

Nora de Rege 00:11

Hello. Hi. Oh, it's nice to see you. Um, thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview with me. I'm so excited to hear about your experiences as part of the National Women's Conference in 1977.

Sharon Day 00:31

Yeah, I tried to respond to some of the questions in writing, so. Yeah, so you.

Nora de Rege 00:45

Yeah, I really appreciate that I. Yeah, it gives me a good like background, I'll probably re ask those questions just to give you an opportunity to, like, expand if you wanted to. But I have, I'm, like super interested in your experience, both like before, during and after the conference. So whatever you want to speak on. Regarding that, that would be awesome.

Sharon Day 01:10

I have about a half an hour. Okay,

Nora de Rege 01:11

that's totally fine. That's perfect.

Sharon Day 01:16

That's why that you know that responding to some of them in writing would be helpful. Yeah,

Nora de Rege 01:21

that's perfect. Good to know. Okay, great. I'm just gonna start off with some, like formal formalities for the conference. And just so you know, I'm recording this interview, I sent you a couple of forms to fill out, feel free to fill those out and send them back to me whenever. Great. Okay. Good afternoon. My name is Nora J. and I'm a student at Macalester College. And today I will be interviewing Sharon Day about her experiences at the National Women's Conference in Houston, Texas, that took place in 1977. And we are doing this interview by zoom and today's date is February 29 2024. And I just wanted to give you an opportunity to introduce yourself however you'd like. In that one, if you want to include like identities, just a little bit about your background, anything like that, go for it.

Sharon Day 02:14

My name is Sharon Day. And I'm an Ojibwe woman born and raised in Minnesota my whole life. And I'm one of 13 children. And I identify as Two Spirit. And I'm also [unintelligible] two daughters and four grandchildren.

Nora de Rege 02:47

Awesome. Thank you so much. So I-- you talk about growing up in Minnesota, you talked a little bit about-- in your answers in my emails about just kind of entering a little bit of a political consciousness at a relatively early age, listening. Could you talk a little bit more about that type of like, yeah, entering that political consciousness, the things that brought you into political awareness that then led you to the National Women's Conference?

Sharon Day 03:14

Yeah. You in our, in our, in our house when we were growing up. You know what, when we were at the dinner table, everyone had an opportunity to say how their day was engaged in conversation. And I know, in some of my friends house, that wasn't the case. It's more, you know, the kids were silent and the parents stuck. But that wasn't the way it was my house. And also think I was 10 years old when John Kennedy was was shot. And that had a big impact. And, in fact, prior to, to that, you know, I can remember my dad and I are having conversations about who would be the best president. And of course, I was in support of John Kennedy, and my dad was supportive of Nixon. And, and, and his, you know, we talked about this later in life, too. In his opinion, Republicans Republican Party, which is very different than Republicans today. Were treated indigenous people on a government to government relationship, as opposed to you know what you said. The liberals or the Democrats did was sort of weren't good at at giving giving a handout but not so good at setting up for long term success. And so that was his opinion. And it was the opinion of, in fact, many Native people who are my age or older. Because it was Republicans who did treat tribal governments in a government to government relationship.

Nora de Rege 05:37

That's very interesting. Um, yeah, I remember that, like, in your email, you mentioned that you went to see, was it? Um,

Sharon Day 05:48

Kennedy,

Nora de Rege 05:49

Yeah, Bobby Kennedy speak, and I listened to an interview that you had done somewhere else. And you were like, mentioning that as kind of a formative experience for you. So I think that, like, it's really interesting to hear just like that type of conversation and type of like, being around people who are interested in politics or just interested in organizing generally, how that was impactful for you.

Sharon Day 06:12

Yeah, that was, uh, I don't know if I said in that interview, but John Kennedy had begun a study on what was happening to Native students in the boarding schools, Indian education. And after John was killed, then Bobby took over the study. And so it's probably about that time that I heard him speak that you would might have been out west. And, and I heard heard him speak. And I mean, you know, at that, that time, I was like, 15 years old, you know, had hair down to my waist, and I got a very identifiably and native person. And, and I, I remember, at the time thinking that, you know, he looked directly at me, and he had, you know, these amazing eyes. And when Bobby was killed, then Ted Kennedy finished the study. And that study resulted in the Indian Education Act of 1974. And so that was, you know, the... that was probably the most important Indian education piece of legislation in many, many years. Yeah, I'm gonna get rid of.

Nora de Rege 07:43

Yeah. All, good.

