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Interview no. 744

Christine Kelso

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Christine Kelso (1946-)
INTERVIEWER: Pauline Dow
PROJECT: Women Attorneys of El Paso
DATE OF INTERVIEW: December 13, 1984
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Attorney, El Paso

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Discussion of her law school experiences, career developments, the role of the Women's Bar Association of El Paso, the crudeness of El Paso Bar Association skits of the past, and actions of the Women's Bar to change the nature of the skit.

Length of Interview: 25 minutes Length of Transcript 14 pages

Christine Kelso
December 13, 1984
By Pauline Dow
Women Attorneys in El Paso

D: Okay, great. Are you ready?

K: [Yes.]

D: Okay. If we could start off with some really basic information like would you please state your name?

K: Sure. It's Christine W. Kelso.

D: Okay. And the date and place of your birth.

K: My birthday is 6-19-46 and I was born in Greenville, South Carolina.

D: The 19th. That's my birthday too, June 19.

K: Is it?

D: Yes, the emancipation of the slaves.

K: Here in Texas.

D: Right. Your marital status?

K: I'm single.

D: Any children?

K: No.

D: Okay. When you were in college, were you preparing for law school?

K: No, not at all.

D: Okay, so therefore you took no courses that would help you in...?

K: That's correct. I'm sorry I'm shaking my head. No, I had no thoughts that I was going to be a lawyer when I was in college.

D: Okay. How did you decide to go to law school then?

K: Probably a product of the late '60s and the feminist movement. I went to law school five years after I graduated from college. I graduated from Duke in '68. I went to the University of South Carolina in '73 and got

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real involved in feminism in the early '70s and decided.

D: In what way, in college or...?

K: No, through the National Organization for Women, trying to get the Equal Rights Amendment passed, doing some lobbying, decided law school was what I wanted to do and applied and was accepted.

D: Okay. What was your family's reaction to your decision to attend it?

K: Oh, very supportive. They always thought I could go to graduate school; it was just a question of what kind of graduate school.

D: Did you have a boyfriend or a fiance at the time?

K: No.

D: Okay. What were your friends' feeling about it, I mean just sort of in general? Is there any particular person that either disagreed or...?

K: Actually, no, not disagreed. In fact, it's the other way around. I don't know if you were involved in the '60s or '70s but we had some things called consciousness-raising groups, and it was basically there that I made the decision that I had to stop griping about my life and go on and get on with it and do something about it. I mean there were a lot of times they were supportive but they were also confrontational within a close group of people, and so I would say it was more real support but also saying, "I think you want to be something then do it."

D: Okay. When you applied for law school then, where did you apply?

K: University of South Carolina.

D: And you were accepted right off? Did you encounter any problems with the administration at all?

K: None.

D: Okay. Was there a quota system for women when you applied?

K: Yes. Actually, I applied twice. I applied in '71 and was accepted and

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decided I didn't want to go. When I applied again in '73 there was a quota because we were only 10 percent of the class. I don't know whether it was still written anywhere, but it was very obvious. To me there was a quota.

D: Was there scholarship money available for women?

K: There was not scholarship money basically available for anybody. There was after I was there a year. The Women's Auxiliary established a scholarship and I won it. Women's Auxiliary to the Bar Association.

D: How did male students in general react to female students in law school?

K: Well, in the sense that most of the females were brighter than the majority of males there ... Those were the days, you know, we obviously had to be brighter than the men to get in so I mean they wanted our assistance, you know.

D: So they were supportive in that sense, you think?

K: Yes. Yeah, you know, in terms of the law school. Now whether in terms of, you know, forming the mentor system or the good buddy system, no we were not included in the career planning type things that went on in law school. But certainly for the academic part of law school we were sought after by male students.

D: Okay. Did your professors encourage you, discourage you? Were they mostly male?

K: Almost entirely male. We had our first full-time female professor of law while I was there. It was not particularly the kind of law school where there is a great deal of encouragement to anybody. I don't think they didn't encourage the women but there weren't any people who... there weren't any women to encourage other women. We kind of encouraged ourselves. Many of us had already done something else, had already

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worked in some other profession or already had a network with other people.

D: Okay, so as far as you know the professors didn't encourage or discourage anybody?

K: No.

D: Okay. Do you feel then that women and men were graded with equal fairness?

