EDITED TRANSCRIPT

Multicultural Midwest Oral History Project

Interviewee: Sandra Berlin

Primary Interviewer: Greg Roller

Secondary Interviewer: Melissa Anderson

When: April 25, 2002

Where: 109 9th St S, Fargo, North Dakota

Editing and omissions are indicated with brackets and ellipses. Additions are noted accordingly. These changes were made at the suggestion of Sandi Berlin.

G: Where were you born and, if you feel comfortable stating, when?

S: I was born in 1959 in Cass Lake on the Leech Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota . . . . I lived there only [for a short time, I grew up in Bemidji]. I am enrolled in the White Earth Reservation although I have never lived there. A lot of my family is actually in Leech Lake and Cass Lake. [My father] lives in Red Lake.

G: How long have you lived in the Fargo-Moorhead area?

S: I have lived here about 14 years . . . .

G: What is your educational background?

S: Well, I completed high school. I went to, I attended technical college in Moorhead, Legal Administrative Secretary . . . . I also went to Atlanta [and attended the] the Music Business Institute [for recording law and engineering]. I also went to beauty college, I'm a recovering hairdresser is what I call it [laughs] . . . I think most of my education that I

[now use comes from] the years of volunteering [and working with the people of] the Native American Center in Fargo.

G: What is your title/occupation?

S: I am a field organizer for the Minnesota Indian Ecumenical Ministry which is a ministry of the Minnesota Council of Churches and I am also serving as a board member for the Native American Christian Ministry of Fargo-Moorhead.

G: What are some other roles or titles you have held in the community?

S: Well, in addition to being a board member for the Ministry, I, [have volunteered hundreds of hours] at the Native American Center, [starting when it used to be] right on Main back here behind [my current office]. I wore a lot of different hats, I just can't . .one on one visiting with people and helping [to address] their needs, and . . . seeing [that] there are a lot of people falling through [the cracks]. So I [have always been] there to try and bring awareness [to the larger community and to support the people however I could.]

I have four children, two boys, two girls. I also have three grandchildren, they call me "Nana"-that's me. (laughs) –Nana, they live out in Washington.

I am also involved in the Justice Circle and I am part of founding that so I am co-convening with Diane Wray Williams of the Justice Circle of Moorhead. I've served on a number of boards, I [have served as a co-chair and secretary] of Northern Plains Voices which is also a pretty new organization that's a nonprofit. They're . . . focusing on the Native perspective in education [and being a voice in the Native American commuity.] Then I also work statewide, so although now I have my office here in Fargo (with the Ministry), I have been working out of my home the last two and a half years, now this is

the first time I actually have a office but I also work the state of Minnesota. I just came from Duluth and up in Grand Portage. [Through my work,] I am able to work with a lot of Native American people, faith leaders, a lot of people from different walks of life and I enjoy that.

G: What are the main goals of the organizations that you are involved in? Is there one goal or do you have a different goal for all the groups and just a lot of them?

S: Well, I guess, personally . . . my goal is [to bring] healing in the Native communities . . . . In my own life I have had to go through a lot, and I still do, a lot of struggles . . . to find that healing, find some of kind of reconciliation within the communities especially through the churches in the Native American communities, [to] look at the issues, concerns that are out there and . . . bring about healing. [I assist in] forming new relationships and [networks at statewide and local levels, and developing] specific goals as [each level]/

G: Why and how do you get involved in the Justice Circle?

S: Well . . . what really brought us together was knowing that the Civil Rights Report [NOTE: "The Status of Equal Opportunities for Minorities in Moorhead, Minnesota"] was going to be [released]. We first met in 1999 and there was about 4 or 5 of us from mostly the faith community, we also had [individuals] from Concordia and MSUM who [have been] major players in that as well. [This was an] initiative of [Renewing the Public Chruch. Karen Roles, a minister of the Minnesota Council of Churches. We initially met] in South Moorhead at the Presbyterian church . . . For me, thinking about civil rights, a lot of things went through my mind and mostly, I thought of getting a big headache and [bringing up] a lot of things that I didn't want to [have to] deal with . . . . [I

had an idea what might be] in the report and I [thought] "Why do I want to go through this?" A lot of things, hard issues . . . I guess I saw it as [overwhelming] to make changes . . . I didn't know what to expect and I had no idea what [might] happen in the community so I was really reluctant, I didn't really want to go. [But after much pusihg and pulling,] I went there, anyway. I went to the first meeting and I was sitting the whole way [through] thinking "I don't want to [be here], I don't want to do this" . . . it was so negative [and easier not to go through] . . . It was a personal thing for me, but then again, on the other hand, I thought of my grandchildren and my children and what they [may have to go] through, what I've gone through . . . it continues to happen in the community and I just knew in my heart . . . by the time I went home . . . within two hours I realized that I had to be there . . . not only because of my position but also to [begin to] address [these issues, rather than] continuing to sweep all these issues under the rug and trying to pretend they aren't there . . . to really bring them [out in the open].

