But, it's, you know, they had been called to work during the war they did that and now the war was over, so there was some women who got very angry but there were a lot of women who didn't, just thought, "Well we'll take this," and I think some women were just glad to go back to home. I don't know; yes, they were.

Interviewer: What did that mean for you?

M. Jeffrey: Oh we were very active, we had women conferences and helping women with their grievances in the plants because I just indicated there were grievances: woman laid off, woman laid off.

[Phone Ringing]

M. Jeffrey: Let that just ring. Because we are going to get to the end of this pretty soon.

Interviewer: So now I'm trying to make connections — most of my interviews have been with women who've been members of NOW and been active in NOW. Were you ever part of NOW?

M. Jeffrey: I was active in NOW, but not very active.

Interviewer: **In the 60's and 70's?**

M. Jeffrey: Oh yeah, we were. Oh yes, I helped organize a lot of women's organizations and I helped organize and I guess was the first president of the National Women's Political Caucus because there was NOW which — but we didn't have a political organization for women. And so some of us, I can't remember how this all happened, but we organized the National Women's Political Caucus which was women to support to recruit and elect women to public office and there's still an existence.

Interviewer: **And so you did you —**

M. Jeffrey: And I became president of that.

Interviewer: **You did? So you were active in the labor movement as well as this other type of activism focused upon women?**

M. Jeffrey: Oh yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: **Did you have time to do this? Were these paid positions or were some of these paid, some of these volunteer?**

M. Jeffrey: No, I went to work for the UAW.

Interviewer: **And were — was your husband and family supportive of your feminist activism?**

M. Jeffrey: My union activism?

Interviewer: **Your union and also your feminist?**

M. Jeffrey: Well, we wouldn't think of it that way.

Interviewer: **Oh okay. I'm using that word you don't like.**

M. Jeffrey: It isn't that I don't like it, it was thought of [as] women's activism in those days. Women's activism.

Interviewer: **Woman's activism, how's that?**

M. Jeffrey: I'm exaggerating that, so skip it.

Interviewer: **No, but I think it's important that you are making that you can't take names out of history and apply them to the past. It's true, it's a good point. I appreciate that point. So your family, were they supportive of your activities?**

M. Jeffrey: Yes, yes, yes.

Interviewer: Okay it seems like you are getting a little tired, do you want a little break?

M. Jeffrey: No.

Interviewer: Okay good. Let's see, so you were president of the National Women's Political Caucus and you were a member of NOW?

M. Jeffrey: Well, but that's just one of the women's organizations.

Interviewer: What other ones were you in?

M. Jeffrey: Oh, there were half a dozen.

Interviewer: Where'd you find the time?

M. Jeffrey: National Women's Political Caucus was one and I organized the Michigan Women's Political Caucus — that was the political arm of the women's movement. The national, because we had organizations in states and in local communities and so on and it's still in existence. That political arm was very important. The other women organizations like NOW, and so on were to organize women on economic or educational issues.

Interviewer: When you think about all your activism with these different organizations do you think it made sense to — did they all mesh together? Was the cause of one similar to the cause of another, or why did you work for varying organizations?

M. Jeffrey: Why did I work in various organizations?

Interviewer: Mostly in the different organizations that you worked for, your labor organizations, your women's organizations, the women's political organizations, did the cause and the goals of your activism mesh with one another? Were they similar?

M. Jeffrey: Oh yes, yes.

Interviewer: Was there ever one organization that did it all?

M. Jeffrey: No.

Interviewer: Do you think that would have been possible?