K: Oh yes.

D: Okay. When you were asked to get up and recite, because I know in law school it goes by the Socratic method, were you treated any different than your male fellow student?

K: No, I was not.

D: They wouldn't call on women for particular cases or anything like that?

K: No.

D: Can you think of anybody that put an unnecessary roadblock in your path during your law school career?

K: No.

D: Were you ever counseled by faculty or administration into one particular field of study?

K: No, not at all.

D: Were you ever discouraged from courtroom even if it was just in jest with friends?

K: No.

D: All right. When you graduated from law school, what type of position did you apply for? What did you get?

K: I went into the Department of Justice Honors Program. You have to be in the top ten percent of your law school class when you apply for it, let's

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say September or October of your senior year. Once you are accepted into the program they offer you positions within certain bureaus, depending on where they need you and I was chosen to work for the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

D: Is that something you wanted to do?

K: I thought so at the time. [In] South Carolina at that time starting salaries were really, really low and I had a lot of debts because I had put myself through law school. So I wanted to go with the Justice Department because their starting salaries -- I think any federal agency -- are generally better than private firms. It evens out and then private firms go ahead after awhile. But the starting salaries were very high.

D: Okay. So then what did you do? How long did you stay? Kind of take us through your career.

K: Okay. I went with the Department of Justice and they gave me a choice of cities where I can go to and I chose to go Miami, Florida. I was there from August of '76 until January of '78. They had hired too many attorneys and so all the young attorneys were shipped out to various parts of the country, at which time [was] the first time I probably did encounter some discrimination. I was applying to go to a job in Phoenix and they took a man with much lower scores and when I suggested to them that possibly it was sex discrimination they found, immediately found, another western opening which happened to be El Paso. I came here in '78 and resigned in June of 1980, took off for a year, went to Mexico and Guatamala and then started my own office in May of '81 which I still have.

D: Okay. Do you feel, okay, except for that one incident, that you ever had

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to settle for less, you know, because you were a women?

K: Certainly. But that was a product that I happened to be in a law enforcement agency being run by people most of whom did not even college degrees. Serving as the attorney for them, they distrusted lawyers, but they distrusted female lawyers more.

D: Did you ever have a client who just said, you know, "I don't want you to defend me"?

K: This is what I'm talking about, working with the Immigration Service. If I ever had an appointed client..

D: Well, even in the Immigration Service, I mean, some...?

K: They couldn't, I mean they couldn't.

D: They couldn't say "No," but did they ever say, you know, "Are you the attorney?" I mean you know what I'm saying, that kind of thing?

K: Yes, certainly that happened. How much of that was due to my being a woman and how much of that was due to my having real philosophical differences with most of the people that worked in the agency, I'm not, I couldn't really... probably 40/60, less female than philosophical differences. Since being in private practice, no, I have not run into any problems with people saying, "No, I don't want a woman."

D: Okay. What kinds of clients do you get? Do you get more women clients than men clients?

K: I think it's 50/50.

D: Okay.

K: I do a lot of immigration work so it's mostly males who have [problems]; a lot of like criminal work which is mostly males; mental health work which is kind of mixed; and then, you know, private clients with whatever. Yeah, I get female divorces probably more than male.

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D: Okay. Do you feel that other lawyers in El Paso, men lawyers, as well as male judges treat you any differently? Do they treat you fairly or do they, you know what I'm trying to say to you?

K: Yes. No, I think they treat you fair here.

D: You, I understand that sometimes judges in the courtroom can really talk down the male attorney? Do you feel that you're less subject to that kind of harsh talk or scolding or whatever they call it because you're a woman?

K: I never thought about it. No. I don't think so.

D: Okay. Do you feel like you are well on your way to reaching a personal goal? I mean, is this what you want to do or...?

K: No, this is not what I want to do. I'm not certain about how much longer I'll stay in law.

D: If you had a chance to do it all over again, would you do the same thing?

K: No.

D: Is there some other career that you can think of just off the top of your head that you might want to go into more than...?

K: Probably would have gone into some field of medicine rather than law.

D: Okay. Do you feel that, well, let me ask you this first. Do you have any political aspirations?

K: No.

D: Do you consider yourself a competitive person socially, politically?

K: No. Not at all.

D: Do you feel that marriage and a career are a viable combination?