Sharon Day 07:51

Okay

Nora de Rege 07:52

Cool. Perfect. Yeah, thank you for sharing all that. I was really able to find a lot of information about your work starting kind of at a later, like after 1977. So a lot in the 1980s. And you mentioned a little bit in the email, but I would love to hear a little bit more about your political work, like it'd be organizations or volunteer positions that you were participating in, before 1977, that kind of led you to participate in the National Women's Conference?

Sharon Day 08:23

Well, when I was in high school, my high school mechanic arts was located, where the Supreme Court building is now. So adjacent sort of kitty corner to the, to the Capitol, and I worked for my band teacher after school. So I would hold the band practices while he was grading papers and stuff like that. And when I would leave school, I would listen to see if there was anything happening at the Capitol because it was so close. So if I could hear speakers or, you know, noise, I would head over there and, and I was

just a shy kid, you know, I would just stand there and listen, and and it felt really important to be there to just listen and so you know, heard a lot of anti war activists and and it was the Vietnam War. And, and my sisters when I graduated from high school, I was taking a college class English, English and writing and I wanted to do my paper on the American Indian. So I tracked down Clyde Bellecourt and interviewed him. And this would be like 1970. And uh [laughter], you know, years later I said, glad you remember when I interviewed you on it my first year of college and, and he looked at me. And I said, you told me about the St. Paul chapter because my sisters were having a hard time in school, and he said you know there's a St. Paul chapter, go over there and talk to them. And so I did. And they had... So Pat Ballenger was the social worker there. And I told her what's going on with my younger sisters in school. And she said, Well, we have a youth worker. So Billy Blackwell was a youth worker. And, and they used to send him because I was out of the house, and, but he, he would go and pick up my younger sisters in the morning and take them to school because my mom started work at 6am. So she wasn't there to be able to get them up. And, and so he did that. And anyway. And then my mom said, you know, the St. Paul chapter, and they kept having meetings and talking, talking about starting the school. And what, you know, my mom, she didn't talk a lot, but she was pretty quiet. And, but one day in the back of the room, you know, she stood up, and she said, Why don't you Why don't you boys to call them? Why don't you boys put your money where your mouth is? Start this school already, we need it. And so, you know, they, they said, Well, okay, well, and, and, and, and so that was the beginning of the Red Schoolhouse. So our family, you know, and I mean, my dad was when I was a kid, he was when I would have these conversations with and my mom was probably too busy doing other things. But after we moved to St. Paul, she was involved in a lot of the Indian activities and, and, you know, everybody really respected her. And back. When my mom died, the St. Paul Minneapolis papers, both carried stories about her natural pages, and her name was Charlotte Day. And, and even the radio, I remember driving home for the funeral. And, and, and the Public Radio, and played, you know, some tributes to it. So everybody was everything is political. Right? Everything is political. And so the Vietnam War and the feminist movement, you know, were, you know, we knew that the personal was political. And so, so there was always that. And so, I just never saw myself, you know, I was the one who, you know, when Wounded Knee trials were here in 1972, I think it was, I was young, but I was a secretary of the board for the St. Paul chapter of AIM (American Indian Movement). And it was my job to like, make sure that the heat stayed on at the old Halleck cube brown building, where were they where they were, I had brothers who are older than me, and a younger sister, who actually went to Wounded Knee. You know, [unintelligible] to Washington DC. I had two kids were really young. And so that was unable to do any of those things. But, but help keep the the office going, make sure people got beds, those kinds of things. So when I went to the women's, so when I got hired as the Indian Affairs representative, that was the title, I was the youngest person, I was the first woman to ever hold that job. And after six months, you know, the tranfered me to Bemidji. And I had two little kids and I really needed my mom that was divorced. So we didn't stay there long. We stayed maybe six months. And then we moved back but it was, you know, one of my jobs there was to find out what women-- native women wanted and needed and, and that was how I ended up at the Minnesota women's meeting. And it was just kind of -- You know, when I knew that there was only one other native woman, as a delegate, I, I just said, like, I could do this and Hattie Kaufman Wing, she was about my age. And so, so, so we went and, you know, a couple of the, like, one of the first things that happened when we got there. You know, there was this big plenary, you know, greeting everybody. And I can't remember what her name was, but she was the

press secretary for Lady Bird Johnson. It's, you know, there's a book right, now blanked out a book, but the NWSA

Nora de Rege 15:48

Oh, I'll look into it.