Having the [support of the] people that were there, who also wanted [change and were] ready to roll their sleeves up and . . . do something about it that was constructive and so I realized I had to be at the table and I've been there ever since. And although it has gotten [somewhat] easier, it certainly is [still] kind of a little scary for me.

G: How did you originally become involved in writing for the *Forum*?

S: . . . . When the Justice Circle [was founded] when the Civil Rights Report finally was out. . . [An idea of writing came to me when I was involved in] *Northern Plains Voices.* [Their mission is to create] awareness of the Native community [and to] be a voice. Northern Plains Voices [has been] working on a speakers bureau. When people have concerns, questions, whatever that will have a list of people who they can contact and go

and talk about [these issues] because actually, through the years, one thing that has been eminent in the Native community that's being invisible in this community, you know, a lot of [hurt from] the stereotypes and [being] judged by appearance. . . . There's been no place where we could turn to, where people would actually see what we really have to offer the community. When the Justice Circle began having these study circles in the community (there was 50 study circles), I had one study circle with the Native American ministry where we met . . . four times. . . . We met and one of things that came out of it was that "nobody knows we are here," you know, this ministry has been here for years but yet its like we are not legitimate. And so one of the recommendations that came out of that study circle and was that we need to have a voice in the community. And I just felt [strongly] that through my work . . .and my connections with the Justice Circle and all the things that were going on, that [I could do something. I contacted] Lou Zeigler [at *The Forum* and they were very supportive of this idea, as they have recently started a multicultural section.] It was shortly after or about the same time when they announced that they were going to have the Reader's Advisory Board and so then I applied for that. I don't know if you're familiar with that. I sent in my request to [serve] on that board, just to be a voice and be heard. (voice interruption) . . .They told us stories and how [it was covered or not] what was going on [in the news and the community and] behind the scenes, how people told their stories. [I served on the original] board and . . . . [I'll continue to write] once a month.

G: Do you feel that writing a column for the *Forum* gives Native Americans a voice in the community that they didn't have?

S: I think so . . . . A lot of people [have contacted me to tell me that they enjoy reading my column, even the] city commissioners [and social workers]. They read it and they [look forward to reading it.] I get emails from a lot of people . . . thanking me for the stories that I have written and that's it . . .

As with the ministry now, we've been working on the . . .on some different [programs and we feel we have more credibility in the community.] We've been growing . . . even . . . the numbers [for Sunday attendance have been up. I don't take credit for this, but people are becoming more and more aware of the importance of the work I do.] There are a lot of well meaning people around here like within the Justice Circle, there were probably 80 people [on my mailing list], now I have a list of over 300 people in the community or near the community who are interested [in my work] and they want to know what they can do [to help or support justice. There are] a lot of [people who] don't have that day to day opportunity to talk to a person of color. . . . [The Native community is invisible. Many stereotypes prevent people from seeing the many Native American people who are] business [owners] and taxpayers . . . those are the ones you don't see, but rather we are judged by the people who are out on the streets or just . . .[misinformation that's been learned] the media, you know, TV. And so I think it's important and it is making a difference . . . probably not as fast as I would like . . . . There is still a lot more work that needs to be done but I know at least people. . . at least now reaching out and know where to go, you know, use the resources, I have a lot of different organizations [contacting me, such as] Social Services, schools, higher education that are calling [and inviting me] to come in and ask[ing me] how they can be more inclusive of the Native community.

G: You talked earlier about the Civil Rights Report, what was your reaction to it and do you think it was accurate, why or why not?

S: I guess even when I [first] started reading it . . . it was like I knew what would be in there, I could have written up a story of my life and it would be like what was in there, you know. I think it was very accurate as far as you look at like housing, employment, education and the policing. I could tell you stories just from my own life or even my children can and they are still in junior high yet and one in senior high . . . [I feel that] it is very accurate. . . . It seems like you're not touched [or affected] by just one of [these areas, but many], if not all of those areas [mentioned], plus, [there were] more [issues] that weren't even in [the report] that could have been.

G: What are some of the experiences you had or witnessed that deal with race relations in this community?

S: (Silence)

M: Another way of asking it could be, what prejudices have you and your family experienced or seen in the community?

S: Oh, gosh, there are a lot, there are so many stories that I have experienced, my kids, ... and people in the community. I guess the one story that I always [remember, and] it really keeps me going of course thinking of my children, my grandchildren [and their future.] My son, he is in 8th grade right now but when he was in about 2nd or 3rd grade, he was having . . . [difficulty] learning how to read and write because . . . the writing was different [than what I was taught]. I taught him the old way of printing well then they [the schools] ended up changing a lot of these letters so he was really confused right there and it made it difficult for him to learn to read and so, anyway, he went to the library one

day at school and he came back with this book about Native Americans . . . He was proud that he went and picked this out and . . . brought it home . . . . We sat down on the couch to read it and I . . . opened it up and in the inside it showed a picture of the Native American villagers, a tepee, some horses and fire and all this stuff. And there was . . . a rack of meat that was sitting out to dry and there was this man crouched down behind one tepee and a little boy on the other one crouched down and the caption under it [read] "Uncle so and so was teaching his nephew how to steal meat" and, you know, you open it up and the very back of it again showed the same thing and [it teaches the kids reading it that all] Indians must steal . . . it was really negative and I opened it up and started looking . . . about the 3rd chapter there was some more things there were really degrading . . . . We both just sat there [and cried]. I felt so bad for him because he was so proud of this book that . . . he [picked out and] wanted to read . . . . I went to the librarian and told her about this and she said that [in the years prior], people have been . . . there [to] go through the [books]. A while back, maybe fifteen years ago, they supposedly went through [the book shelves],but there's still stuff out there that's so degrading . . . the things that my kids are learning supposedly about them[selves] but it is so inaccurate, you know, it just continues to portray any Native American [in a negative light, and it has a negative impact on Native American kids.

If you look at how many [Native American] kids are graduating, the kids of color, you know, they just aren't graduating . . . you find [them] in the jails, you can find them . . . in . . . prisons, even. You know, I [recently went] to prisons and it's a [shame] . . . I know [a lot of them, or their] mothers . . . . Their kids are being taken away . . . a lot of negative things are going on, [and when] a person [who is put down keeps] getting [put]

down and down . . . . [it's hard to find] a way to get up again. [This is] what gives [me the] motivation to do [my work . . . to keep working towards changing attitudes.] Maybe I won't even see a change in my lifetime but if I can somehow impact people [what impact they have had on] my son [the] struggles [that continue. I feel this particular incident had a negative] impact on his education . . . I don't know, maybe by the time, . . . my grandchildren grow up there will be some changes made . . . [we] still [have a long way to go. When] the Civil Rights Report came out, right away [everyone] wanted to . . . hop on all the statistics and . . . whether or not it was 20 or 30 [percent] . . .whatever the difference [is] . . . . We can't get off [track so much that] we don't see what is happening. . . that's the awareness [piece, that's what I do to help us stay on track, to look at the issues.]

M: Do you think part could be like for education, there isn't a lot of teachers of color?

S: . . . There are a lot good resources. There's a lot of educated people out there who are Native American, you know, and it is just, you know, having to take the extra [mile to find] funding, resources whatever [it takes]. . . . There's [an] extra effort to reach[ing] out . . . without any names or specifics, I know that there are a lot of things that continue to be taught through organizations that . . . have a negative impact on the kids and they continue to teach these things to the kids . . . there are so many untapped resources], tribes and reservations: there are 11 in Minnesota and I think there are like 7 in North Dakota right with South Dakota . . . You look around and there is all sorts of resources here but people are just not reaching out or not making, [and] forming those relationships that could be made.

G: Do you think that through your contacts that you made that the problems that Native Americans face are in any way different than other minorities in the Fargo-Moorhead area? Or are there a lot of similarities?