K: Oh certainly.

D: Okay. I just have a few other questions and those talk about or revolve around the Women's Bar Association and so I understand that you were one

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of the founders.

K: No.

D: No?

K: That's not true.

D: Okay.

K: No.

D: What's your involvement?

K: When I came here, I guess it's now been almost six or six and half years ago, I went to several meetings and then, you know, was an intermittent member. I would go on occasion. I was president of it for a year. When I came back and started my own office three years ago, I became more involved in it and was president of it for a year, have not been particular involved in it this year.

D: What do you think the role of the Bar, Women's Bar is? Does it have one?

K: We have always seen it as a networking, socializing role but that's falling off and I think because, you know, it's what inevitably happens. Once the barriers are down, then all kinds of women from all kinds of different backgrounds are coming into the legal professions and we don't have as much in common anymore. And maybe it's a mark that we have made it that people don't need to band together any longer. We've had some real problems, though, with the big Bar. I don't know whether the other lawyers have talked to you about it. The Bar Association skit has been one of the huge bones of contention between the female attorneys in the big Bar and we finally last year got it eliminated. And there's a lot of criticism of us for that but it was the most incredibly crude, sexist, personal attacks that...and it was very, very hard to get the male members to listen.

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D: Yes, as a matter of fact I always like to ask a question about that because the female lawyers do sort of have something to say about that. What I want to know is what was your reaction and what was the reaction of the men around you? Have you attended one of these?

K: Yes.

D: Well, the first time you went to this, you know, can you remember what your reaction was and what the men...?

K: Okay, I was president when we got it changed, and so because I fought it, I can't talk very dispassionately about it. I went one time before. I did not go when they had the stripper, thank goodness. I was in Mexico and I didn't go the next year because it had just been so bad. The year I went, I don't remember, they made a joke -- it was nearly four or five years ago -- and the reactions, the jokes were not so bad then. They got progressively worse for two or years because of a small group of Young Lawyers and so the year I went it wasn't that bad. I heard, you know, terrible reports since a lot of my friends were to act in [it]. They decided to force them, force the issue and....

D: How were you able to get them to quit it?

K: We went, well.... I served on the Board of Directors as President of the Women's Bar Association. Janet Ruesch was at that time vice president of the Women's Bar Association. We brought it to a vote two and three times before, so we talked about it. And we finally got a coalition of some of the younger lawyers, with one in particular, Tony Cortez [who] is the ex-president of the Mexican-American Lawyers' Association. Some of the younger ones who realized that sexism was not really the way to go, plus some of the ones who were from the old school of gentlemen and didn't think ladies should be talked about that way and that was the only way we

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ever got a vote through to have the Women's Bar Association be in partial control of the skit. And Bob Wales and our co-chaired.

D: So you've been able to maybe let it be...?

K: Well, what we did was we took the power away from Young Lawyers because they wouldn't agree to share power with us and so the Bar, we finally forced it to a vote and took it away from them. I mean it is the Bar Banquet's skit and I don't know if some people have told you the nature of things that were being said but there were jokes about pubic hair and weight and breast size and just unbelievable stuff. I mean it was really, really unbelievable. Not even funny. It was like the only thing they could do could was look at a female lawyer and the only thing they could think about, instead of something funny that this person or that person had done in their legal career, they made a sexual joke. I mean we have plenty of prominent female attorneys who surely have done something amusing legally, because that's what the other jokes are about: what this judge has done or that judge has done. Instead, when they got to the women, they made really crude...

D: So the jokes about the men were not sexual.

K: [They] were totally professionally connected. You know, someone who made an idiotic move or fell down on the way to court. I mean, you know, something like that. But the jokes about women were about fellatio and just like I said,unbelievable stuff. And it was very hard fought and I'm sure there are still, there are still hard feelings about it and unfortunately I wish I could say that it was wonderful the year we took it over. It wasn't. The skit wasn't particularly good. It was very hard to write stuff like that but at least we stopped it. Now what it's going to be like this year, I don't know. I know Debbie Kanof, the

present president, is co-chairing a committee. What happened on this and I'm sure other people have told you, is the Young Lawyers have traditionally put it on and that it had been stag banquet for years. Janet Ruesch and Ruth Kern were basically told, you know, they could not stay -- when they first got here -- could not stay for the skit and then even when they had, my friend Liz Rogers was president of Young Lawyers one year. They wouldn't tell, you know... the meetings would get cancelled, you know... They... We tried and tried to work within the organization and considered boycotting. We considered this and that, we tried just sending people to Young Lawyers meetings and they never would get access, so we finally had to have a real confrontation about it.