M. Jeffrey: No. I don't think it'd even be a good idea.

Interviewer: **Why?**

M. Jeffrey: Well, because women wanted to do different things. And it wasn't necessary because women's movement became a solidifying force for political action for example and for other actions we worked together. But it made a difference — there was a lot of —

[TAPE 2]

Interviewer: **Ready to go when you are. We were talking about your different types of activism in the labor movement and the women's movement and you were talking about juggling it all because not one organization did everything you wanted to. Can you think of any funny or dramatic moments or significant events that you were a part of back then?**

M. Jeffrey: Such a good question. Well I think these details are so — they don't come back easy, but anyway I remember this was must have been the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, this was in Reading, Pennsylvania and it was a shirt shop, right. And I was sent in to organize and ready and — the Wide Awake Shirt, the Wide Awake Shirt Shop. That's it, that's the title — Wide Awake Shirt. That's what I was struggling for — Wide Awake Shirt Shop and there were other plants too but that was one of the larger ones. Shirt shops weren't big, they weren't like auto plants, they weren't big institutions.

And so I was sent in to organize it and the only people I could get to get really interested in the union were women who worked in the packing department and I said I was sent in. So then one of the top male organizers came in and I was so proud of these people and they came to meetings and they would go on picket lines if we wanted them to but they were wonderful, they were wonderful. But the organizer said — he just tore me apart because they weren't important. They were in the end of the process, you know, where they put shirts in boxes — that wasn't cutting off the major production but I can still remember. Oh, we did get in that plant — it just came back to me — in a shirt plant, cotton garment plant. You had the cutters (the men), and then you had the sewers, and then you had the pressers, and a couple of others departments in sewing. It was taught if you were going to organize the plant you organized the sewers, the stitchers, you don't — and of course the cutters, but generally in the Amalgamated in those days they'd send in some men to organize the cutters — yeah the cutters, because they were men and they had men organizing. But I remember I can still see some of these women on the picket line and they were pressers and they were terrific. And they were mostly Polish and many of them, most of them, did not speak English. That was many years ago and that was in Reading, Pennsylvania. And BBD in Baltimore, and this was a great big plant and the only place that we really big for that industry, 1,200 people that was big and the only, only people we could get organized were some pressers, and again

it was a handful of women but we did call a strike and they were, with this handful of women, we didn't win it right away, but we did gradually. I can still see them and if I had — I'm trying to think of their names if I can quickly. You know a lot of our work was when we first went in to organize we went house to house at night. Because you are always trying to get a core group that would work in one department or the other and you had to develop a core group inside the plant cause you can't organize outside the plant. That doesn't work except in dramatic situations.

Interviewer: **What were your main, if you think about your work, what do you think your main achievements were?**

M. Jeffrey: Mine? Oh I don't know. Well it was to get a union contract that was certainly an achievement. First union contract and that's what we did mostly in organizing the first union contract and all that process, that is a lot of hard work organizing, building your organization within the plant. Helping it was mostly women. You become unafraid. Be willing to lose their jobs and that and that's a hard thing to do, that is for an organizer, because you know you get this woman really interested and active, she may well lose her job. So, that's a responsibility the organizer has, so the woman or the man — we worked mostly with the women — knows that she could lose her job. It's a risky business but you get some wonderful women, wonderful leaders.

Interviewer: **Who are your main organizational allies? Who were your allies, who did you work with the most and who was most supportive for you and your activism?**

M. Jeffrey: Well, allies in a plant you never know where you may find somebody. It could be a man, a man in the cutting department, which is the exclusive. It's where you have the most skill. And if you get some men, the cutters, who are willing to give leadership that could be pretty important or can be any department where you get key people. Pressing department for example. I guess that the most rewarding thing is to see how leadership develops. I think that's one of the most rewarding, because you can go into a plant where they never had any organization or there's been no, no leadership of any kind and you can see over a period of time how that leadership is developed, builds, is transformed, and that's very exciting. And of course once they're in the unions then there are a lot of opportunities, educational opportunities, summer schools, but various educational programs and it's wonderful to see how people can develop their skills. Leadership talents and so on. And become presidents!