Sharon Day 15:54

So if you look on the agenda, you can find her name, but she, she gave the welcoming address. And one of the things she said was, you know, I want to welcome everyone to Houston and to this, you know, it was a decade of women and, you know, all these things. And then she said, you know, we want to honor you know, those women who-- Native, American Indian women, it's probably what she said. Pocahontas who saved Captain John Smith and, and Sacagawea. This is a direct quote, Sacagawea, who lead Lewis and Clark, across this barren, empty wilderness. And so when she was, and then she got talked about-- For Mexican women, she talked about honoring Malintzin who at that time, she was not exactly seen as a hero. Neither were Pocahontas exactly. I mean, I've since changed my mind some about that, but, but at the time, we had an eye, we somehow we got ourselves backstage. And so we confronted her. And we told her you have like, insulted, you know, like, every Native woman in this country. There's so many other women you could recognize, besides Pocahontas, and, and Secretary. And, you know, she kind of laughed herself up. She's was like, kind of, like, how dare you? You know, how dare you? Like, we were, like, 24 wonderful actors. And she was like this older, older, stately kind of woman. And she, she said to us, like, how-- Like, what do you mean, what do you mean? And we said, well, this country wasn't wild. And, you know, bear, barren wilderness. There were 1000s 1000s 1000s Millions of people in-- who were killed by genocide. And, and, and so we demanded, she apologize, and, and she kind of plucked herself up, you know, again, and said, like, she was a great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great granddaughter of Pocahontas. And, yeah, so that was one thing-- that was the first thing that happened when we got there. And then the fact that in Minnesota, we had so many resolutions for women of color. And, we got there there was like a National Coordinating Committee, and they didn't want to have any floor debates. Because they said if they did, conservative women could, it could become a whole debate about abortion. And, and so finally, they, you know, because you know, there were enough of us there. They agreed to open the floor for two resolutions, one dealing with lesbians and because they were as mad as we were, and the other one dealing with women of color, but in the end, it was something sort of like a blanket thing. You know, that everything we said here, you know, also pertains to when they call and, you know, and they you know, women of color was so mad and they wanted-- They, you know, there was a caucus and they said Gloria Steinem in to talk to us. And, and so they said, you know that Gloria and a couple other, you know, women would craft the resolution, and then bring it back to us. And so she and I were in the elevator together. And I'm five feet tall and glorious, probably 5'10" Maybe, and seemed really tall to me. And so when we're in the elevator, just, it was just the two of us. So I asked her, I said, "Miss Steinem: What do you think about-- They're asking you to help us craft this resolution for women of color." And she looked down at me. And she said, "I just do what I'm told." And so we got out of the elevator, and I couldn't help myself, I was like "Can we take our picture," and I take my picture. And this was before cell phones. So I had my camera and had

somebody take a picture with me out, you know, years later, probably five years ago. She was here in Minneapolis. And she was there was a black woman who wrote a book about women in prison. And, and, you know, the kind of issues they had and the help they needed, and Gloria was here to-- was at the Minnesota Women's Club. She was here to like, open for her, to introduce her. And that--she was really, you know, other women. And so a friend of mine, Ann Manning had bought a table. And when she said, I want you to come. And so while we're there on my phone at some point, I had taken a picture of my picture with Gloria. We're eating dinner, you know, I, I showed the picture around, and then answered, you have to go show her? And I said no. She said, Yes, you do. And in the meantime, you know, in my mind, Gloria had redeemed herself because she was one of Wilma Mankiller's best friend. And Wilma was the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, the first woman to be elected as a principal chief. And in fact, when Gloria finally did get married, Wilma was the officiant. Wilma, I think the wedding was at Wilma's house in Oklahoma. But anyhow, so so she had sort of, you know, redeemed herself to me. And so I took my picture over and I did show her and on my phone and she was really kind, like, she held my hand and, and we chatted, and I told her, I was also a friend of Wilma's. And, and she told me that writer she said, Write to me and talk about this night. So I'll remember, you know, who you are [unintelligible] so we took a picture again. But, you know, so many things have changed, and so many things have stayed the same.

Nora de Rege 23:48

Could you speak more on the like, yeah, like on that kind of difference between, you know, 1977 as a political organizer, as you were then and kind of your transition into now, like, what are those differences that you feel like most salient?

Sharon Day 24:05

Well, I think, you know, up until about 10 years ago, I spent my whole life-- national march on Washington, so many marches and the Minnesota women's event at the Capitol I spoke at that. The first one, we had the big one when Trump was elected. So many... Yeah-- So many protests, right. And, you know, in my generation, we we thought we were going to change the world. And [unintelligible] and so, you know, so instead of doing the kind of activism that I used to do, now, we try to bring people together. And groups, you know, men, women, mostly, but women of all races, you know, and I read these water laws [?], and because, you know, it's even in our language, right, like, when we say I'm going to oppose this mine, I'm going to fight this mine, we're going to win, we're gonna fight this pipeline, and we cannot let this happen. You know, like, every, every action causes a reaction. And so when we're oppositional immediately to something, and that's our stated case, now, we immediately create the opposition, or the opposition comes out of the woodwork, right, like, and, and even, you know, like, in the theater world, to help so much in our language, like, you nailed that, you killed that, I'm going to battle cancer-- and, you know, that language, it's so oppositional and so violent, really. So try to... excuse me. So, you know, with the water you know, we live in a state where half of our water is polluted. And, and we have a lot of water, but we have a lot of pollution, excuse me.[Coughing] So I leave these water [unintelligible], and try to do my work from a place of love. If God is at the center, and you know, and you're doing work from like a spiritual motivation, then you're going to be able to do

whatever you set out to do. Self is walking in Mississippi or walking Missouri River, walking around Lake Superior, you do it with other people develop community along the way. Everybody has a job, everybody has a part to play, and all these discussions that happen around social justice, racism, sexism, and, you know, all of those things happen on the [unintelligible]. And I like to think that, you know, if we can connect people to you know, like, sort of the core values of loving the water being kind to the water, and being respectful, and being grateful and then we can come to the understanding that we are in our bodies are made up I hope I'm still in 65%. But, you know, like, you know, once we kind of fall below 50% You know, like we're transitioning into that by the world but I find that you know, especially with the youth-- they seem to grasp things really quickly, you know, older people, they're more and set in their ways, although many older people want this. But if you can create community move forward together. You know, that's that's what we all need to do. Because I, all those years of doing the protests and you know, you get everybody all excited. And, and, and then and and then nothing happens, nothing changes. But so that's, you know, it's not very exciting, but that's what I do.

Nora de Rege 30:18

It's It's heartwarming, it's like the long time, like the long, long term work that needs to be done constantly in order to, I don't know not, to not give up on that, like those types of reactions to just like, keep going through it all. And to be like, build those relationships, I find that very, very impactful. I want to be respectful of your time, but I still have a couple more questions. If you have more time to keep talking. Okay, great. Um, I'm really curious about what you see the like, like, talking about all the things you've done since 1977. But was there any, like, Was there a specific role that you think the National Women's Conference in 1977 played both in like a larger political landscape, but also specifically for you, like personally, and politically, or like as a, you know, as a kind of career organizer, if that's a way to, to describe the things you've been doing since.

Sharon Day 31:26

that, well, the one thing that that happened was, you know, there were two to let two out lesbians from Minnesota, and they were, they were alternates but they came to Houston. And, and one was a school teacher, and the other one is not sure what she did. But they're one was sort of quiet, the other was, like, more fiery, you know, and, and I really admired them because of their courage and, and, and willingness to put themselves out there. And, and when I came home, I did some door knocking for-- one of them was partnering with Karen Clark, who was state representative was about to run and started door knocking and, and then a couple years later, and met some women. And you know, it was a really gradual process. And I didn't come out in a relationship like most people do. I came out in a, in my mind, in my rational mind that weights are going to live my life in solidarity with lesbian women because they gave me the most support-- that's why. And trying to explain it to some, some other people, like especially native people. I, I said that, you know, and you're in a room full of native people who are just like you, you feel at home, say, most of the time. Well, that's how I feel around lesbians. I feel like I'm safe. And that didn't happen in 1977, it took another 10 years. I went back to school, and I think I took every human sexuality course there was [laughter]. And... but I was sort of wondering, you know, like, could that be me and then of course, I had been married and I... but that really, it was, you know, being

in organizing work with two women that I really respected. And I still remember Betty Friedan's words, you know, when there was all this drama about who was going to do this resolution? Who was going to speak to the resolution? And she did, and she was one that was selected. And she said something to the effect of like, I have loved men in my life. And perhaps I have loved men too. Because there's, you know, like, it was such a totally different time. It was like a lot of lesbian baiting going on, like, if you were an ally, then you must be one. And so there was always fear. I mean, it was a different different time. And so I really admired them. And, and so also knowing that most of them, you know, in my life, most of my emotional support came from women. You know, it was like, it was like sort of this. Yeah, this I'm gonna live my life-- in solidarity. And you know, that didn't that didn't last six months, nine months, something like that. But, you know, that was that was a political decision.

