

The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 digitally-recorded session of an interview with Maureen Lane by Cynthia Tobar on October 14, 2011 in New York City.

This interview is part of the Welfare Rights Initiative Digital Oral History Archive Project.

Maureen Lane has reviewed the transcript and has made minor corrections and emendations. The reader is asked to bear in mind that she or he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

*[starts at 0:00:00]*

*Cynthia Tobar:* Thank you for being here. Please introduce yourself and your affiliation with WRI.

*Maureen Lane:* Thank you for this project, Cynthia. Maureen Lane, and I'm Co-Executive Director of Welfare Rights Initiative.

*CT:* And I wanted to ask you to just get started with a little bit about your background, your early life and the influences that you experienced with your family, your education and your early childhood, that sort of thing. So tell me a little bit about that and you can begin anywhere you'd like.

*ML:* I was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma and my grandfathers were a tremendous influence on me; both of them, maternal and paternal. One, that I call Gang Gang, was my father's father and he was a judge, a lawyer. The other grandfather was also college-educated. Both of them had a reverence, [Gang Gang] more for oratory and as a lawyer, Shakespeare, philosophy, etc. and Grandfather O'Brien was much more pragmatic and so the two of them were a wonderful influence. My mother was dedicated to both my brother and I getting a Catholic education so we went to Catholic schools when we were younger. They were disciplined and effective at teaching reading, writing and arithmetic.

*CT:* And how did you... What was your journey like from Oklahoma to New York where you are now?

*ML:* Well, it was...quick. We were living with my father after my mother and my father divorced then my mother came to New York City for work and then we ultimately came, we moved with her and it was just arriving here for the first time, just being blown away by the city. My brother didn't take to it quite as much as I did but that was probably 40 years ago. I still have the same feeling every time I cross the George Washington Bridge, more than 40 years ago, actually.

*CT:* And were there any politics in the family background?

*ML:* Yeah, there was. Both grandfathers were involved, had rich civic lives and one was a municipal judge that was appointed by a Republican-Democrat, Republican... Many different... Actually there's two varieties in Oklahoma, and he was appointed and re-appointed by both and then Granddad O'Brien was very involved in politics, Democratic politics, state legislature as a warden in Oklahoma and dedicated to his state.

*CT:* And growing up how did that affect you and your outlook on, I guess, what would become later your attempts at advocacy?

*ML:* I think both of them had a really keen ability to ask questions of people. My grandfather who was a lawyer was famous for serving the under-served. In Oklahoma in the 30s, 40s and 50s, that was African-Americans. 60s and 70s, as well, to this day. So he was dedicated. He did a lot of pro-bono or exchange bushels of corn and stuff like that for...and he also understood inequity and he described that to me in colorful detail. Granddad O'Brien was the same and it was much more pragmatic but they both...

*CT:* And what were the roles... What was the role of your parents during that time as well, in regards to influences and...?

*ML:* Well, my mother was a single mother and she was... she did what she did all her life. She was a performer, a singer, an actress and in radio, television and in the theater. So she was busy a lot but she was committed to both my brother and I having a foundation of a Catholic education. She had it and she felt it was really important. She didn't go to college. She took some singing courses after high school for like two years but then, you know, her work took her away and... But she saw it as a really important foundation. I think she was right, actually. I think she was exactly right.

*CT:* How so?

*ML:* Well, I didn't go to college until I was 42 years old and the education that I got, the understanding that I had of reading and writing and how to add things up came from that early up until high school.

*CT:* Let's backtrack and talk about your time in New York. What was your experience growing up in New York like at the time and where did you grow up in New York?

*ML:* Well we lived in the upper-East Side, like 80<sup>th</sup> and Lexington and near the Catholic school that we went to. I had a lot of friends who were raised in New York, born in New York. Spent the summers in Rockaway Beach, and I got to go once... I had the experience of New York in the, I guess this would have been the 60s.

*CT:* And as an observer of life in your neighborhood in that time could you describe to me a little bit about any conditions of poverty that you witnessed during that time? Was there any form of support system in place, government, non-government? What were the political and social attitudes?

*ML:* The... I know that we lived closer to the school so we were near between Lexington and Third. A lot of the friends that I was in school with were... Because my mother was doing well. A lot of the friends that I had in the school were what – later I heard the term working-class or blue-collar, that type – lived further down closer to the East River and there was a clear difference between the tenements and the apartments. In those days... Now things have changed in that part of the upper-East Side dramatically. Those tenements are not there anymore but they were railroad apartments, is what they called them. When you walk in the door there's the first room and then the second room, it was just like walking through a railroad car. It was very different from the apartment that my mother had. It had a living room and then off of it this and that, you know? So I remember noticing that. Everything was, with my friends anyway, was centered around the church and religious institution. So I didn't interact a lot with government or have a notion of it at that time much.

*ML:* Well after that time, to, when I came to WRI, or came to college, was probably about a 25 year period and... Too much to get into, frankly, in a small amount of time; even if we had two days, too much to get into. Suffice to say that at the end of, the beginning of my 30s I had committed fraud, and ended up in prison and when I got out of prison I resumed my previous behavior and ended up

before the judge about to go back again. There was an intervention in between with my public defender because these were federal charges and my federal defender connected me with a social worker, which they don't have any more. At least they didn't, up until about... I guess last time I checked in on that was about 10 years ago and, but she was able to connect me to a hospital where I went in for detox and then from there I went from one program and another. By the time I actually came up before the judge on, after being re-arrested, I had been in a comprehensive addiction treatment program for about nine months and it was amazing what had happened to me in just those nine months. So the judge did not send me back to prison. I was able to stay in that program. It was in that program that I was, that I took the... The vocational director there said "You should try college", I hadn't been to college at that point. And I said "Well, I don't know." At that time I was 42 years old and I thought I'd be lucky if I could just get a job working as a waitress or a factory something, you know, something like that and change my life around. They said "No," you know? "Why don't you just apply? See what happens", so I took the CUNY application. I ultimately got into Hunter and it was at Hunter that my life changed. I mean, the whole journey from being re-arrested, frankly, from serving time for crimes I did commit and through to being re-arrested and getting into a program and, which I was able to do because of Medicaid, because when I came in off the streets there was time in between... Long story but the upshot is I was on the streets homeless and like a Bowery bum, and so it was through getting into detox at St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital, actually up at 114<sup>th</sup> Street in Amsterdam, that started my journey. And it was because of public assistance. It was because of public money and public people who had keen sense of policy and the things that, the safety net – things that I hadn't really thought of in that same way. Although I was familiar with Social Security because both my grandfathers were of the Roosevelt generation and that's all they ended up retiring on. Neither one of them had savings. Most of the work they did in their lives didn't make them, you know, a lot of money. So Social Security was the way they were able to retire safely. So I knew about that but I didn't quite have a understanding. And it was at Hunter where I got involved with Welfare Rights Initiative. That first year, actually.

*CT:* What year was that?

*ML:* That was 1995, and so that summer before I went into my second semester Freshman year I got a letter from Melinda Lackey, the founding director of Welfare Rights Initiative saying that there was this class and would you be interested, in the history of social

welfare policy and law, and we're meeting... I think this was in May or something of the year before it started \ to talk about it, find out more and I said "Yeah." Now it's funny because the vocational people at my program said "Don't go. This is a catch," what do you call it?... "A setup." You know, a sting operation, you know? Because here I was receiving public assistance, I was still in the program, I hadn't yet moved to an SRO which ultimately I did, as soon as I left the program.

*CT:* Can you explain what SRO means?

*ML:* Uh-huh. Single room occupancy housing. I was in Washington-Heights and it ended up... When I did leave the program and went to an SRO I ended up there five years living in an SRO and very grateful; again, public housing and very grateful for it. Anyway, the... So I responded by showing up at that meeting and listening to the idea of the class and the core of what I heard was to find out more about... I knew what I'd benefited from and I wanted to find out more. What is this? I also... We also talked that first time, when we were all together, about the stigma of welfare. I remember hearing a little of the Reagan thing but I dismissed everything, and that was part of my upbringing. I dismissed everything that white politicians said about... Really, I dismissed everything that almost anybody said no matter their color about African-Americans if it was negative and sounded in a stereotypical way; and that was from my background in Oklahoma and my grandfather's, Josie and her family. I knew better so I was very suspicious and I remember that, so that little bit of stigma and stereotype around welfare and then in my halfway house, as well. The program, I attended the day program, but anyway. There was a lot of discussion about that and most of the people I was close to were people of color and we talked about it a lot.

*CT:* And how did Melinda Lackey know to reach out to you? Did you know her beforehand, or...?

