

Interview with: Susie Wilson
Interview by: Danelle Moon
Transcriber: Amanda Grundmann
[Interview #7]
[Alvarado#3.Wilson#7.wav]
[111:46] at beginning {start at [60:46]}

Moon:

(recording starts abruptly) home of Susie Wilson, and we are go – we are starting one of our final interviews for this – for the oral history project documenting Bay Area feminists and politicians, and today's date is October 19, 2006.

Wilson:

(inaudible) some of the things that I did that, when I – when I went on the board I went into the system, I opened up doors for minorities and for women, in particular, and I think back on it, and I don't think about the dates that I accomplished things, but it was really since I'd been on the board for one year when I was doing things like, uh, helping WOMA establish, and helping the rape crisis center get established, and I'd just been on council one year.

Moon:

Yeah. What is the, um – let's just describe WOMA, it's the – what was the, um, what does the acronym stand for?

Wilson:

Well, the only thing I can figure, it was the, uh, Women's Alliance. And so they took the women's part, the W-O-M, for *woman*, and then A for *alliance*. That's as near as I can figure out.

Moon:

I was trying to figure out where it – how it got that name.

Wilson:

It's a – because that was what it was. And they really were created when Bea Robinson, who was the Hispanic woman who wanted to do things for battered women, and, uh, have a shelter for women. Uh, we of course came to the city council and came to the CDBG, which I had been, uh, placed there – I was on the – the member of the city council that was on the board of CDBG, uh, federal grant phase(??) that was the Community Development Grant program [through] the federal government. And they got a huge amount of dollars for that. And so that was to better the community and to make changes to the community through low-income loans, through funding organizations that would assist in bettering minorities or nonprofits that benefit for people. And it was, uh – sometimes it might be street paving, sometimes it might be, uh, assisting in just rehabbing a house without it being a loan, but it just was a grant. So, and that was the poverty program, is what it really was, that I was in charge of. And I had a committee.

Moon:

And that was your first year on the – on the board?

Wilson:

Yeah, that, uh – Norm Mineta assigned me to that 'cause it's – it – it was created in 1974, too, I think, or late '73. And so I – Norm put me in charge of it, and so I ran it the whole time I was on the city council, and then when I went to the board, I was the representative on the board, so for eighteen years – seventeen, actually, I was in charge of the poverty programs and the housing programs for both the city and then the county.

Moon:

And then the county.

Wilson:

Yeah. So I guess that, that's one reason I stayed involved in housing issues and gravitated toward them. And, uh, gained some expertise in housing. And so this particular organization, uh, came before the board, it was really loosely organized I could say, at that time. But they came, and they wanted to buy property, a house, that would be a secret house for women who had escaped the violence that they had been [in]. And I engineered through the CDBG process, money for that.

Moon:

And Bea was the one who was the instigator of all of that?

Wilson:

Yes, she instigated and she would be CEO, or the executive director, I would say executive director, for a number of years. And Bea was typical of the absolutely grassroots organizer who did not have the sophisticated organizational skills, what she had was drive, perseverance, and bluntness, and challenging people to – that if they didn't support her then there was something wrong with them. I think she probably - she was raised on the, uh, Chicago mowmow?? – the organizing schools of Saul Alinsky at the time, back there in the sixties, are you familiar with all that?

Moon:

A little bit, yeah.

Wilson:

And they were - they were rabble rousers. And Bea was a rabble rouser.

Moon:

And was Bea Hispanic?

Wilson:

Yes.

Moon:

But her last name was her married name?

Wilson:

She was Bea – yes, uh, she was Bea Vasquez Robinson.

Moon:

Is she still alive?

Wilson:

No.

Moon:

No.

Wilson:

Well, no, she might be. Her brother's dead, her brother was one of the, uh – Jose was one of the big organizers, and Bea might still be.

Moon:

Hm. Um, how old would she be? If she were alive, is she in your same age group?

Wilson:

(both talking at once) My age. Yeah, probably. Mm-hm, she might have been – oh, she's probably – probably be a little bit younger than me. But yeah, in her seventies now.

She'd have to be. Um, and probably some people in the Hispanic community might know, uh, somebody with NOXA?? might know.

Moon:

I wonder if Blanca would know Bea?

Wilson:

Blanca might, I'm not sure, but she might. Yeah.

Moon:

Well anyway, so she was, really, this kind of nuts-and-bolts, sort of, grassroots organizer?