D: So you think there is still hard feeling about that?

K: I think there is some. But then, you know, the group of men who were doing it are almost getting too old to be Young Lawyers. Yvonne Puig is president of Young Lawyers and certainly Yvonne is a feminist and supportive. I forgot to mention that she was also on the Board and supported us and spoke and she carried a lot of weight because she is with a big firm. I didn't have any particular ties to any of the people on the Bar Board of Directors and I unfortunately came across very strident at the first meeting because I was so appalled that we couldn't get a majority. But they couldn't even understand where we were coming from and I had thought we would have a natural ally with the Mexican-Americans because they had gotten some of the Mexican-American jokes stopped, and I found that that was not true.

D: I've heard that.

K: So but I think with Janet and Yvonne there, it was a lot easier. I certainly didn't particularly get it turned around on the basis of what I

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did. I think it was a combination of all kinds of things and mostly them.

D: And you are a member of the El Paso Bar?

K: [Yes.]

D: All right. That's really all I have about those two things. Just one other question to wrap it up and then if you have any comments. When you came to El Paso...?

K: I came in '78.

D: '78. You know, attitudes were one way and people treated you one way, including lawyers and judges. Do you see some change in attitude today?

K: Okay. Well, when I came I was not practicing in court. I was working in a specialized part of the Immigration Service, so really when I say I started to get on with judges and lawyers it was in '81 when I set up my own office. I think it's pretty much the same climate. I think what we don't... I don't think we get discriminated against but I don't think that we also get possibly included in all the, you know, the old boy network and that type thing. So we, to an extent, have set up our own and try and let each other know about appointments and job opportunities and.... And for that reason I'm sorry to see the Women's Bar Association kind of going into decline because I think it's been extremely helpful in that sense.

D: Okay. One question I should have asked you before and then we'll quit. Did you ever think of applying, whether when you were in law school or when you got out, to a big firm?

K: No, never even considered it.

D: No. You just didn't want to.

K: No.

D: Okay. Because some of the other women have mentioned that you just didn't

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think of that because it wasn't possible.

K: I think it wouldn't have been possible in South Carolina. I don't think it would have been possible in South Carolina then but I never even considered it. So I can't absolutely vouch for that. And then I knew that I didn't want to work for anybody else when I set up my own office three years ago. There are a lot of women now, here in big firms, but that's come within the last two or three years. And I think that the women, at least the first women, have not had an easy time of it. The women I know who are feminists in the firms, I think there's a whole kind of... This is a generalization. There's a whole, almost... there's a generational gap between those of us who went to school in the '60s and early '70s, maybe even the mid-'70s and those who are getting out of law school now. I think a lot of them have forgotten about quotas and I think a lot of them have forgotten about what things have been done so they could be in law school and accepted by the big firms. My friends who are feminists in let's say mid-'30s or early '30s have had some problems with the male associates. They have been excluded, partially because of our way of recreation is not to go out and get drunk at a football game. We could start there. But it's not only that, but it's just attitudinal.

D: Okay. Just one more thing.

K: Sure.

D: Because you were interested in equal rights and just the feminist movement in the '60s and I'm sure that that attitude has progressed, is there anything that you do actively today in that...?

K: Sure. I'm legal counsel to Planned Parenthood, I'm legal counsel to Reproductive Services, basically pro-bono type things. [I am] a member of

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Women's Political Caucus, used to be on the board. I'm not any longer, not actively.

D: Are there any other comments you'd like to make, just in general?

K: Let's see. When I went to college which was in '64, there not only was an unwritten quota system, there was an actual quota system. I went to a private university. Things changed very, very much in the late '60s and early '70s. Now because of, I think, things like the National Organization for Women, less Women's Political Caucus, but I mean some really pressure groups and people didn't just open the doors very easily. So that while I think that I was very lucky that I haven't personally experienced that much discrimination, I hope the people don't forget that it was there on this earth as late as 15 years ago and that we have to continue supporting other women or it could change back.

D: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW