INTERVIEW: Marj Levin
INTERVIEWER: Sarah Arvey
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Interviewer: **The first part of the questions, set of questions, that we ask is something about your personal biography, and what lead you to become active in the feminist movement. So, you read the first question.**

[Pause]

Interviewer: **If we start at the beginning, is where were you born, what year, and maybe describe your family economic circumstances, where you were living during your childhood.**

M. Levin: Okay. Great. All right, so you want me to start?

Interviewer: **Yeah, go ahead.**

M. Levin: Well, I was born in Worchester, Massachusetts. I moved to the Detroit area when I was very young and I never, ever, tell the age. That's just my choice. But, you know, I'm pretty old. And I married a doctor, very talented, gifted doctor. I had three children, but before I was married, I always wanted to be a writer, and I had worked in advertising in Chicago. I had this wonderful, exciting job, I did all the Dreft, Oxydol, Betty Crocker commercials for radio and I was being trained to do them for television, so that would be, that would give you some idea of how old I am. Anyhow, after he finished his residency in Chicago, and we moved to Detroit, we had three children. My husband was a very troubled man. It was not an easy marriage. And, you know, he became more successful in his practice, and he took, okay, more and more control over our marriage, our personal relationships, whatever, but we were doing all right, I guess.

Anyhow, the first inkling, I always had these feelings that this is the fifties, and women were sort of geared to supporting their husbands, subsidizing their personal goals to help their husband. And I wrote an article about that one time. I sent it to a magazine and it was why should women sublimate themselves, just to subsidize their husband's erections. Because we were keeping them virile and on top of things, and they were the men of the world and in control. And, I felt that women were definitely, this is just an instinctive feeling I had, you know, why should we tone ourselves down, hold ourselves down. I read, I don't know how I came across this, Simone De Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, and of course, she was saying exactly the same thing. She was expressing, historically, what I was feeling. And, it was such a relief to read it. This was definitely in the fifties that I read it.

Interviewer: **And that was your first…**

M. Levin: That was my first confirmation that my feelings were shared by other women, especially somebody like Simone De Beauvoir, and even she felt subjugated to Jean-Paul Sartre, and then she had this affair with Nelson Algren, and she still put herself in a, I thought, demeaning position to these men. Well, anyway, then of course, Betty Friedan came out with this *Feminine Mystique*, but before she did, she appeared on David Suskind's show. He had, sort of interview show, I think it was on PBS, and she was saying the same thing. And I wrote to the David Suskind's show and I said "I want to join her organization. I want to join NOW." But, I never heard from them, I don't know why, just never got a reply. And then I went to hear her speak, she was promoting the book and I read the book, and I realized that she had popularized exactly what Simone De Beauvoir was saying. She didn't really ever credit *The Second Sex* with any of her ideas, but she was a very strong voice and, you know, I admired her. And her theme was "Don't give up your economics." You know, don't — you have to have money in order to have equal say in your marriage, in your relationship, and your power in the world. And she was right. But I didn't want to go to work, I had three little children, and my husband was making enough money, I just wanted my equal power, but it doesn't happen, you do have to have economic power, you really do, unless you're married to some kind of saint. So, anyway, all these thoughts were boiling around my head, and then of course the Vietnam War came along. And, at that time I was a very active Vietnam War protester and I real —

Interviewer: **You were?**

M. Levin: Yes, and very active in the anti Vietnam War movement, which was the social revolution of this country, certainly. And, the reason, I think I became really an active feminist, along with being an active Vietnam War protester, was because you look at the Senate and Congress, and there were no women. I mean maybe ten women in the whole Senate and Congress together. So, we had no power. There were no women in positions of power. And I kept thinking this is what we have to do. We have to go to work, we have to run for office, we have to gain power. We can't just say you're supposed to do this, unless we have the power. So, anyway, Patricia Burnett and I were going to a funeral for a mutual friend's husband, and she had also, she also had a very troubled marriage, and she was also thinking the same things that I was thinking, obviously.

Interviewer: **Had you joined NOW by then? Or were you just friends?**

M. Levin: No. We just knew that NOW existed, but we hadn't joined, we were just friends and we were going to a funeral. On the way to the funeral, on the way to the cemetery, she said, "Do you want to join the women's lib?" and I said, "Yes, yes, I've been thinking about it." She said, "Okay, well since I brought it up,

I'll be president." I said, "All right, then I'll be vice president". So, somehow, she wrote to Betty Friedan and got through and Betty Friedan wrote back and said "Okay, what you have to do is form a board, ten women, and start your corporation. You can have a Michigan branch of NOW."