*ML:* No. As I understand the story they came up with the letter... Melinda and at that time, WRI was housed within the Center for the Study of Family Policy and they arranged with the registrar, I guess, to have letters sent out to students who were receiving public assistance here at Hunter. And actually, I think probably CUNY... I don't know. I think, I guess it was just here at Hunter that first summer. But anyway, it was sent from the registrar because of anonymity. So Melinda didn't know who it was going to and that it was up to the people who responded, and I responded. About a handful of us did and that made, ultimately, the first class.

*CT:* And as one of the participants of the inaugural class can you share your reflections of what that was like, that first class and your experiences in it?

*ML:* Well, it was so profound I'm still here. And I'm here and not doing the same thing every day. I'm here and having sometimes dramatic but always challenging experience of working in groups, working in policy change, working to understand others and to communicate the truths that we know that we have some clarity on. So many of the discussions around welfare, I've found over the years, sound clear because they're very cut and dried. "They should just get a job like I did." That's a very clear cut and dried statement and it can almost make sense unless you start separating; well, who are you, when you say like I did? And how old are you and what are your circumstances? And who are they that you're talking about? So it's teasing out that kind of thing that is at the heart of WRI because it's getting to the truths of people's lives, as you're doing with this wonderful oral history, and at the same time it's understanding the perception of people who are actually in policy making positions now and how their perception is, intersects with the truth that we know, of people's lives, and how, in fact, it completely misses any intersection.

*CT:* That was beautifully put. I think it would be great for you to maybe share about the particular kinds of things that you did as a student once you were in the WRI class. What activities were you involved with? Anything advocacy related? What was your time like?

*ML:* This is... Really, it's been a long time. I mean I talk about it but at the same time it's exciting to remember. The first time when we met, the very first thing we were given a chance to participate in, even before the class started, was that summer there was the National Welfare Rights Union was having a conference in Houston, Texas. I'm pretty sure this is all accurate. And we had an opportunity, because there was a small amount of money that Melinda had applied for, to get students to go down there and participate in the union, in the conference and to understand. Because it was historical. We had not only people from the National Welfare Rights Union and from welfare organizing in the past but people in feminist... The President of NOW was there to speak to the group. Other union people were also represented, as well as academics, as well as organizers that we ultimately read about once we got to the class. There were people I met that I didn't realize at the time that I met them. I mean, I knew they were great gals; Marion Kramer, just a long list. So that experience was

extraordinary. It also helped us form a strong bond before we even became a class. Part of the hallmark of the first semester for our students is solidifying as a cohort, bonding with each other, becoming the community, you know? And we got to do that, the group of us who could participate in... I think it was about five or six of us in the class who did that; then once the class started, because it was '95, in '95 the discussion was full blown about welfare and all the stereotypes. It was astounding. I mean, I was absolutely amazed.

It had started so we were learning about welfare, the curriculum, and leadership and speaking but at the same time we were also being asked to speak at different events. So it's a little different than what we do now because now the students have that first semester to get all the information under their belt. And then in spring they're out in the world taking the theory and putting it into practice. We sort of had theory and practice simultaneously which was like walking on a high wire without a net, it felt like to me, because we were speaking out with Mimi, with [Jan Poppendieck] that where ever they were asked to speak they said "We want to bring a student from WRI" and so it was exciting. It was wonderful to read the different materials and handouts that we needed for class, and the chapters and books, etc. Then to go out into the world, and with Mimi Abramovitz who wrote a lot of the books that we read, and [Jan Poppendieck] and go out with them into the world.

*CT:* Alright, so where we left off was you talking about your experience being part of that first group, the activities that you were involved with. Would you like to continue where we left off? I guess we're missing about the initial outreach activities that you were involved with.