Interviewer: **The next part of the interview focuses on some reflections on the women's movement during the 60's and 70's and the first definition — which I know you are going to have fun — what is your definition of feminism? The first question is what is your definition of feminism? You said you weren't even sure you were a feminist today. You mentioned earlier you weren't sure**

that you were a feminist now. Do you have —

M. Jeffrey: Well, I guess I don't know what's a good definition of feminism is. It's clearly, you know, the full rights of women at every aspect of her life — that's feminism. To me, every aspect and that in all walks of life and total open opportunities with whatever she's doing. Well, it's a full and open society for women and we haven't achieved it yet although it's far better than it was. But we always have aspirations like the presidency of the United States as one example. Which we will have it when we're president, I don't just when but we will. I used to be asked that question over and over and over again. And in recent years, and maybe I haven't been in places, but in recent years, it isn't asked nearly as much. I think because generally there's more acceptance of women, because women are in more and more elected positions. You know a woman, she won — [it] isn't bad anymore.

Interviewer: Do you think —

M. Jeffrey: There's some of course. There's prejudice around.

Interviewer: Do you think the press — that the media, the newspapers, televisions — accurately portrayed feminism?

M. Jeffrey: Do I think?

Interviewer: That the media portrayed accurately portrayed the feminist movement?

M. Jeffrey: No.

Interviewer: Can you talk more about that. Why?

M. Jeffrey: Why? Oh they don't want to work. It's easier to do the divisions, the splits, or the — you know, they feminize it to some extent: a woman is running for this position or that position. The surface as I said they really don't want to work or dig, or the real story isn't as attractive as the one they'd like to write about. I'm thinking about — I'd like to have about six women here and I can think of them who hold elected positions in various unions and have them talk about it about your question. There's still a lot of obstacles, a lot of obstacles but it's much better, no comparison to even ten years ago.

Interviewer: What do you consider were the main achievements of your activism?

M. Jeffrey: Of activism?

Interviewer: Of feminist activism?

M. Jeffrey: Well, there's never a main achievement. There's a lot of achievements and a lot

of them may be unheard of or unwritten about but — and there's so much more to be done but I think that it's still unusual for a women to be elected to position in industry or there hasn't been a women before — it is more common but it's still a long, long way for us to go and I can tell you in the UAW there's still a lot of prejudice wherever men gather, there's still a lot of prejudice.

Interviewer: **Is there any —**

M. Jeffrey: And some of it is general because when you get down to it you know in an individual situation maybe a man is quite fair, but in his actions, in the union, and helping or stopping or hindering a woman who wants to run for office may make him look like a real shit.

Interviewer: **Is anything that you would consider a failure of the feminist movement?**

M. Jeffrey: Oh, by the way I think women have made enormous progress, women have made enormous progress and we're on our way. And so much of it isn't noted these days because it's happening in all sorts of avenues all sorts of ways and all sorts of places and we're on our way, we're doing well.

Interviewer: **Do you have advice? Do you have any advice for the next generation of feminists?**

M. Jeffrey: Hang in there.

[Phone Ringing]

M. Jeffrey: Excuse me, didn't I just hear the phone ringing.

Interviewer: **No. It stopped ringing. I'm almost through here.**

M. Jeffrey: Hang in —

Interviewer: **Hang in there, that's right.**

M. Jeffrey: Oh, and it's women, like others, have to learn to work together. And that's a hard, hard reality and I think more and more that is understood by women there isn't nearly as well — there are more opportunities so there isn't as much competition for those opportunities that have been available in the past.

Interviewer: **Okay Millie, this about covers the interview unless there's anything else you would like to add about your past or other questions that you might think have gone unanswered.**

M. Jeffrey: Well, I guess all I'd like to say is be active, having goals, having dreams is essential, is what makes the women's movement or any movement challenging,

exciting, sometimes threatening. It's what makes life fulfilling. I can't think of a life without some kind of goals that can be religious, spiritual, or it can be just human. And goals are involved people — and so fundamental to all of this is simple things like liking people, knowing how to work with people, wanting to work with people, respecting others, sharing; sharing is very important, very important. I guess I'm worn out.

[END]