Interviewer: **Was that the first Michigan Chapter?**

M. Levin: That was the first Michigan chapter. There were a few women, I forgot their names, Haber, a few other women that had joined NOW, but maybe there were three or four, but they had never started a chapter, they never recruited women. But, Patricia and I got ten women, one of the ones I got was Joan Israel, who was very reluctant. I said, "Come on. You know we want free childcare," which she was very interested in childcare, and we want equal pay for equal jobs, we want all of those things. But the main thing was we wanted pro-choice. This was a big thing in Congress and different states, and the League of Women Voters which, at that time, was the most liberal organization, would not take a position on abortion. They would explain the different sides, but they would not take a position. So, we rallied women around the abortion issue. Anybody who was pro-choice, you know, could join our movement, that was one of our tenets that we had to have — we were pro-choice.

So, we had a meeting, at the Scarab Club. Patricia was a member. She had a studio there. She's a portrait artist. She had a studio at the Scarab Club, and we got our ten board members, and we told them to call all the women that they thought would be interested, and we called all the women who we thought would be interested, and the rallying point was obviously a pro-choice issue. No, I can't remember how many people showed up. Maybe we had 100 or 150, but, since I had always been sort of interested in journalism, and I said "Okay, I'm going to be vice president, I'm going to be in charge of publicity." And I called two women, one at the [Detroit] *Free Press*, and one at the [Detroit] *News* to come to the meeting, and to see what this was all about. And they sent reporters, two women. Barbara Hitsky, I think she was with the *Free Press*. They sat there and took notes and they saw all of these suburban women, white suburban women, maybe there were a few black women, I'm not sure; they weren't even called African Americans, they were colored women at the time. So this was, this was the late sixties… definitely the late sixties. Ah, because the Vietnam War was still going on, and I would go to, there's a Gleaner's church, I think it was a church on Woodward. There were these cells. Black Panthers had one room, and the Vietnam Protesters had another room. I was actually a white suburban housewife, but this place was in Detroit, in the middle of Detroit, it was a church. Maybe Father Thomas Gumbleton might have been the priest of that church.

Interviewer: **And this church, held…?**

M. Levin: Had all these —

Interviewer: **Had all this space for community activists?**

M. Levin: Right. Exactly.

Interviewer: **And you were all together, but you weren't necessarily working on the same thing…**

M. Levin: Right.

Interviewer: **Did you feel some sort of camaraderie?**

M. Levin: I felt, with the Vietnam War protesters, yes. And, so, anyway, we got our NOW charter, we asked everybody that wanted to join to give three dollars. I think we asked the board members to give ten. And there were ten board members, and we got a charter, it was a rinky-dink sort of operation. So then we had become a corporation, this is the funniest story. So, I called up a lawyer friend, who was a man, and said, "Could you help us, we want to be a non-profit corporation?" He said, "Absolutely." He showed us how to do it, it was very simple, and he said, "Now, when you do your first class-action suit, call me, and I will represent you." Okay, I said, "Oh, of course we will" and he was doing all pro-bono, you know, setting up this little corporation. Okay, so an aside to that is, finally when the organization got going, the first suit we brought was against Michigan Bell. Because they were not paying equal pay to equal, to women as to men. And, so, we had to give it to the women lawyers, you know, I called him, my friend Wally Goldsmith, and I said "I'm so sorry but we can't give you the case, because we have got to give it to women lawyers." "Okay," he laughed, he got a big kick out of that.

Interviewer: **Had your husband been supportive of your…**

M. Levin: No, well he was not supportive of the anti-war movement. I would have meetings at my house with the few friends that, we were very early protesters. No, he didn't, we had meetings at the house, and he said, "No, the president knows what he's doing". And it was just ridiculous, and then my kids would say "She had a meeting, dad." He was angry but never abusive physically. And, then, after I started the NOW movement, he was pretty supportive of that. He wasn't opposed to it. One of the reasons was that after Patricia's term ended, (I could've been the next president, because I was the vice-president) I had started my show, called "A Woman's Place" on channel 56. It was a feminist show.

Interviewer: **What was the main agenda for —**

M. Levin: The main agenda was to interview feminists, to spread our message. We have to become activists, we can't just sit here and tell them this is what we want. We have to get into positions of power, and we have to support political candidates

who are women, who believe in what we believe in. We have to sue companies, we have to become activists. So, on my show, I was bringing a message the feminist viewpoint. I would get letters: "Oh thank god you're saying it." These women were sitting at home, so this was actually the early seventies

Interviewer: **How were you even able to get…?**

M. Levin: The show?

Interviewer: **TV time, yeah. Who?**

M. Levin: Oh, this was Channel 56.

Interviewer: **Which is…?**

M. Levin: Which is, the public television.

Interviewer: **So they were?**

M. Levin: They were sort of open. It was a half-hour, of course, they didn't pay me, but they were getting on the bandwagon, and they were employing camerawomen and editors, and so this was a chance for them to have a feminist show and to have actually women behind the scenes.