*ML:* Right, so being able to not only read the materials but in a way to see it come to life and with the authors... Because we went to speak at forums at NYU with Mimi, with Jan Poppendieck at various locations, John Jay and other places and so we were able to hear them speak their words and use, because there were questions and answers and to hear the different questions and analysis. It was just wonderful. That learning experience, although scary, the scary part is – and this is still the central in WRI's first semester is people with firsthand experience, actually owning your own experience, whatever it is. Students spend a lot of that first semester in coming to self awareness and "What do I believe? What are my internalized stereotypes," you know? It's phenomenal to understand yourself in that way and not judge yourself. You

know, it's not about surfacing the inner judge who bases everything on stereotypes. No, it's about understanding that you do this and it's almost simultaneous that it falls away. Especially when you're in dialogue with your fellow students and they're having experiences different than yours but maybe similar to the stereotype. And all of a sudden you see the... One of the, this wasn't in the first class but fairly shortly after I remember a student in our class who was a mother and had two kids, and at that time WRI... It still does. We were the support organization for the client empowerment committee. That's what our Know Your Rights training was an offshoot of, the Welfare Reform network, Client Empowerment Committee. It's now Economic Justice and Social Welfare Network, but it's a place where people receiving public assistance now can come and learn about their rights and strategies to actually apply them at a fair hearings. So they could do a *pro se* fair hearing because even with our lovely collaboration with [Kenny Law] there's not enough lawyers for students. So you've got to know how to do it for yourself and the more you understand, the better things are. And the more improvements we can make. Anyway, so we were at this client empowerment committee and one woman had just come in and she was so excited, she said "Oh, this is great. I want to stay in school because I know that's the only way I can move off welfare because I'm different than those gals who like to just sit around and stay on welfare and don't care about work or anything and who live in the shelters" and you know, because that's where she was right now. and you know, there was like a tingle in the air and a young woman who was in our class said "Oh, this is wonderful that you're going to stay in school", she said "And I would urge you to reconsider what you think about the other women in the shelters and who are lazy moms or..." whatever she was saying. She said "You know, I was in a shelter and I've just only been out for about a year. We're in tier two housing now and when I was in the shelter it was because of domestic violence. I was so depressed I couldn't get my kids up in the morning and dressed for school. Other people had to come and take them because I couldn't do it". She said, "But now I'm in college. I was able to get treatment and intervention and now I have energy and I'm in college and we're going places. But it taught me a lesson not to judge because we don't know what's going on." Well, you could've heard a pin drop. And it's that moment that was fairly early on that just sort of adheres in my mind all of the lessons. That isn't the only lesson that we all learned over time but because of the way the student was able to break the stereotype. The stereotype inside of her was broken and she was able to accept what this woman said with compassion, and not say "Hey you, blobbity-blob, don't say that



about...” No. There was a whole other... And that to me is the crux of what we learn at WRI; how to understand ourselves and the world in such a way that somebody can do something like that in a room full of people, you know?

*CT:* And in terms of issues of organizing for welfare rights advocacy in New York City during the 90s at this time, when you began your involvement with WRI with other grass roots advocacy organizations like the Welfare Reform Network that you mentioned and Federation for Protestant Welfare Agencies and Community Voices Heard, how did they differ and what was the sense? Were there tensions and strains between the different activist organizations at the time? Did they collaborate? What was the sense at that time?

*ML:* Well, the... I think there's two. There's several things occurring at the same time and I didn't see that all in the first year. Number one, our issue was yes, welfare, but access to education and training for all, including people receiving welfare and here's why, and we had the statistics to show that. [Marilyn Gittel's] study had just come out showing 99, actually 100% of the CUNY graduates who were receiving welfare moved permanently off welfare. It was, the national figure was 88. So, you know, that was astounding news and somebody had to deliver it. Our focus was pretty much on education. It was how we were formed, it was what the class was about. We were grounded in higher ed. The students that were from the first class to this are dedicated to helping people access education along the continuum, where ever they need to go, without being cut off or have a ceiling on it, you know? We want the floor and the ceiling to be the same height, you know? So high, in other words. So that was unique to us because the other grass roots were concentrating on different issues. [WEP] was really getting very difficult. Although these are all intertwined and we did a lot of organizing together; marches, there was a lot of marches, a lot of protests and we participated in all of them. Every time we spoke there was always somebody from CVH, [Make the Road by Walking and Fury] and a few other groups. However the focus was very much different in... And I think it was the perspective of WRI coming from access to education and training. Education and training was the thing that we were just zeroed in on because it was the equalizer. It was the right of all of us and just because somebody is receiving public assistance or any other reason, or immigration status or anything else, we don't need to stop somebody from attaining what they can attain. We saw that the WEP organizing as well was intertwined because it was all about the work participation and education was a part of that, very

narrow. So it was involved. However the thing that sort of kept, I think was challenging too, is a lot of small groups competing for the same funding, in a way.

Which brings us to the first class and the idea of doing kind of what NYPRIG does or the [??] and that is go to the colleges themselves, the student body, and get funding. So Melinda looked into it and we looked into it, here at Hunter, what needed to be done, and a referendum needed to be run and then a petition to change the existing student activity fees to include and then we proposed three dollars a student, to fund WRI; and Welfare Rights Initiative, at a time when welfare was not a really popular word, although in the last 17 years it hasn't gotten more popular. Perhaps it's even less popular. And so that became the focus, the organizing focus for our Spring semester and it was a long semester and it was full of lessons and we won. And it was astounding. I remember when the vote was tallied. It was thrilling and it's because of that funding that WRI has been able to develop in the way that it has, to support the class and to support CUNY students, over 4,000 over the last 17 years, to stay in school; over 400 in our program to graduate and matriculate. Graduate from college to the tune of, I think it's 99% of our students graduate from college and we have about 20% of our students go on to graduate school. That's a really high... And I know you're one of them, and I'm another, by the way! And so it's astounding. The legal advocacy developed from that. We have some of the finest... Roxanne Henry, our legal advocate coordinator and legal advocate is, if my life depended on it I would choose her over any lawyer working in welfare today. So, you know, we just have... And she's a great trainer.

So we have students leaving here knowing how to do it themselves. And then it led us to policy. And that became abundantly clear, probably by our third year that we need to be involved with policy, because all of a sudden the federal law did change. No matter how much we spoke out, no matter how many demonstrations we did here in New York, Clinton signed the Welfare Bill, it became law. It became law in New York City way before he signed it and we were able to win a lot of fair hearings because the Giuliani administration had actually illegally jumped the gun. But ultimately, you know, it became law in New York State. So the idea of taking student's lives and living everyday and turning it into a policy focus emanated from the experience of that first year and then the second year, when we had students who were doing work study and internships as well as their college, and then being asked to do 35 hours of WEP. We had one student who

was single and she was basically doing 75 hours a week and, you know, 35 hours of WEP and getting internships, and it was killing her. She couldn't do it. So and we made the argument that work study and internships are work but it wasn't clear that that was going to count in New York state without a law change. So the legacy of the first year and the second year and the third year classes is that understanding where demonstration leaves off and now, how do we work to actually make a difference. It became policy oriented. We've learned a lot of lessons. There's aspects of that that are not as clear, or they weren't clear to us because we didn't have a lot of experience passing law.

*CT:* Can you talk about that? How WRI developed and became... I guess, as a side note too, at this time you were no longer a student acolyte, you were actively involved in WRI at this time. What was your role in the organization?

*ML:* Well, after that first year we were able to... I did an internship. I was still receiving... So my first year of college I was still receiving Medicaid and Food Stamps. I was in a program so I didn't get cash assistance but they did, you know? Then my second year I was still able to get Medicaid and Food Stamps but I also started to work. And we didn't have the work study internship law so I was getting work study and anyway, I lost welfare because I was single and if you're making more than \$90 a month you don't qualify. So I lost Medicaid and Food Stamps and everything. So I had work study in WRI and did work study and internships with WRI. Then I had a fellowship because I was part on Hunter's honor program but also the human rights program and that fellowship included money as a stipend as well. I worked with the lawyers committee for human rights. It was called the lawyers committee for human rights then. And I worked a lot with [Sy Lees] who needed Food Stamps. And we had Food Stamps there because in those days it was, as people would not need their Food Stamps... Anyway so there was a lot of intersecting. I was able to see the not only what we were going through here in New York but in context of how does this play out in the world? These things are not freestanding, all injustice and justice. Even the little justices within the unjust systems, you know, have human aspects to them that are really important to understand, you know? So my personal situation changed and it was almost exactly what Marilyn Gittell found, that 75% of people receiving public assistance, upon getting into college move off of welfare permanently after two years. That was my experience. It's hard when you don't have Medicaid and you don't qualify. You're in the in-between space and stuff but I was really lucky because the SRO was a section eight and it was a