Wilson:

Yes. Yes. And, so I, uh, went on their advisory board and I was their, uh, champion on the city council. The city council, as - very often city councils are offended by the – the villainy?? of the grassroots organizers that - well, the insulting ways that they treat the city council. So it was always a smoothing over of - of their blunt approach, I might say. (both laugh) But it – it worked. You know, I've always said the radical, the radical win today, because they believe so firmly, that if they're – they just go after it, and persevere, that they eventually have – gain supporters. If the, you know, if the cause is a good cause, which this one was, and she floundered and eventually, she blundered too much, she was - used foul language a lot and she tried – she dominated the staff, and so when she had a board that became more community-oriented, afterwards, like people from - women from an engineering firm, or women from other boards, who were more genteel, and didn't like the way - the bulldog ways that she had, she eventually, you know, made too many missteps that she was ousted from the organization.

Moon:

Oh. Yeah.

Wilson:

Which was after, long after I - I was on the board of supervisors, though it was, uh, long past when I was gone from the city council, but - but her organization then, probably not - soon after, a day after, WOMA was so – there was a stigma, probably, around it, that they switched their name to Next Door.

Moon:

Oh, okay.

Wilson:

And, some people felt like, Next Door, what does that mean? It's, you know, they had a good debate about the – the difference from Women's Alliance, which was centered on women in an alliance banding together, but Next Door, now it's just accepted as a perfectly natural name. You never can tell what's happening next door, is what the whole - when you think about it, (inaudible) next door to you, or next door is a women who's in need. A person in need, mostly women. So, they are very successful now. They, uh, you know, are looked to as an established organization that really deals with the issues of women in trouble. And they've expanded, they're over on Gish Road now, and have a larger headquarters, and I don't know whether they have one or two houses, but they've done a great job. And the community backed them, their budget – they raised over, oh, two, three million a year, so that Bea should be proud of what she started.

Moon:

Right. Do you know who – who is, currently, um, the exec there?

Wilson:

Yes, I know her, but I can't tell you her name right now.

Moon:

Okay (laughs). If it comes to you.

Wilson:

But she – you can –

Moon:

I can look it up.

Wilson:

You can look it up.

Moon:

Yeah.

Wilson:

(inaudible) interesting (inaudible), yeah. And I'm not sure, you know, how many people really remember the beginning, this was a ten year??, uh, ten year?? – and I think it's the only one they've organized like this, and it was a –

Moon:

And they formed in 1973?

Wilson:

Four

Moon:

Four.

Wilson:

Because this was a, it was (pause) - 'cause, see this was WOMA: 1974-84. Ten years of WOMA.

Moon:

So at the beginning of the organization, it seemed to have a focus on domestic violence issues, but it also was an alliance to try and provide – to address issues of poverty and –

Wilson:

No.

Moon:

No?

Wilson:

It was strictly –

Moon:

Strictly –

Wilson:

Strictly, uh, domestic -

Moon:

Domestic violence.

Wilson:

Domestic violence and –

Moon:

Okay.

Wilson:

-founding a shelter for women.

Moon:

Okay.

Wilson:

No, that other program –

Moon:

The other program.

Wilson:

-CDBG was that. That was – CDBG was for - to combat poverty. This was strictly to assist women who'd been raped, and were now – women who – not raped, but women who were in domestic violence situations, and needed to have shelter.

Moon:

Okay, so –

Wilson:

To get out of it.

Moon:

So CDBG stands for what?

Wilson:

Community Development Block Grant.

Moon:

Okay, that's right. (quietly, writing it down) Community Development Block Grant.

Wilson:

Program. Federal program. And that was, and I'll tell you, one – after you finish with this–

Moon:

Okay.

Wilson:

And this, the first of this ten-year celebration, Bea has a message here, as the executive director.

Moon:

Oh, okay. I'll look at that.

Wilson:

So you can look at that; that was her message.

Moon:

Well, that was a, really, a big issue in the seventies, domestic violence.

Wilson:

And it still is.

Moon:

And it still is, and it's – I've been talking – I had talked to a lot of people – last time we spoke, I had, you know, had another session with Blanca. And so we were talking about some of the things that she's been involved in, like the Girls for Change, and some of these, you know, important women's-oriented sort of, organizations, and it's remarkable that – it seems like – like, you know there was a real sense, in, you know, kind of, the Hollywood-ization of talking about domestic violence, that they had all these programs about domestic violence, like on Lifetime, you know, and all these sorts of things, but, I haven't heard a lot about domestic violence quite in the same way that it was publicized in the nineties, and, yet, it seems like the violence has just gotten worse, in, especially the immigrant communities, and in the Hispanic community, she was saying that that's one of the biggest problems.

Wilson:

It's just – it's not that it's gotten worse. It's just that they're – the community itself is combating what has been hidden all these years.

Moon:

Right.

Wilson:

I can remember when I was supervisor, and talking to a group of senior citizens down in Morgan Hill. And it was a group, and there was a Hispanic man, sitting – sitting next to me, so, when I was talking about the need for the shelter, and what was happening, and the, and men beat women or that they hit women. And the man, older man, next to me, says, well, they certainly should. And, and, because that was the role, in the – in the minority communities, in the Latino community, that the husband was the dominant force and the women obeyed.