Interviewer: **Did you interview local women, or national…?**

M. Levin: I interviewed local women and national figures. I interviewed Betty Friedan. I interviewed Gloria Steinem. I interviewed Bella Abzug. I interviewed Jane Fonda. I interviewed Shirley MacLaine. I interviewed everybody who was an active feminist coming through Detroit. I had the only feminist show, and they all came on. Unfortunately, I don't have those tapes. I have this one tape that you're going to see…

Interviewer: **Oh no…**

M. Levin: But those tapes were re-used, over and over again. And they were two-inch reels, and, you know, they broke, and I think they gave me two and I don't remember what happened to the good one.

Interviewer: **Oh, that's too bad.**

M. Levin: Yes! I had a really good one of some of those women on —

Interviewer: **Oh, that's traumatic.**

M. Levin: It's very traumatic, and I don't know what happened. They gave me two reels,

and you'll see one reel. And you'll see the, the feeling of that era, which was, what, twenty-two to twenty-three years ago. No, thirty, thirty-two, thirty-three years ago.

Interviewer: **So, how much time did you dedicate to "Women's Place"? You weren't getting paid, and you also had a job as a reporter.**

M. Levin: No, I didn't. My job as reporter started in '80, , yeah I went to work in '80. I had the feminist show in the early seventies. And I only had it for a year because the producer was a big chauvinist. I said, "How can you take this show off the air?" I said "I get more mail than anybody at the station of all the programs." All those letters are at the Walter Reuther Library in the archives, part of the social movement of the time.

Interviewer: **That's great.**

M. Levin: Yeah, and so he said: "Well, women write. You know, that's why you get all the mail. Women write, men don't; important men don't have time to write." And, actually, I mean, I looked good on camera, but I don't think I was challenging enough, well you'll see on the tape how I'm sort of benign.

Interviewer: **You were in the questions that you asked the feminists? You feel…**

M. Levin: No, I asked them direct questions, but I should have also had more people on the show that were probably against what I was doing. But, we never did.

Interviewer: **You never debated, okay —**

M. Levin: We had never a debate, like, you're wrong. You'll see the show.

Interviewer: **You mentioned that your kids tattled on you for having meetings at your house. Were they unsupportive throughout?**

M. Levin: Well, they were so young.

Interviewer: **Yeah…**

M. Levin: You know, they were, I think twelve and something at the time. And they were trying to, the boys were trying to stay in favor with their father. But, it wasn't a big deal. You know, it wasn't really a big deal. And, so, after I got the show, I had a certain visibility and my husband liked that, he liked me to have some kind of presence. He was very supportive, actually. After the *Cosmo Magazine* jumped on the feminist bandwagon, I don't know if you know this, but they had a picture of Burt Reynolds, who was a sex symbol at the time, nude like a *Playgirl* foldout. But, instead of a *Playgirl*, you know, in *Playboy*, they had Burt Reynolds, so it was adorable. He had something across his penis, but

anyway, we cut out that picture and we pasted it together, and we made an invitation, and we sent an invitation to everybody that was important in the city, whether we knew them or not, and then we invited all of our friends, and we ended up, I don't know, three or four hundred people, at the Scarab Club, and we told everybody to bring their own bottle, and wine, and we ended up, and my husband was great, he loved that. Patricia's husband, I think was out of town, she wanted to do it when he was out of town. But, we ended up, it was in January, and we ended up with a lot of men whose wives were in Florida, we ended up with a party that lasted till four in the morning. And it was just, it was just a fabulous party.

Interviewer: **What was the Scarab Club? Why were you…**

M. Levin: The Scarab Club, if you don't know, is a club right across from the art institute, where they have artists' studios, and it's a beautiful old building, and Patricia had a studio there, so she had access to the facilities of the club. They have a big dining room, which could hold three or four hundred people. It was a fun time, it wasn't just all dead serious. There was a lot of literature at the time. Gloria Steinem started *Ms. Magazine*. It was very serious, they could never poke fun at themselves, which I thought was too bad. Really too bad, because Tom Wolfe came out with a real put down satire "The Radical Chic." Do you know about that?

Interviewer: **No.**

M. Levin: Thomas Wolfe did a radical chic article in the *New York Magazine* that was so wonderful. He had started what they called "new journalism." The radical chic parodied, satirized the Black Panther movement, which was supported by all these white liberals. So he did this whole article on Leonard and Felicia Bernstein, who had a party to raise funds for the Black Panthers, but they didn't want to have Black wait staff, so they got Colombian, or some South American wait staff. And, eventually some of the Black Panthers ripped them off. So, I asked Gloria Steinem in one of my interviews I said: "There's a lot of things about the feminist movement you can satirize." She says: "No, no." She wouldn't do that, because it would undermine it. But I said: "But it's strong enough to support humor." It's strong enough, I mean, she was wrong.

Interviewer: **Do you, did the women you know, were they able to poke fun, make fun of themselves?**

M. Levin: Not too many. They really couldn't. I mean, a few of us did, but they really couldn't make fun of themselves, and then the other thing was that we had these consciousness-raising groups and a lot of them were in terrible pain because their husbands were physically abusive. I did one of the first articles on abused women — physically abused women. They would come to the consciousness-raising groups. And I interviewed them. And at that time, I was thinking about

going back to school, in fact, I had enrolled in school, I was going to become a psychologist to help these women, but, actually, what happened was, when I interviewed them, because I was always a freelance writer, when I interviewed them for the article, I was so bored with their stories — I mean, their stories were repetitious, they went from one abusive man to another in, often they had alcohol in their backgrounds, alcohol in their families, and they married abusive alcoholics. So I did this article, I tried to point that out. Well, later when I went to a writer's conference, books came out about abusive husbands and wife beating, but there hadn't been too much literature about it. Anyhow, so I went to this writer's conference, and I had on my nametag, this one woman, who had written a whole book, came up, she said: "Oh my God, when I went to the library to research this subject, there was hardly any literature." Well, I guess this is the early seventies, my local story had been picked up by *McCall's Magazine*, which is, you know, a national publication, and at that time, all of these women's magazines, *Ladies Home Journal*, *McCall's*, *Good Housekeeping*, which had been so traditional, were jumping on the feminist bandwagon. And *McCall's* had a whole section on where women could go for help, and so my article appeared in the *McCall's* section. They had just started safe houses, but there weren't too many. Women could go to a church. And some of the churches came forward and had safe houses for the women. This is all in the seventies.

Interviewer: **Could you talk a little about the consciousness-raising groups?**

M. Levin: Yes. I didn't direct them, there will be some other women that you will talk to. I think Gerry Barrons perhaps was one of the directors.

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

M. Levin: Yes.

Interviewer: **And what did they entail?**

M. Levin: They entailed women who, it wasn't just wife beating, but how we could raise our consciousness about the fact that we had been so brainwashed for, a submissive role in society. And how these feelings that we had were shared by many women and they were not wrong, they were right. Society's values at the time were wrong. Now, there were plenty of women that became doctors and lawyers, but not to the degree that they do today, and, plus they had to sue the universities to allow them in, because Affirmative Action was certainly not in place. And so, when the civil rights movement became law in this country, I think somebody put women into the bill, and that gave every woman legal grounds to sue companies. But the consciousness-raising groups helped women to that point, where they felt that they were not wrong, and if they were in an abusive situation with a husband that beat them, you know, get out. It wasn't their fault.

Interviewer: **And, so now were there other organizations that, or other feminist groups that…**

M. Levin: Well, I think there was one called…I think NOW was the strongest, there were other feminist groups, I'm forgetting what they were called. But, NOW is really the strongest. There were Woman Lib groups, and there might have been other consciousness-raising groups, but we really organized them. And, I'm not sure how we got the word out, maybe through newspaper and certain articles, like the one I did, which was published in the *Detroiter Magazine*. You know, word like that would spread, and I think I might have given phone numbers for a few churches, things like that, or where to go for a consciousness-raising group. But, I, personally, did not have the temperament to sit there, and I learned that when I interviewed some of the women that were in the group. There was one I called the beanbag beater, where her husband would put a beanbag over her and then beat the beanbag. These huge beanbag chairs at the time.

Interviewer: **Yeah.**

M. Levin: And he would throw one over her, and then he'd beat it…she could have suffocated. But, when I talked to them, they talked in these monotones, they were defeated women, and then I, that's when I realized I didn't have the patience to sit and listen to them as a therapist.

Interviewer: **So what were your main organizational roles?**

M. Levin: Goals? Or mine?

Interviewer: **Your roles?**

M. Levin: My role was publicity, which I think I did very well. And I really did get the word out, my show was a feminist show, which dealt with those issues. Then we also went out and talked to groups. Maybe people don't realize this was thirty years ago, and everybody, temples and churches, had groups of people who wanted to talk about social issues of the time. And, so, we would, we had a speaker's roll, I forgot to bring it. But we had a speaker's — I don't know where it is, I forgot to bring it, I'm sorry. We had a brochure published, if I find it ill send it to you. And, there were at least fifteen or twenty of us, including people like Harriet Alpern and Patricia Burnett and Gerry Barrons, and Patricia Widmyer, you'll see on my tape, and we would go and talk for free, or some days we would get paid. And so, the reason that Veteran Feminists of America have gathered together is because people in your age group just take it for granted. And, now, these abortion issues are being threatened again. You have the articles.

Interviewer: **I do.**

M. Levin: You know, we're being threatened, so, and these rights can be eroded, we have to be vigilant.

Interviewer: Did you organize and also, you were in charge of the publicity. Did you have other women out there, writing articles for you, going and doing the speaking?

M. Levin: I was doing the speaking, other people were doing the speaking — we were also lucky at that time, because people would come to us for interviews. Of course, that took a lot of time, which is all volunteer time, to research, I didn't do as much research as I could have, but the books were coming out, and then I hired, I mean, I had volunteers, Patricia Widmyer would give feminist stories of the day. So, that was my main way to get the news out. Everything I've done has a feminist slant, or a view, it's an unconscious viewpoint.

Interviewer: Do you have any stories of some big public events that you organized that might translate well on tape?

M. Levin: Well, we went to NOW conferences. No, we didn't so much as organize them ourselves, because we were busy trying to get the action going, like class action suits, which I wasn't involved in. I think Joan Israel was trying to do something with childcare, so people were trying to write bills for the state legislature, but I wasn't involved in that. My skills were writing, news stories, publicity, I did get the publicity out. But other women were doing really serious work, very serious work. You'll interview them.

Interviewer: And, was NOW very good at, sort of, channeling certain people into doing certain things?

M. Levin: Oh, yes, definitely. I think, well, they volunteered in whatever their area of expertise, that was their area of interest. But I will tell you about some conferences that Patricia and I would go to conferences in New York, NOW conferences, and I remember there was a large one in New York, I think it was New York or Chicago, I think this is New York. Well, Patricia was still, she was really walking on two sides of the street, because the NOW conference I went to in New York, I went without my husband, there was no question that I, you know, would go, he wasn't, but she went and her husband showed up, and she had a hotel room, I said Do you want to share a hotel room?" "No, I want my own room." But I said, "Why is your husband here?" And she said, "Well, he just wanted to come." But he came to keep an eye on her. He was very very jealous, so she wasn't as free at night. I remember sitting at a bar in Chicago, at a conference having a drink, and we were talking to the guys around us, all of a sudden, her husband walks by, I say, "What is Harry doing here?" A lot of times, after our meetings, the girls would go out and we'd have drinks, and he'd show up — she won't tell you that, but he did, he was very jealous of her.

Interviewer: **Do you think a lot of men at that time had problems with their wives?**

M. Levin: Well, a lot of, I mean, this was the thing, a lot of the women got divorced. And, both Patricia and I wanted to get divorced, but we didn't. We actually — and some of them suffered for getting divorced prematurely, they, financially suffered. And, when I finally left my — Patricia earned her own money as a portrait artist, she could have left Harry, but they had an extremely affluent lifestyle, and I don't think that it was as easy for her to give it up, whereas I had an affluent lifestyle, but I finally decided, I'd rather work the rest of my life than live the way I was living, so that's why I went to work full-time. I was very lucky, I was fifty years old when I was hired full-time at the *Free Press*. And, but that was another thing, they hired two other women, fifty, that never worked full-time at a newspaper, it was kind of the era, anyhow the 80's.

So getting back to the one conference that I could see the direction. There were ten different seminars; one was on childcare, women's health issues. Oh, and we had this whole thing about how women should take charge of their health, and they were passing around these speculums to show you how to look up your vagina, that was a trip. I mean, I haven't looked up since then [laughing]. Everybody went into this booth, they showed us how to do it, and how to cure our own yeast infections with yogurt. I mean it was really something to make fun of. I was laughing, but too many people took it so seriously. But now there are more women gynecologists, and so, women who prefer that would go to them, but at that time, they didn't have that kind of choice. So we had very serious, goal-oriented seminars, and then there were the lesbians, who wanted a voice. Okay, so they had their seminar, and there were ten seminars, and then, this is the *New York Times*, this was television, this was big time in New York. So, I remember standing in the lobby and all the crews come in, and the reporter… "Where is the lesbian seminar? We want to go… we want…" All of the media went straight to the lesbian seminar, they got all the publicity, I mean our serious issues, forget it! I don't really know what their issue was.

Interviewer: **Do you think that that was common that the press?**

M. Levin: Yes.

Interviewer: **…the press honed in on certain aspects?**

M. Levin: Absolutely.

Interviewer: **Do you think, do you consider this representation inaccurate, an inaccurate portrayal?**

M. Levin: It was inaccurate at the time, because the lesbians who had joined NOW were a small minority, they are now dominant in it. And they dominated, they began to

dominate *Ms. Magazine*, and they dominate, really, NOW, as far as I know.

Interviewer: **Were the goals any different, really? Than heterosexual women?**

M. Levin: No, the goals were the same, but it's the same thing that lesbians and gays wanted to come out and live in society as other people — they didn't want to hide who they were. And we were definitely supportive of that, but there's more, I guess, what is it, you know, more controversial news, there's another word I can't think of — voyeuristic news, in which the readers want to know about these underground people coming out, and definitely we were supportive, but what has happened is that I think that they worked harder and this was all volunteer, nobody got paid, and so, maybe they had stronger feelings or more of a, they weren't really married with children. I'll tell you another incident I remember now. I don't know if you're going to get this spiel from everybody that sits down here, but all this stuff is coming out, but the whole movement was founded by pretty affluent white women. And, we were castigated for that "Oh, you're just white suburban women." But that's who starts every movement, that's who started, you know, the right to vote movement, were affluent women who didn't have to work to make a living.