certain amount of my income. I think it was a third of my income, and so it just came out of everything I'd, stipends or work or work study. So anyway, that, and then ultimately I got hired as the committee organizer once we passed the referendum and got funded they did a hiring outreach and I applied and I got it. So I spent many years, I think the first five years that I was here going, developing relationships for WRI at other campuses and CUNY and with the broader community. So I was out in the world for WRI and as well as CUNY. It was a wonderful. It was a rich experience. It was time consuming as heck. And I developed what was known as activist knee, is what I called it, because my knee hurt from walking around campuses. It was like, all the campuses like Queens and everything, we don't realize how good we have it here. Walking from building to building but that's another story. Organizing has some therapeutic and exercise attached to it. So that was what I was doing. So I was sort of on the frontlines of, well, maybe we need to do something for changing law because I was also involved with the coalitions as they started developing, etc. And since we saw students were doing work study and internships, and work study and internships are work. There's work in the title of work study, you know what I mean? And if those counted that could make a difference in a student's life; it could make a difference between graduating and not graduating. So we began the quest of changing New York State law, just modest change, to expand the definition of work activity to include work study and internships. It was allowed under federal law as vocational training but it was not clear and allowed in the New York State Statutes and there also needed to be some clarification in how this would work. So we started with working with our friends and CUNY law, WRI students and Don Freedman and [Ricky Blum], Legal Aid and the legal services, and so we sat in a room and talked and students talked and ultimately came up with some language for the bill, for a bill. So then we started and then we talked with coalition members and, you know, started to build support and took it to someone who was a Freshman. He's still in the legislature so he's not a Freshman anymore but he was a Freshman. His name was... Oh my gosh, I know this story and I always tell it and I forgot his name now. Maybe... Oh! Stephen Wright from Long Island, assembly member, and he was so excited. "Oh, yes! I'll introduce that bill!" And bless his heart, he did and what we didn't know is that Freshman Assembly-people introducing bills, there's not a really good chance of anybody, you know? So then we started learning about how bills really get through and we learned that you've got to have the Chair of the committee that would pass on that bill to get it to the general population to vote, or the general house, whichever one. And so

you have to go right to the Chair. You get the Chair behind you, then you're going places. So we did that and met with the assembly and it's Democrat and at that time it was Ramirez, Roberto Ramirez, and he said "Yeah, I'll support this but you've got to get the Republican counter-part to agree" and the guy who was then-Senator and had been Chair of Social Services for a long time, because Republican-held Senate was longstanding in New York at that time... This is back in '98 I guess, or '97 maybe. He was just leaving. He was on his way out. I think he was actually leaving the Senate but he was also, therefore, not going to be Chair so he said "No, I'm not doing anything." So we had to wait another year and a new Senator came in. his name was Raymond Meier from Utica and so the next few years became about developing a relationship with Senator Meier and listening to his discussion, working sincerely to answer his questions and address his concerns and then we elicited the same from him. A pivotal thing was Senator Tom Duane suggested, he said... He was the one that steered us to Ray; he said "I could introduce this but it's not going to go anywhere. I'm not a member of the leading party in the Senate but I do know Senator Meier because I'm on his committee and I've met him a little bit. Let's talk." He said, "I think it would be a great idea if we have him come to New York and meet with you." So what we began to do with our CUNY partners and our coalition partners is build a tour, a tour of CUNY for the Senator and Ramirez and some other people to come down and meet with students receiving public assistance on three campuses. We chose Bronx Community because it has a very high number of students receiving public assistance, still to this day. Bronx, it was the first... For somebody coming from upstate it's the first place you go to. Then the next was BMCC, because that was in Tom's district and he was very proud of BMCC and there's a lot of students receiving public assistance there, and we worked there with students who had gone on from college and ended up working at some of the places they did internships. So Bronx Community was about students receiving public assistance now and the different internships and work study they're doing. Then BMCC, we had breakfast in the Bronx, we had coffee at BMCC, the President's hosted us, and then the President of Hunter put on a lunch for us so that he ended his day at Hunter with our students in dialogue in the conference room and we had lunch, etc. Now mind you, when I saw him in the Bronx when we first met to take him on the tour, he said "I'm not going to be able to stay past noon. That's it, I just want you to know." I said, "Oh, fine", you know, we started at 8:30 and so we got to Hunter and then he stayed for lunch and then it was 1:30 and he stayed for dialogue and then after the dialogue we showed him WRI and he met more students

and it became 3:00 and we said, “Senator, we’ve got to go to class now!” so he was still there so it was amazing, the power of human connection. He subsequently, not only did he put forth the work study internship law, he championed it and the Senate passed it unanimously in 2000. It did not pass unanimously in the Assembly and I always found that a head scratcher. But Senator Meier got it passed unanimously in the Senate. So one of the aspects of the bill that was a little, it was about compromise – was that it would sunset every two years so we’d have to renew it because they just didn’t know. They didn’t want to do anything permanently that might be helpful and then all of a sudden a whole bunch of... Their fear was, their conservative fear was that a whole flood would come to apply to public assistance so they could go to college, that was the fear. Of course that didn’t happen but nonetheless we had to renew it every year and we did, successfully, in both houses and with unanimous consent of the Republicans up until 2010, when last year it was made permanent.