Moon:

Right. And then that most recent report came out in Gilroy, that they're having a really terrible problem, apparently, with domestic violence, and I think Morgan Hill is still in that. And they were showing the study of this valley, the percentages were extremely high, in Morgan Hill and Gilroy, and maybe that has to do with a large portion of that population being Hispanic, I'm not sure.

Wilson:

Right, the – when I was a supervisor, the most poverty-stricken area was one particular area, social – social service area, in Gilroy, which had more Hispanics in that area than the population of the city, in San Jose. And it was in desperate poverty. And that was the farm workers, and where it were – they were part of it, and so that – and right now, I've

been heavily involved in a domestic violence case that started in Morgan Hill, that is - taking her through all these steps. She's an employee of our company. And it's - it's not easy, because the - Latino men, if they haven't really embraced it in the world, they believe they have a right to do what they will. And that if you don't obey, then, you know, they have a right to destroy you.

Moon:

Yeah. That's the really - you know, it's so hard to imagine, coming from, you know, a white middle-class family where - I'm - not that that doesn't happen in those families too, but -

Wilson:

Yeah, it does.

Moon:

Of course it does, but you always think of - you think of domestic violence as more of an issue, you know, that it - poverty as being kind of a, you know, a -

Wilson:

Well, when you hear an executive, as I did??, you know, forty, thirty-five, thirty years ago, who was the - who vacationed in Bermuda, and father - her husband was - she was a millionaire's wife, and he believed, you know, that - he struck her, he treated her badly, he screamed at her, because she - she didn't do what he wanted her to do.

Moon:

Right. It's not really about ethnicity, or about -

Wilson:

No, it isn't.

Moon:

-you know, wealth, it's really a –

Wilson:

It's about power.

Moon:

Yeah.

Wilson:

I always ask?? and it's about who's going to rule, you know, and it's – our new understanding, of course, is that marriages are partnerships, and –

Moon:

Not everybody has a partnership.

Wilson:

Not everybody has one. So it – it remains – and you see today, while you say there's not much done about it, you know, not – not as noticeable, people understand it, so they flip by, unless it's a really – murder, or something like that, but Len Edwards, who started the Domestic Violence Council, that is, that pattern, it's the first to – in California, and he was the father, and I'm considered the mother, of the Domestic Violence Council, that's what he calls me. And it's a model for the nation. And he's received some national awards.

Moon:

[both talking at same time] But he – he's Don Edwards' son, right?

Wilson:

Yes. He's a judge.

Moon:

Yeah, and he just retired recently.

Wilson:

Yeah. And he – he’s a great judge, and a great juvenile judge, and he cared so much about children, and what’s happening to them. And he created this, and we got it through the board of supervisors, which he didn’t think he could do. I think I’ve told you that story.

Moon:

Yeah, you have, and I think that’s really interesting, that would be a great subject for a student to write a paper on, to, you know, to talk about that whole –

Wilson:

Yeah, talk to him about this. And, you see, and the YW[CA] has this Walk a – Walk a Mile in Her Shoes? And that’s a domestic violence, and - issue. And this – this month is domestic violence month. So that – and there wasn’t such a word as domestic violence, years ago. I mean, as a term, not an identifiable “what do you mean by it”, and cops didn’t deal with it well, and when I was on the board we were working so hard to say that when it’s a domestic violence call, that you take a social worker with you. That it isn’t just – you can’t walk out the door and think it’s over. ‘Cause they’ll calm down while people are there and then you walk out the door and it starts up again. If you haven’t really come in there to defend the person who’s been beat on whether it’s a male or a female. So it – so it has – and it’s just like everything else. Our society’s so open that you can’t hide.

Moon:

Right.

Wilson:

And – and – but then at the same time, we treat violence as something that’s just ordinary. Particularly those of us who’ve never had violence in our lives.

Moon:

Yeah, and it’s easy just to, you know, go along in your life, and say, “oh yeah, I know that’s a problem, but, you know, I’ve got a bit??” – you know, “busy, I’m trying to raise my family” sometimes you go through that kind of thing (inaudible), it’s hard to be an activist, and – you know?

Wilson:

Well, and that’s – that’s okay, right? You know, that’s - all of us are too busy, that’s what I always said is that, most people, when they don’t know about politics, they’re - they don’t have time to know about politics.

Moon:

Right. That’s right.

Wilson:

They’re – they’re so busy raising their families, and doing what’s the best for their families, that – you read the newspaper, you can be knowledgeable, but to get very involved you just don’t have time for it.

Moon:

Right. That’s where it was easier, for, you know, middle-class women in the seventies to become so active in politics, ‘cause most of them hadn’t necessarily been, you know,

working full-time jobs, and, you know, having a two-family income sort of situation, like you have today. And I think, that's really hard for women to (inaudible).

Wilson:

Well – and part of this is, particularly in California, it was – you had, really I think, in – in – starting in - after World War II, you began to have an educated marriage, right, and men came back and went to school, married somebody in college, was a typical pattern, and so you had women who were educated as well as men. And those middle-class marriages have education, which is what we always say, is education will do marvels for this world if we can get everybody educated.

Moon:

Right. And then of course, World War II brought on, you know, the whole - for the first time in American history there was this kind of, almost, parity with people in the middle class and the rise of the middle class – classes, the ability of people to own a home and all of, you know, that was the – that was an unusual time in our history.

Wilson:

Absolutely.

Moon:

And, so – I mean, that really –

Wilson:

The G.I. bill.

Moon:

Yeah, the G.I. bill brought so much at once, to American –

Wilson:

(both talking at same time) And – and then – and veterans, exempted veterans, certificate for housing, absolutely. And the other part of it was that, also, the returnees from World War II - World War I people went back home. World War II, those, they were so world wise that the people from Texas and Oklahoma got – came to California, they went – came back to California, and they started looking [for] opportunity – they (smelled it??) out here. And, so they left homes, and – and so many – and by – they brought their educated wives with them.

Moon:

Yeah. Also the opening of the highway system, too, probably –

Wilson:

Opening up the highway system, and then the opening up of the engineering world that was in California.

Moon:

Right.

Wilson:

First, uh, airplanes and cars, manufacturers, Kaiser, and then down in southern California, and now Lockheed, and, well, those were engineers that came, and they brought their own wives they'd met in college.

Moon:

That's right. And that's why –

Wilson:

And the wives were ready to do things, you know. You know, it's just a - the growth of the nation, you might say. And the change in the nation.

Moon:

And now we're in a time of different sort of, you know, process where there's a lot of other – a lot of complications, certainly, but – I just – I think that's one of the reasons why it's hard for younger women to get engaged with politics.

Wilson:

Actually what I've been finding is I – I still have people come and talk to me when they're trying to figure out their lives, young women, and they're bumping up against the glass ceiling. I met a young attorney who didn't know why – she thought that because she came from this sheltered family, who helped her become an attorney because she was a – her father was an attorney, and it was not done to try something else, but she was almost pampered, you might say, in believing in a cause, you know, believing in everything's gonna be rosy, and she hit that glass ceiling in terms of promotion up to partnership in law firms. And she said, "It's out there." And she wakes up. So there's women who wake up too, and – so someday, maybe they won't have to wake up.

Moon:

Yeah, maybe, yeah. (laughs)

Wilson:

Every time, you know, you see - that's what we - you know how the games are, that someday –

Moon:

We hope anyway.

Wilson:

Yeah, we're hoping, but - so that there are some brutal awakenings, and there is a statistic that says that marriage – married couples are a minority.

Moon:

Right. I – that was a surprising statistic, though.

Wilson:

Yes. As much as we talk about the values of marriage and all – but part of it is, you know that senior citizens, if they marry-

Moon:

Yeah, they lose their benefits.

Wilson:

They lose their benefits, and they lose, they lose their income tax benefits, so that they live together. And I have, one man, who's quite a man, but I won't go into his story, but – his wife had been a - has Alzheimer's and is in a home, and so he's living with another senior. Woman.

Moon:

Oh.

Wilson:

And he says his wife knows, that she wants him to be happy. As much as she can.

Moon:

As much as you can be, in that state.

Wilson:

Yeah, right, in that state. So it – so he – it's a very different world, this is the same world that's saying you're all - these seniors are supposed to be very conservative and all.

Moon:

Well it also must be that the young – you know, the younger people aren't getting married as early either, so they're delaying marriage into their thirties, maybe.

Wilson:

Yeah.

Moon:

You know. Although there seems like there's a lot of young kids getting married, you know, that I've –

Wilson:

Yeah, but they're not marrying at fourteen or fifteen like my generation.

Moon:

No, they're marrying –

Wilson:

In – in the south.

Moon:

-in their twenties, probably, but –

Wilson:

Yeah. Oh but – the woman that I, oh – when I went back to my sixtieth anniversary and went out to Georgie Sue Parkerson(??) and now, Georgie Sue Barnett Parker. Hadn't seen her in fifty-nine years.

Moon:

Oh, my gosh!

Wilson:

And she – the thing she remembered, which is – people always remember different things, (inaudible) she said, “I’ll never forget that when I came to school, and I had my engagement ring, you grabbed my hand, and you pulled me down the hall with my hand held high, saying, ‘Mr. Lacy, Mr. Lacy, lookit – Georgie Sue’s got a ring, she’s engaged!’”

(both laugh)

Wilson:

She was sixteen.

Moon:

Oh, my word!

Wilson:

And she never graduated from high school. She went out and lived on the farm for –

Moon:

Oh, gosh.