Interviewer: **And, you think the fact that they don't have to work, allows women a certain amount of freedom to be activists?**

M. Levin: I think, at the time, it did. I mean, supposedly, in a utopian world husbands and wives share all the work and the housework, so that everybody has an equal amount of free time.

Interviewer: **So, then, were the interests that were pursued by NOW, the goals pursued by NOW, reflective of affluent White women, or did they, were they also more broad?**

M. Levin: No, they were broader. They were also directed at labor, and women who were laboring in the labor force, and I remember debating, this was really, there was a big debate, I don't know why there was even a debate, but Myra Wolfgang was a big union person, and I had to debate her. I mean, something like that. She's like, "What are you doing?" and I was trying to explain that our goals are the same, just because, maybe I'm not working full time in the labor force and I don't belong to a union, doesn't mean I don't have something to say and that I can't help all women. But, I think she wanted to do it through unions, and their — that was their goal.

Interviewer: **What about women of color? Were there conflicts and controversies?**

M. Levin: Then we finally were trying to recruit women of color. No, there was never a feeling that this was a white woman's movement, we wanted to encompass everybody, and then black women did become active, very active, and it was a

tremendous amount of support. I mean you'll see on my television show that I would seek active Black women to tell, you know, and the Black women, a lot of them had to be working. So, it was definitely, there was no problem.

Interviewer: **And, sorry, just…**

M. Levin: That's Okay. But, I remember also during this same debate, Sonya Friedman, who was a psychologist and she had a show, was sort of challenging me, and it was about the roles of men and women, like "Are men really stronger?" And, so, she said to me, "Well how would you define, you know, a strong man? How do you define male?" I said, "A strong man is able to be tender." And she sort of gasped at that. I said, "A strong man, you shouldn't have to be macho, he should be able to be tender and embrace his feminine qualities," and that was a big issue of the time, let the feminist traits of men come forward, and allow women to be more aggressive. It was a whole melding of genders without losing your identity as a male or female.

Interviewer: **Did men join your…?**

M. Levin: Yes, we finally, that's why it was always called National Organization for Women. It was never Of Women. It was always For Women.

Interviewer: **Okay.**

M. Levin: And, that is why we had men joining too.

Interviewer: **And do you think men at that time could be the same types of feminists as women?**

M. Levin: Very few.

Interviewer: **Why is that?**

M. Levin: Because they were threatened. I mean, look at how they're threatened today. It's an equal play — more of an equal playing field, why should they give up all of their advantage: "I'm a White male, Jim is going to hire me and put me in their executive program, they're not going to hire YOU, some woman with a, you know, business degree." No, I think they are very threatened, they're still threatened. And, I, if you want to know the truth, I think this whole throwback to fundamentalism in Judaism and Islam and Christianity is because, I think, the feminist movement is the most powerful social movement in centuries. And men are threatened, I really think that. In fact I asked Gloria Steinem that question when she was here a few years ago, she really didn't relate to it, but I also asked Anna Quindlen, I said, "Do you think this rise of fundamentalism is, in any way, caused by the feminist movement?" She said to a degree, but she said, "Technologically, it's so threatening." Our technological world is so

threatening, or, you know, these old-fashioned values, and people are terrified of living as existentialists, they're terrified of freedom of choice, men and women. So, the women revert too — you should read this book, *Nine Parts of Desire,* it's fascinating

Interviewer: **Did you have any religious affiliation that you had to reconcile with your feminism?**

M. Levin: No, because I'm reform Jew, and my mother was early feminist, whether she knew it or not, she was a, she had a Master's degree in social work, she was a social worker. My father was a social worker. My mother never said, "Oh you know, learn how to please a man and get married." So, she, I came from a very liberated background.

Interviewer: **Do you think that that is what might have influenced you in your feminist leanings?**

M. Levin: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, because my goals weren't really defined at the time, but I married at twenty-two. My goals at the time were: work for five or six years, you know, as a writer, either journalist or copywriter, and then, get married to some wonderful man who has all this money, and then I can have children, and then after, they grow up I can, you know, go back to writing. I wanted the experience of being a single woman with a career. And I did that, unfortunately, when I was in my 50's, then I had my own apartment and this wonderful job at the *Free Press*, which, you know, I could use all of my writing skills, and then I had a really young boyfriend, 25 years younger, who'd take me out, we'd go out everyplace, and I lived in my fifties the way I should have been living in my twenties, but, so, you know, finally I did it.