*CT:* That’s a wonderful achievement. 2010 Gov. Patterson I believe, he signed it into law...

*ML:* Yes, he did.

*CT:* What can you reflect on what your interactions were with the Governor’s office during that period?

*ML:* Just, you know, conversation and letter and there didn’t seem to be any discussion whatsoever about not signing it. You know, again, we had Republican... It was bi-partisan support and spearheaded by Senators Squadron and Montgomery and a lot of... Of course, Duane and Senator Liz Krueger and then of course in the assembly. Assembly-member Wright was the Chair of the Social Services at that time, he’s not this year. I think Labor Committee this year. So, you know, everybody was... Stars were aligned.

*CT:* That’s wonderful. Um, I want to kind of segue into your work with the Drum Major Institute. Can you talk a little bit about that?

*ML:* Sure! Drum Major Institute is a policy group that wanted to start a project where they have people advocates who are actually working in the ground right now in grass roots organizations put forward as policy experts. So they developed a fellowship program and that was funded and they had approached a few people to be a part of that first fellowship and WRI... I was asked to participate as at that time I was Co-Director of WRI, I think. And it was a cohort experience. We got trainings and discussions and the benefit

of all the wonderful people who were at Drum Major Institute. At that time it was [Andrea Batista Schlesinger] who was the Executive Director and Amy, who is still... And I can't think of her last name, blank. I will in a minute, I'm sure. And just, they had a wonderful group of people who specifically were there to... Well, part of their job was to help fellows learn as much as they can, write as much as they can, editorials and that kind of thing, articles. So...

*CT:* And it's a continual involvement you have with them or is it just for that period?

*ML:* Well, during the fellowship, that lasted I think a couple of years, then, the ongoing relationship I had was being able to write for their blog, which was a lasting legacy because I was able to do some things and bring some issues to the forefront that we got some really good, positive feedback. Foster care and welfare, that just wasn't discussed a lot and my... Our blogs that we did on them, they weren't hundreds but a few. I was amazed to see when I was working with that committee that it was known and respected so that was helpful. Also the case for access to education and welfare, you know? Not a lot of discussion about welfare was happening. So that was ongoing. Now the blog is different. They have pretty much like and editorial page; people who are, that's specifically what they do.

*CT:* And, I guess...

*ML:* So I don't have ongoing involvement with them.

*CT:* Oh, okay. It sounds like a rewarding experience. It was a great way to implement what the message was for WRI. How has WRI changed physically since you've joined its staff over the years?

*ML:* Well, we've changed locations quite a bit because simultaneous to WRI expanding and we have a core staff right now of three that gets... Plus, we have usually two interns and two work study. So that's a staff of seven but it balloons to a staff of 30 by spring when the students in the class become part of working with WRI. So we've always needed offices to continue our work ongoing through summer and fall, but bigger offices every year for more and more students, you know? So it's visibly changed in that regard. Also, in those first years or two the internship portion was we were out in the world at other organizations that had been established and we were doing internships there. Although we were getting credit for WRI we were being supervised in doing

things. I was the only exception because I was doing an internship that included connecting all the interns and doing campus outreach at CUNY. But people were actually placed in different agencies. So that's changed. Now you do your internship at WRI, which is going out to CUNY campuses, also doing coalition work and a lot of policy work, as well as campus organizing.

*CT:* And I guess, also to add to that, I guess, how has WRI evolved as an organization? Evolved along with your own journey over the years?