Nora de Rege 35:47

Yeah, I really, I love hearing about, like, kind of how the impact of relationships and relationality and, like representation of really like, not only informed your, like, political work, but personal work that's, like, so powerful. Yeah, and I was also curious kind of about, like, what you think of maybe like, specifically at the 1977 conference, but also generally about, like, the role of like, representation, because you talk about, like, meeting people, and being in rooms with people. And like, what was it like, for you as like, you know, the representative, like the representative that is like, the native woman, but also like, the to spirit lesbian woman at the, like, National Women's Conference? Or like, just kind of generally? Yeah, like, what do you think that role is?

Sharon Day 36:40

I think back then there was, there was. And, you know, I didn't have a lot of-- I mean, there was Hattie, I'm not sure when-- I think it was later on... There was a National Native women's meeting that... and we had sort of our, you know, like Ada Deer and some of those women were sort of our elder's and ran for political office or whatever. But, but not so much then. So for me, that, you know, like, who I've always aspired to be like, was my grandmother, you know, didn't like to speak English. But she's dealt with a lot of tragedy in her life, and yet, I never heard her speak an unkind word about anyone. Never, ever. And, sure, she had moments, but I never saw them. And she was like, the epitome of grace. And so I aspire always to be like, my grandmother.

Nora de Rege 38:27

Yeah, that's beautiful. Yeah, I, I mean, I love hearing about this. It's a very, like, it's, it's an interesting time of like, you know, in the 1970s are an interesting time for like, feminist history and like women's rights, but hearing specifically about your experience, which I think it's relatively underrepresented in, like the women's history, or women's movement, or in the mainstream women's movements. So I'm glad to hear about that, and also how it how it like was for you as a person and not just as a political figure. I feel like that's also something that can get lost in the weeds of history. Yeah, is there anything else that you'd like to share about the conference are about your political life or personal life?

Sharon Day 39:17

You know, I did go on like I was, you know, when I work for the state, you know, like you're involved in politics. And so I would go to the county conventions and a couple of times, you know, went onto the [unintelligible] three different times when I did that, was elected to go to the state conferences. And then in 1988, I moved to-- I was elected as a delegate to the national DFL conference and one of the things I do know, the higher up you go in on that, the more it's less about, like, what you want, but more what the power that be tell you it's going to be.

Nora de Rege 40:10

Yeah.

Sharon Day 40:11

In Houston, you know, we will open the floor for two votes, one lesbians one a woman of color, and then they were so limiting, you know, are so overarching to really not have a lot to them. And, you know, at the National DFL meeting in Atlanta-- this was a time of the Rainbow Coalition and when it came right down to it, you know, like, they told us what to do. And so, you know, so after that 1988 I kind of stepped back from the party politics. Because it's a little-- frankly, it's a little disillusioning. But but like I said, before, you know, like, the personal is political, and so your everyday you're still making choices and decisions. And, you know, tomorrow, like, this afternoon, I'm gonna be working on a banner for Saturdays, and build a piece for... focusing on Palestine, as, you know, making a banner and then go hang it someplace. And because, you know, like, it's not, it's, we, we have to stand up for what we believe. And, but, you know, our banner will say, Peace, Power and love, we have the Palestinian flag and the kites, three white kites on it. For the journalists who died, who said, you might die, like, children. And so. So I'll always live my life like that. But not so much know the... You know, and at one time, I wanted to be the first Native state senator. And, and I'm so glad I never did that. Because there are other people better equipped to do that, you know, and, you know, those kinds of compromises you have to make and so on. But, yeah, I want to thank you, too, for reaching out to me and for I don't know how you went about picking who you're going to interview, but I'm happy to be one of them.

Nora de Rege 43:03

Yeah, no, I just read like, found your name on a list of like all the delegates. And we were doing a little bit of research and you. You have a very interesting life and a rich, like political history. And I was just very excited. Yeah, it's just really. Yeah. As a side note, I would love to see this photo of you and Gloria Steinem. If you have it still. One of the questions they ask is if you have memorabilia, and I think this would be incredible memorabilia to see, to be published alongside your biography, just this photo of you and Gloria Steinem, right out of the elevator. Yeah, I really appreciate you taking the time today to talk

about your experiences, both at the conference. And generally it was really, really enlightening and just like, very powerful to hear about.

Sharon Day 43:57

Yeah, and I'm working from home today in my, you know, I just have a little single page printer. So I'll pull out those forms when I'm at my office.

Nora de Rege 44:06

Awesome. Thank you so much. I really appreciate that. All right. Thank you so much. Yeah, have a good one. Bye.

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