Wilson:

- like, fifty-nine years, until I said I’d follow you, and then she wasn’t going to the reunion, ‘cause she had a bad knee, so my brother took me out there.

Moon:

Oh, my goodness!

Wilson:

So, sixteen, and my best friend married at thirteen, and –

Moon:

Holy moly!

Wilson:

-that I'd grown up with, that we all – through elementary school – and her – and there were three of us.

Moon:

At thirteen years old, oh, my gosh.

Wilson:

Thirteen. Almost fourteen, Jonelle?? Barnett. Stayed married to the same man her whole life, helped put him through college, the whole works. And Margaret, who was always almost fanatically attached to Jonelle, married at fourteen. I think just because Jonelle married at thirteen. She founded that race?? and she had – she was from a wealthy ranching family. And when she was married she was back in New Orleans, washing sheets in the bathtub, the girl had never had to do anything.

Moon:

Oh my gosh.

Wilson:

And she lasted in that – she married at the ranch and all, she was an only child, an only grandchild, and it was kind of amazing. But, yeah. So, sixteen was old for some people.

(both laugh)

Moon:

How old were you when you got married?

Wilson:

I was eighteen.

Moon:

Oh, so you waited.

Wilson:

Yeah, eighteen, I'd been in college a year. Well, my mother, she taught me early on that – she said, “Suzanne, anyone can get married.” And I saw demonstrated that –

Moon:

Yeah, with your friends.

Wilson:

-when some of the other people got married and, you know, that – when I was a kid I always thought we had to be popular, and vivacious, and all this crap, to get married, you know, but I saw this very homely girl who was very quiet – she married as soon as she got out of high school, and I – that was when I really knew that anybody can get married. There's always somebody who's gonna love you, as my mother would say. And she went out on the farm with her husband, you know, and it's true.

Moon:

Oh, gosh.

Wilson:

That was-

Moon:

Well, that must have been – was that exciting, going back and seeing all your old friends?

Wilson:

It was, it's always good. I had been back at the fiftieth, and so the sixtieth was fun. And, going back – but it was really exciting to go back and, Georgie Sue, and just – my brother just, inadvertently met her on the street in Gonzales - which had?? five thousand people,

and six thousand now – and said that – asked if she was going to the reunion, she said, no she couldn't come to the reunion but she'd love to see Suzanne. So he [said], "Well, I'll bring her out." And so, I – he took me out to the country, and we rode around in her SUV on – looking at her 750 acres -

Moon:

Oh, my word!

Wilson:

Yeah, farm. And had a good time. There was a tank there, and when I was talking later to another old friend, he said, is that – is that – tank is a lake in Texas-

Moon:

Oh, ok.

Wilson:

Like a small – what it is, you dig, you dig a bit hole and it catches the water, it's a mud bottom, and it's called a tank. And, he says, "I used to swim in that tank, all – every summer." And I didn't even know that he – that his father's farm was right next to theirs.

Moon:

Oh. So they built it as kind of a swimming hole kind of thing?

Wilson:

No. Uh – cattle. It's for – no, no. It's been built for the cattle so –

Moon:

Oh!

Wilson:

-they can have water, so they built a – and when it rains in Texas, it rains in the summer but you’ve gotta have water all year round, and so you save for the droughts so it’s a watering hole.

Moon:

Oh, okay.

Wilson:

That’s what it is. It’s like a – like a pond. You call it a pond in New England.

Moon:

Oh, okay.

Wilson:

Yeah, if you don’t have anyplace else to swim, and you know, it can get to ten feet deep.

And, so – nothing wrong with it, it’s just a tank.

Moon:

It’s just a tank. Okay, I was thinking a tank, when you said there was a tank on the property (laughs).

Wilson:

(laughs) Yeah, (inaudible).

Moon:

I’m thinking, how – how’d they get a tank there?

Wilson:

That’s what we called a pond – in New England.

Moon:

Oh, okay. Interesting. Oh. Well, that sounds like you had a good time going back there.

Wilson:

Very good time, mm-hm.

Moon:

Well, that really, you know, is something – I was talking to my daughter and my – her boyfriend about marriage – or about divorce, really, because they both come from divorced families, and I think that a lot of young people are delaying marriage because they don't want to be in a situation where they're gonna have to go through divorce, and hopefully the divorce rate will go down as the, you know, next generation of children marry, but I think there is a real, you know –

Wilson:

I think where it is, is there's a real desire that if you're – if you're gonna have children, you need to stay together, because it's very damaging to children.

Moon:

It is damaging, and I think that, you know, divorce has been overrated and overused certainly.

Wilson:

Well, that – that, you know, that came along with that freedom in the seventies, (inaudible)-

Moon:

I think so, you know, it did actually.

Wilson:

You know, that when you start fighting with your husband, there wasn't any solution except to get divorced.

Moon:

Yeah. Just gotta get over those humps, there(?).(laughs)

Wilson:

You know, can't walk out the door, that's the only thing you can't do.

Moon:

Well, WOMA was an important organization to have formed, and so it's, you know, really good to see that, you know, those types of organizations continue, and I think it's a real legacy and testament to, you know, all of the work that grass-roots leaders like Bea, and, you know, politicians like yourself and other people, put into those organizations.

When I was talking to Blanca, I was asking her – we were talking a little bit about where women are in politics today and what some of the dilemmas are, and – so she was saying that she didn't really see it as a problem in just looking at sheer numbers, she said it would be better if we could get more women, you know, as office holders in, you know, in politics, but she said that she sees women's hands all over the map in Santa Clara County, whether it's working through, you know, some of these very specific organizations like Next Door or looking at, you know, the Commission on the Status of Women, that she really sees women's hands all over policy, and so I was just wondering what your perspective was on that.

Wilson:

Well, yeah, I think that's very true because – but it – it's really not as much the status of women as being on the planning commission.

Moon:

Mm-hm.

[01:31:44 interruption: an unidentified male voice inquires about Wilson's lunch plans, Wilson's grandson enters and is introduced to Moon – ends 01:32:59]

Wilson:

So, that – women are in – in diverse positions of power in politics. They've had women who were the assistant executive of the – of the county, and the assistant – and heads of departments in the city. And I don't – I see that the – is it – there are – I think the status of women is much lesser, in terms of power, today. And again, all of those people who are in power and heading a department and establishing policy (inaudible). You'd look at these – where people go when they graduate in political science at San Jose State, and positions they go in and then they – very quickly they go in as aides to politicians, and then go out and they become lobbyists, or become a part of the administration. I can think of several men and women who have graduated from San Jose State who are now in the VTA or at a different – and political organization at the state, and they go in as – start in as aides and learn the system, they learn meetings, and how to create policy, and they go to law school, and then they get in law firms, and then bump up against that ceiling and try to change that. So you have this truth, and we have young women who are like young men who go in to companies and establish policies. There's one thing that has not changed, is that we still have the fact that a man, a Republican man, at the age of 28, can easily slide in and run for the assembly, or run for the state senate, but they consider women too naïve to do it.

Moon:

Right. So there's still this, kind of, barrier from – based on age and gender.

Wilson:

Yeah. She should start at the school board. 'Cause that's what I was told. I should start at the school board instead of city council, and I said I'm not interested in the school board, I want to run for city council. But – so there's a lot of opportunities for women to run, but the city council ain't it?? and the board of supervisors. But, to leap up into –

Moon:

Higher levels –

Wilson:

a higher level, you've got to be a Sally Lieber, who's a little older, and you had the experience. Or, uh, Rosemary Stasek, who was on city council in Mountain View, and she's a woman who's been doing a lot in Afghanistan, but she was older. And much more experienced, and they still like the – women need to have that. And – and also in both of those – do not – are not encumbered with families.

Moon:

Right, and that's another reason why women oftentimes enter politics later, because of course they – they're usually the main caregivers for the children.

Wilson:

Oh, but when they're single, they're too young.

Moon:

Right.

Wilson:

According to the – you know –

Moon:

Yeah. Right.

Wilson:

But, a Republican – a Republican man, Joe Vitia??, he just needs to move into the Congress. He doesn't want – you [inaudible]

Moon:

He doesn't have to do anything to get –

Wilson:

Yeah. 'Cause if he goes out and makes a living, and just forms a company, then he's entitled to go to Congress.

Moon:

Somehow he's got, you know, the skills.

Wilson:

Yeah. So it's – it's still – there is still – still lopsided, but I will say this is that the public generally trusts women in politics more than they do men.

Moon:

I think so, and I've heard that said quite a lot, in all of the interviews that I've, you know, conducted since this project began, and I think there is something to that.

Wilson:

Yeah. There really is. And even in national – you don't – well, for one thing, is that there's nowhere in the world that a woman in – nat[ional] – in Congress could play around and not be looked down on as a scarlet woman.

Moon:

Right. In contrast to the men, of course.

Wilson:

In contrast to the men, who've always played around. And who've always done things, and so that they – so people trust the mother to continue to be the mother.

Moon:

Right.

Wilson:

It's a strange kind of - isn't it strange?

Moon:

Kind of odd, 'cause women have the same kind of, you know, flaws as men do-

Wilson:

Of course!

Moon:

-you know, when it comes to that kind of thing, but –

Wilson:

But, but they don't have – but, no, they don't have the egos. You and – that men have. I still believe that women who go ahead in politics are really concerned about the nurturing kind of change, and (inaudible) style. And they are more apt to let their egos go by to get the job down. And I've seen that a lot.

Moon:

Yeah, so there's more – seems like there's more consensus building among women, or, they're the consensus makers, perhaps, in that process.

Wilson:

That's 'cause they have to do it in their families, and they're [recording skips] skilled at it. We're skilled at it, we – we have to settle disputes all the time.

Moon:

Well, those are great. You know, that's a great, kind of, way of looking at women in politics and seeing how – I mean there is a real difference in what women bring to politics and what men bring to politics, and that we need both people there to be able to really promote policies that are, you know, socially driven.

Wilson:

And there are – you know, and yet some of the most successful ones, you look at them, you know they have a strong ego. Dianne Feinstein has a very strong ego.

Moon:

I would imagine.

Wilson:

And, uh, Nancy Pelosi, of course, her teeth were cut in politics. And she is a very strong-opinioned and a very forceful woman, who really indeed the first minority speaker. So a leader of the party – so that, you know, it's – but it's not contradictory because she also raised a houseful of kids, I don't know how many. You know, six, or you know, something like that, I mean a lot of kids, and – being the good Catholic that she is. So that she still learned a lot of (inaudible) skills into her life, and she was exposed to politics at such a young age, so that it's a – her father was the mayor of Boston.

Moon:

Oh, is that right? I hadn't really followed her background that much.

Wilson:

It's an interesting background. And, so – so it's not that women are Pollyannas, they can be very strong, but they can also temper their egos better than men can.

Moon:

Yeah. I think that's probably generally true, 'cause that's what happens in marriage.

[both laugh]

Wilson:

Yeah.

Moon:

Oftentimes, anyway. Well, now, going back to, looking up WAMA, and then going forward and talking about the CDBG, the housing poverty program, was that one of the areas that you felt that you had made the most contribution to while you were on the board of supervisors, or - ?

Wilson:

I – well, in the city, I think the CDBG program was more dramatic in the changes it made in the city in the lives of people, so that, yes, and some of the things that (unintelligible) and I've talked about the Gardner Childcare Center, that was CDBG, but the main account?? is CDBG. When we talk about the Filipino Community Center, that was CDBG money, and there was the struggle, and I'll never forget one of the first interviews, a TV interview that, uh – we walked along a street, over in East San Jose, that was – it was – the young people on this street had gone to apply for a needed?? loans for the CDBG program, and – and I walked – Rico Chacon and I walked that street, and we talked about it, and what was really evident, the reason those people didn't have loans to upgrade their houses because they were living on a mud alley, practically.

Moon:

Was that Poco Way? Is that that area?

Wilson:

No.

Moon:

No, that's a different –

Wilson:

That's a different area. This was it. And – so that the people didn't get loans on their houses. Poco Way was apartments. And – so that they – why would they indebt themselves to houses when all they would do is track the mud from the street into their houses. They had no real lawns, they had no real definition of the – so, I got the money to pave that street, through the CDBG program, then they began to apply for their grants and loans. They, you know – there was something of value that had been given to them so that they have a street, and sidewalks, now you improve your houses. And, it – it's concepts that people think, you know, you can give some money, but those people have brains, too, and they – they –

Moon:

Yeah.

Wilson:

It doesn't make much - to pay back a loan and have something that was still gonna be there, - look bad, and be in a bad neighborhood, wasn't [gonna] do much for them. So that those were – those were important things in terms of the lives of people, and yes, I guess I've always been involved in the lives of people in that way. That you're – execution is really helping, and the children, so that they can move forward in the future. But, you know, there's also – of course you had the big issues, the big policy issues that

impacted the whole city, and I never really tried to place myself as a – I had to list all my accomplishments, it really didn't make much difference to me as long as I've got the (intelligible) done. And, because, you know, VTA came on, and we readied it, and you've got the light rail, you know, and I was a big part of that, and, suddenly I had – was a part of getting Caltrain going down to Gilroy, and I was definitely a part of building the migrant housing down in – for the farmworkers down the way, Gilroy, so it was just – housing has always been important to me.

Moon:

Right. And that's also been a – important area for any politician, it seems, in this – in this valley, because of all of the, you know, the population increase and all of those issues that come with, you know, that, you know – pressing the boundaries of the services and all of that. But, now in thinking about your years in politics, and the different people that you became friends with as a result of all of this. Who – of all the women that you worked with in politics, who – who would you – was there one single person, or couple of women that you would say that were, you know, your – you know, your comrades in arms or that you really developed strong, you know, bonds and friendship with as a result.

Wilson:

Yeah, I think it would probably be Dianne and Zoe, (unintelligible) banding together and (unintelligible) the jails?? and that group. When we see each other we feel like, you know, that – that bonding of that experience, that we still chuckle about, I guess that's the best way to put it, that we still enjoy that. And that was –

Moon:

Yeah, I hear that “Jailhouse Rock” –

Wilson:

Yeah, uh, we had raised money for that.

Moon:

That you had raised money for that, and I thought that was really cute.

Wilson:

Yeah, and that was really funny [paper rustling obscures words] at the time. And it was – you know, frankly, we loved the excitement and – politicians love the dynamics of the campaign. They hate campaigning, but they – hate raising money, but it’s kind of like our, it becomes our whole system to be involved in a challenging campaign. So that – that was a really bonding – and of course with Janet Gray – Janet Gray’s always – of course she’s now – I’m fond of Janet Gray because we were sisters on that city council, and so many of my experiences were really bonding in terms of - we were the only ones there. So – and most of the time we were – we were both liberal Democrats, and so we stay in touch. And I was at her eightieth birthday party.

Moon:

Oh, were you?

Wilson:

Yes, and people always ask me about Janet Gray. They always – and people still think that I was the mayor, or some people think – they get – they mix us up. Always, they call – some people call me Mayor Hayes and some people were the – and she said the same thing would happen to her, that, uh – it was a time when there were only two of us in the women’s phase??. But – so that, you know, there’s a fondness there. And then Jerry

Steinbergen said we were just together, we could go on Sunday and she'd be at the YW[CA?] luncheon sitting at my table.

Moon:

Oh. Do you think she would be interested in being part of this?

Wilson:

I would think she would be, yes. Course, you know, she was first appointed to the planning commission for the county. And then she was appointed to Gail's?? vacancy, and, in fact I remember we were having dinner. See, Grady was a YWCA architect, and liked the way that I got to know Jack, I mean, Jerry. She lives in Palo Alto now.

Moon:

Do you have her, um, her contact information?

Wilson:

Yes, I do have.

Moon:

Because I would like to contact her. I did make contact with Leona Egeland, and –

Wilson:

Oh good!

Moon:

I sent a letter to Sally Reed –

Wilson:

Yes, she said she'd gotten it.

Moon:

Yeah. And Leona is – was so excited she wrote me this really nice letter and said that she would be so happy to come down to San Jose and see all of her old friends and bring her scrapbook with her, and so hopefully I'll touch base with her soon.

Wilson:

And Sally – Sally's husband was just diagnosed with, you know, two nodules in his lungs, he (inaudible) sooner or later that the cancer was there, and so this last year, she said when I got, uh, Danelle's –

Moon:

Okay.

Wilson:

-email, and says, I'll get – I'll get-

Moon:

Yeah, that'd be great.

[extended pause]

Moon:

I think that we've covered a lot of ground in the last, you know, several months, and what I'm gonna be doing – I'm gonna be – I've already put together a very, kind of, you know, biographical sort of sketch of you and some of the other women that I've talked to, that I'm presenting at this conference I'm in, then I'm hoping to write something much larger than what I have right now. And I've finished reviewing the last scrapbook so I have that in my car, I'll bring that back into the house for you, and – but I think we've covered a lot, and what I need to do is go back and listen to all of the tapes, and then what I also

would like to do is put a letter together that maybe we could maybe get some, you know, funding for it, to do that, and so I'll work on that.

Wilson:

You need to explain why you need it and what you're gonna do with the money and all of that.

Moon:

Yeah. And I'll get that for you so you could –

Wilson:

Yeah, okay, I will explain to – you know, the one thing I didn't give you – I remember, (inaudible), I don't know what's in it, but I came across it the other day. [pause] I had the election yearlies and this was the last year, and somebody put together this the last year, when I was chair of the board. I don't even know what it is, but it's just pictures.

Moon:

[looking at item] Oh, wow.

Wilson:

[pointing out photos] Oh that was – yeah, that's me. And that was my entrance on my six-foot tall white horse. And then I'm gonna have to (unintelligible) take my grandson out to him – (inaudible) I'll do that today (inaudible).

Moon:

(inaudible) like all photographs, it looks like – Oh, how fun!

Wilson:

Yeah, it looks like it's a lot of photographs in there –

Moon:

Oh, those are great, though. Those are things you should, you know, at some point consider as part of your papers.

Wilson:

Yeah, I know. That's the one, I think you saw that, that's the picture that was in the Business Journal, and was (inaudible). This was my staff, in ninety-eight, we took pictures and I gave one to everybody. That was the photographer, he (inaudible) he liked me. Always because I took such –

Moon:

Very photogenic.

Wilson:

Took such easy pictures.

Moon:

That's a good picture there (laughs).

Wilson:

Now that was when the new building was barricaded (inaudible). That's just pictures, I didn't know what it was, but it was fun. And there we were!

Moon:

Yeah. That's a great picture, actually.

Wilson:

Uh-huh, yeah.

Moon:

That's a really good picture of all of you.

Wilson:

Now, Ann's lost weight, and Zoe gained weight.

Moon:

Oh.

[both laugh]

Wilson:

Oh my. Yeah.

Moon:

Yeah.

Wilson:

Sorry my –

(tape ends at 1:51:46)