*ML:* That's part of the reason why I'm still here. The connection to human beings, other people, in addition to our students and our students that come and are not part of the class but are part of the advocacy, in addition to the coalition members we work with and other grass roots and their members that we work with in training as well as in organizing, and in addition to policy makers and their staff and understanding different perspectives, you know? The upstate perspective of the downstate and the downstate perspective of the upstate and just understanding why are we separated in that way? It's like, I remember reading about the Civil War and how did the North and South really become the North and South, as if it's... And it's just, we tend... The human condition is such that we tend to form family, we tend to form community and every once in a while we can segregate ourselves from other communities and other families. And I think to the extent that WRI has made me aware of the value of connecting to each other, understanding, stretching yourself to understand more about other people, other families, other communities. It has, it keeps me here, because I learn all the time in deeper ways, you know? First of all how my internalized misperceptions and learning somebody else's view and accepting it. Extremely... It opens up creative abilities of everybody concerned. I think WRI is innovative and creative in a way that we do things and just for that reason, letting go of all that stuff. The value of education, that knowing how to find the facts, how to siphon, how so much of what I read in my life and my past before I went to school. Facts were not cited. Things were not... I would just incorporate them and say "Oh, well. This and that and lesson, so..." and then now I can say "Wait a minute. Where did that come from?" you know? And I can investigate it and I know how. The tools of research, the tools to find out the facts and very often... Niles Bohr said, one of my favorite Nobel Prize winning physicists said one of my favorite quotes, and I'm paraphrasing, is "In life and in physics the opposite of a profound truth can very often be another profound truth." And I found that to be so, in the social sciences and in the human sciences and in life. The opposite



of my truth could very well be your truth and it doesn't mean they're not both true, you know?

*CT:* How's your attitude towards conservative right-wing changed since your involvement with WRI?

*ML:* Well, it's changed radically. One of the big changes was developing relationship with Senator Meier, whom I like as a person. He's a really nice guy. And as he said to me once, he said "You know, Maureen, you and I would not agree on a lot of things" and it's true and it's wonderful to be able to work civilly and respectfully with someone on something that you both can agree on. So I've been able to for the most part look at what we hold in common. There are still people in conservative and even progressive and liberal events who speak in a manner that is not conducive to finding the common denominators and I can, too. I can get inflamed and enraged and I also know that's not really as productive as ultimately, let's get this thing done. Because the one thing that we found in the work study internship law, in addition to getting the law passed, which we did and it was wonderful, it becomes about implementation and how you get something implemented. Well, that is about building saliency for the issue, relationships in your districts, good will to implementing and that isn't, that doesn't come from angry rhetoric or highlighting divisions. That kind of implementation, productive implementation, really comes from people being respectful and understanding what they can accomplish together. So that is... Because that's hard to do, daily. You know, I've been trying to do it for 17 years and every year I learn something more, about myself, about others, and it's through the class, the present class. The dynamism of the present class and what they bring to the material cannot be underestimated. You know, to the class, to the framework of the class, to the policy making, to the legal, advocacy, to everything. So...

*CT:* I guess a good way to maybe perhaps close is probably end with... Unless you have any other final thoughts in addition to this, your education, ultimately. Your college; you completed your degree at Hunter?

*ML:* I got a Bachelor's and I was in the Honor's program so I got it *cum laude*. I know! *Cum laude*, go figure. And then I went to Hunter School of Social Work and I got my [MSW], and that was another rich experience, Master's level work is thrilling, you know? Because even with the Bachelor's I thought oh, I'll never be able to do Master's level work, you know? It was such a wonderful

experience to know, just try. Read the material, discuss and you know, I was able to graduate. I have a vision of Ph.D. I know you... Yeah, yeah – I know you fulfilled that vision, or are fulfilling the vision.

*CT:* Oh, yes, no. Not me, but I think you would be perfect. I'd think that would be a perfect fit for you.

*ML:* Well, it's something for me to think about and you know, it's not out of the question. There was a time in my life when a Bachelor's was out of the question. Master's was not even a possibility. So the best I can say about going on is it's not out of the question, you know? So we'll see.

*CT:* Life long learner.

*ML:* Yeah. It's... Dee has talked about it, we've talked about WRI as being a learning community and every year it has a deeper meaning for me, you know, because our staff and students share their family experience; raising children and being involved in the world and the community outside of WRI, within the city but outside of WRI and so I've... Yeah. It's a wonderful learning community. We ought to be degree-granting. We'll be a degree-granting learning community.

*CT:* In the school of life.

*ML:* In the school of life, yeah.

*CT:* Thank you so much. Do you have any final thoughts and words?

*ML:* No, just thank you again, Cynthia. This is wonderful and the questions were very evocative. Well done!

*CT:* Thank you.

*[End of Audio – 1:17:44]*