Interviewer: **I'm going to pause this for a second…**

[Pause]

Interviewer: **Were there issues or causes that you worked on besides women issues, women's issues?**

M. Levin: Well, the Vietnam War, of course. And, I was always pro-choice, so yes, as a reporter, it was a great opportunity for me to support things. I covered all the benefits. I interviewed people, books, book authors coming through, and I can remember some really great ones. But, I was able to, to choose whichever benefit I wanted to cover for the social pages, so I was always able to cover ones that supported causes that I believed in, like, well, if it was, let's see, well this was a really good one. Yes, it was a benefit for the Haven. Whenever there was anything to help abused women I would always support it. The Haven would have a big benefit every year, this is a big house in Pontiac for abused women, so I always covered their charity, and give it a lot of publicity. And,

then there was another feature we had, like, a day-in-the-life. There was a house for abused women in Detroit, I think it was called Safe House or, and I went there, and I did an article on a woman who had left her husband, who had escaped there. I was able to feature that, and, I remember *The Burning Bed* came out at the time, this was a television show about an abused wife set her husband's bed on fire. And, so, the thing was, should she be tried for murder, or was it self-defense, because she had reached a point, she felt her life was in danger. And, I interviewed a woman who had actually was in a safe house, because she — it wasn't a burning, but it was close to that situation. So, through my job, I was able to support these causes, but I was always supportive of the abused woman situation, because, I was never physically abused, but I was emotionally abused. And, it was like, get out, get your job, you know, get rid of this turkey, whatever you have to do. But, keep your money, and so it's hard for women to do that.

Interviewer: **It seems as if, despite working on all of these very emotional issues, you had fun. Would you say that's correct?**

M. Levin: Yes. I absolutely, thank you. I mean, I think I had, because of my attitude. I had fun because I kept looking at some of the things that they were doing, and I just saw the humor in it, and others just didn't see it. I can understand why, but I always felt the movement was strong enough, it was so powerful, that we should have been able to laugh at ourselves, definitely. And, Patricia and I could do that. And then, the other thing that was great about her, you know, because she'll tell you that she was a beauty winner and all that, was that we would get these sincere women, and she would do make-ups, like, makeovers on them, and they would just line up to have her do the makeup. Just because the media picked up on the other types, it wasn't really fair. And, plenty of women, you know, were beautiful, I mean, certainly, that's why Gloria Steinem took off, because she was so photogenic and good-looking. And, that's why poor Betty Freidan, if she had her nose fixed, it would have helped. But, she also left the feminist movement and became a humanist, and she's actually right, I mean we have to move on, and I agree with her, and I really think that she's a much more profound thinker than Gloria. Gloria is very bright. She did a great deal for the movement, and she had so many personal issues that she had to overcome.

Interviewer: **Let's think about the future of feminism for a while. Well, actually, let's reflect upon your actions. Do you have a definition of feminism? Do you have a working definition of what it is?**

M. Levin: Well, I guess, feminism, a feminist really is evolved to be a humanist. That's how I feel, that I mean, I am an existentialist, and I think that all human beings, male and female, should be on this Earth to help each other, because if you look at human beings as a whole, I mean, it's a Buddhist idea, that to help other people, we're helping ourselves, because we're all part of the human race —

human civilization or, there's another word for it. Humanity. But unfortunately we haven't evolved to that state yet. And I have to go back to the fact that, I really think a humanist is an existentialist, and people are terrified of freedom, they're terrified to think and act on their own. But I can't even define feminism anymore, except as a step toward evolving into a humanist.

Interviewer: **Interesting. What do you think your main achievements were? Or the main achievements in general of second-wave feminism and what were the main failures?**

M. Levin: Of, you mean, the whole? I always relate it to NOW.

Interviewer: **Yeah, that's fine. That was your experience in the defined — sixties through eighty-five.**

M. Levin: Well, I think women's role has totally changed, and I was glad to be a part of it. I was certainly a small part, but I think it's fabulous that women today go to college. I mean, I understand that there are more medical students that are women today than men. I was talking to one, and she said because it's more difficult to make a living because the Blue Cross has changed, so the men are going into more technological fields where they think they can make more money. I think our greatest achievements have been to create a world that women do feel that they can go many directions they want to. But, as far as the failures, oh my God, our failures to see this idiot president in office, I can't stand to look at him. I mean, to me, that's a great failure, and not to have more women on the Supreme Court, and to have allowed George Bush, the first George Bush, to appoint all of these conservatives, and to have this second George doing the same thing, that is our greatest failure, that maybe we don't have enough liberal women going after political careers. I mean, everybody, I've had people say, "Why don't you run for office?" But, I just don't have it in me, but I certainly support. And, the other thing is, that, locally, we had two women running for representatives in my state district, and I supported the liberal Democrat, who was pro-choice, and this other woman, who was more pro-life and a Republican, I cant believe she — they're both Jewish, I can't really believe that the Republican is really pro-life, but she just joined the Republican party, because that was a Republican district. And she's in there now. And, you know, they have certain obligations, they vote the party line, and I think it's very unfortunate.

Interviewer: **So, you don't see feminism making as much of an influence upon politics these days. And you would consider that one of the...**

M. Levin: Well, I think we have made an impact, but I think we're in a valley now, and we have to, I mean, when you read about Clinton and all his personal — but women supported him politically. I mean, women didn't like what he was doing, he was a bad boy, but politically, we supported him. And, I think it's

unfortunate what's going on in this country with the backlash, and, so I think that's a big failure, but I can't take the failure just as a feminist failure.

Interviewer: **What do you —**

M. Levin: But that's why we're reviving exactly; it's over the abortion issue again.

Interviewer: **What is your advice for the next generation of feminists? What do you see as the future outstanding issues that…?**

M. Levin: Well, I would just say what we used to say is just I wish more women would run for office, and we do have, you know, Emily's List that was supportive of women in office, which was a good thing. And, I just wish more women would become more active politically. I don't know if it's a failure, it's just you have to be constantly vigilant, and every time you think you achieve a goal, but I think that's true in everything, you just have to think, you can't take it for granted it's going to stay there.

Interviewer: **Are there any different issues that that they'll have to confront that you didn't?**

M. Levin: I don't think so. I think the same old issues keep cropping up. Can you think of any different ones?

Interviewer: **You know, I think the same old issues keep cropping up, and, of course, they change. I think there's more interest in getting women of color and working class women actively involved, but it's the same problem of class, and the economy, all of that…**

M. Levin: Right, exactly. And, I really, I mean, I think that our country, I think our country is strong because we don't have the ethnic or religious problems that you see in Europe, I mean, it's so hard to believe these people in Yugoslavia are killing each other. They've been living together for forty years, and they intermarry, you know, what's happening? And, we do have a racial problem in this country, but I really think its more a question of class. I mean there's no racial problem when, I don't think when people have the same educational goals and cultural goals, and unfortunately, this city — you're from California — this is a racially divided city because the white people just gave it up. But, they are moving back, and when I was at the *Free Press*, which was twenty years ago, I mean, you would see people, you know, Black and White men and women all lunching and working together, and it was never publicized. And you just see these divisive stories, but what happened unfortunately was the whites left the city because of schools. And, that's still a problem, I think the biggest problem we have is really educating the minorities.

But, I have to tell you, my daughter, has a daughter, my granddaughter just

graduated from — this is going to be off the subject, but she just graduated from English High School in Boston, which is the oldest public high school in the country. She was the only white American in her class to graduate. Now, half of her class didn't graduate because they didn't pass whatever this new thing is. Half the class did, and the class was definitely more of people of color. Her best friend is from Haiti, who is a, I mean, she's not, when you look at this, she's not a beautiful girl, she's about fifty pounds overweight, she's very dark, but is the sweetest, most wonderful friend. They just adore each other. And, how many kids get that experience, but she lives in the inner-city, with a great transportation system, and my daughter's children, this one goes to English High School because she's dyslexic, and this was an easy high school for her. All the kids from foreign countries go there. And, her son goes to Boston Latin because he's smart and he is at the best high school in the country. Her other child is a budding ballerina; he's going to be the next Baryshnikov. He goes to a high school that has a performing arts program. But in the city of Detroit, there's no transportation to take these kids, there's no high schools like this, it's a huge educational problem. And, I don't know if this is a feminist problem or not, I think it's a social problem. It's not a feminist problem, really. It's a horrible — we live in a city, probably LA, too, that has no transportation, and it's terrible. It's a crime. And, I think if we had a good transportation system, we would have a better economic climate, people could get to their jobs, in the suburbs or wherever they are.

Interviewer: **That's interesting.**

M. Levin: It's definitely a social issue. And, as far as the feminists, we just have to continue to be vigilant, because you take three steps forward and two steps back. You can see it happening.

Interviewer: **We are almost out of time on this tape.**

M. Levin: Okay.

Interviewer: **But, we're almost done with the interview.**

M. Levin: Right.

Interviewer: **So, the last question is, is there anything else you wanted to add, and anything you think we should ask the other women?**

M. Levin: The other women?

Interviewer: **Yeah, anything I missed anything you want to add…**

M. Levin: Well, you know, this is what I think I haven't discussed this, but there are certain eras that just happen, and I use this example of my three children. One

day we were having brunch. I have two older sons and a daughter. So, my older son cooked the brunch, my middle son was cleaning up and my daughter, who is the youngest, was out shoveling the snow. Now, they never saw their father do any of these things. But, they just picked it up from the atmosphere around them, I think they felt a freedom, and that's the thing, and I wanted to add. That was another big thing that came out the gay people, you know, lesbians, are part of the community, and they're having children, and they socialize with everybody, and they don't have to stay underground, or feel they have to stay underground. So, it's a part of the whole opening up of all roles, which the feminists definitely had a big impact, it was a big factor. So, I think that's really good!

Interviewer: **That's great. That's great**

M. Levin: Yeah.

Interviewer: **I'm going to take some still shots of you.**

M. Levin: Oh, Okay.

Interviewer: **So, if you just sit there and smile.**

M. Levin: Okay, well one thing we have to do is sit up straighter.

[END]