S: There are more similarities I think. . . . . W hen I was having study circles . . . I had a couple of [people who are] Somalian . . . they're [being brought] here but [now that] they are [here they are] feeling isolated . . . That is a shame for anybody to be feeling, . . . and that is the same thing that I see . . . a lot of people that I know who out on the streets . . .they are just feeling so . . . forgotten and . . . a lot of these people . . . have so many gifts and talents . . . and the people won't even give them a chance to walk through the door . . . you can't even get a job . . . if you get a job then you're not even paid minimum wage or even an opportunity to see what [you are capable of] . . . . How can we get out of that? And that is what a lot people of color are seeing . . . my kid walking into the mall and being followed around or even being told you can't be in here, I mean there is a lot of that going [on] and people just don't realize [it]. A lot of [people do] realize [it and] are very [vocal about discriminating and saying hurtful racist remarks].

G: Do you believe relations have improved at all since the Civil Rights Report came out?

S: . . .One of the ministries . . . of the Minnesota Council of Churches, MCARI, provides . . . anti-racism training and . . . I can't say that is because of the . . . Civil Rights Report, but I know that the YWCA for instance, has been going through organizational changes, [as is] TOCAR [NOTE: Stands for Training Our Campuses Against Racism, an initiative of MSUM, NDSU, Concordia, and Northwest Tech]. Seeing what they are doing and attempting to do [and] implementing . . . for instance, in Moorhead now . . . there are . . . CATS . . . community action teams that have [been formed as a result] of the study

circles [where people are becoming informed and aware of racism and discrimination in our city] . . . . I think right now there are a lot of opportunities including anti-racism training . . . I think that is the first step . . . in order for any organization or institution to look at themselves they have to be able to recognize what is going on and to . . . to be able to talk about things and see what it is otherwise you don't see it. In fact, I don't know, one more thing pertaining to this is like TOCAR . . . on April 1, when the Human Rights brought the recommendations to Moorhead, to the City of Moorhead . . .the Mayor had an official proclamation and I don't know if you are familiar with that (hands us a copy) and that's is because of the work of the Justice Circle and the organizing that we had done. [On March 23, 2002,] Diane Wray Williams and [I returned from] San Diego [after receiving] an award out there [on behalf of the Justice Circle. NOTES ADDED TO TRANSCRIPT: The award was for Best Practice in Social Work and Social Services in the category of community organizing. So, there is more awareness because of the release of the report, but we are only beginning. There is a lot of work that needs to be done to improve relations on all levels.

M: Is that the national recognition that you mentioned?

S: Yes. So there are good things coming out of it . . . . The public schools in Moorhead [have written] a report of how many people of color they have employ . . . . Anti-racism training . . is [really an] important first step that needs to be done in any organization. TOCAR [is working hard to be inclusive], that it is just awesome, what they are doing between the campuses . . . . Not until you do that will you be able to begin to move forward . . . to . . . make a difference . . . . The Justice Circle [has] been working [hard]and organizing [to] make a good thing come out of the Civil Rights Report. . . .

Although [there was] a lot of negative stuff . . . when the report was released, the day it was released [on] January 31, we had a community that was . . there waiting, I think there was 250-300 people that were . . . waiting for the Minnesota Advisory to come and actually hand the report out and there has never been a community that's been . . waiting for the report . . . . The police department was there, education, [ADDED: faith community and city leaders]. everybody was . . . waiting for it. . . . I . . . spoke at that time too, telling [people] that we need to look at this [together] and not to be defensive . . . [We need to] sit down and talk about what was in the report . . . do it in a [respectful] way . . . look at the issues and, you know, find solutions together as a community. [ADDED: and as an All-American city].

G: What are some ideas that you have for the goals that the community should try to achieve when it comes to race relations?

S: Some of the goals, I guess, is to be able to look at themselves . . . because really you can't make a change until you . . have . . healing . . . within yourself . . .whether you are an [ADDED: individual]. organization or a school . . . you really have to evaluate where you're at . . . work to make those changes [ADDED: and educate yourself as a community.] First the anti-racism training and then be able, um, and I'm not sure, you know, for instance, I'm on this board now for the YMCA the anti-racism training (inaudible sentence) and, I guess, (inaudible word), you know, I think it is just awesome what they are doing as well in order to do that, they've been through the anti-racism training. . . . . I think that . . . it is a step in the right direction and I don't know what way to go with . . .but hopefully it will be a place where people of color or [minorities] would be able to come and feel that they are being supported rather than . . . feeling like they are

left outside . . . . . In order to fit in we have to somehow . . . meet those expectations . . . . People just judge on what they see . . . [there] is fear, I think, of . . . not knowing and understanding . . .to be able to have, to be able to learn from us . . . .You can learn a lot from [this diverse community].

M: Is there progress on the housing units that are proposed to go up in Moorhead or is it something they are just talking about doing?

S: Well, I know that the city did, I think it was in March, they approved like 30-40 units in Moorhead and on April 1, I believe they did approve another one and I know that's not without controversy . . . [We need to listen to our] heart[s] . . . . I was at the March [city] meeting when they were talking about . . . housing . . . I know . . . people who are out in the street . . . like the lady that they found under the bridge because she couldn't get housing . . . . It seems like that was just another thing . . . nobody really seemed to mind having somebody under the bridge but anyway this man that was standing up and talking against the housing [proposal], he didn't want it in [his] neighborhood. . . this man that stood up at the City Commissioner's meeting and he had said that he didn't think this housing should go up because, how did he put it, that it wouldn't fit with his . . . neighborhood . . . the apartment would really throw it off and ruin the whole thing . . . He had said that . . .people are bringing up all these emotional stories or bringing all these emotions . . . but . . . he just couldn't grasp the idea . . . because to him it was all . . . his property, you know, and it is a shame to see that people have to put that [property, belongings] ahead of human beings.

M: Where are they proposing to put the apartments?

S: Well, those ones were up on the north side, I don't remember what street but I think they approved some more, I'm not real sure, on the south side, I'm not real sure.

M: I've taken an American Indian class and I know some of the cultures and traditions and I was wondering if you yourself practice any here in the Fargo-Moorhead area or do you know others who do that instead of giving into the culture here?

S: Well, you know it is interesting that, you know, even in the meaning of spirituality, it was outlawed until 1978, you know, so you couldn't even practice that and as a result of that a lot of it was lost, you know, but then there are those who have held onto it and, you know, stayed with and taught that, um, I don't think locally there are any, um, like sweat lodges or anything like that if that is what you are wondering. Now, so usually you have to go probably at least 70 miles, you know, to go and be a part of that. And it is something that I think a lot of people are looking for that . . . for their identity but. . . in the Native community . . . there's a lot of people who are . . . traditional . . . and [there are] Native Americans who are Christian and only Christian and anything else is frowned on, you know, and so what we're seeing for instance at this ministry is that how do you find a balance in that, you know, for like myself . . . if I was forced to choose, I don't know how [to] do that . . ..

G: I remember being here in Fargo when the Civil Rights Report came out and they talked about the arrest records of minorities versus whites and versus community . . . If you look at the number of arrests and the arrests that come from kids from poverty backgrounds, they are very similar, he thought they would be very similar between whites and minorities, but unfortunately in the Fargo-Moorhead area a lot more minorities live in poverty than that same percentage of whites. Has there been any

studies to show that maybe the issue isn't the arrests but unfortunately more minorities live in poverty and as poverty kids are more likely to commit crime or anything like that, instead of just being about the arrest records but more the cause?

S: I don't know . . if there has been a study like that . . I know there were some particular questions about the numbers and percentages and . . . I know there is a lot of information that . . is very clear from the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council . . . . Thirty eight percent of Indians live below the poverty level, more than twice the number of average U.S. citizens, and you can look on any of the reservations and you'll get the same thing. . . . People come here to the urban [setting, ADDED: hoping to better themselves,] . . . it turns out that you can't earn a living wage or housing, education and it just. . . Like with the alternative school, . . people are feeling like that is what they are using as a place just to shuffle the kids off . . . . That's really a question . . .it's cause for a little bit of controversy. 68 percent of Indian males and 13 percent of Indian females 16 and over are

[working on] here at the ministry. We have an All Nations Youth Group that we've been working on. We have over 12. . .26 people who are [on the] planning committee, most of them Native American, Native American role models, and [we are] planning . . . a [holistic] program that is led by Native Americans [dealing with] the whole person . . .

G: When I grew up, I went to school with a lot of Native Americans . . and their parents, they were actually second generation kids, does the Justice Circle or any of your groups do things education, out reach type things where you'll go into classrooms with elementary kids or junior high kids with artifacts or stuff like that and show them but, not the stereotype show, this is Mr. So and So, Mrs. So and So, they are in this job and try to have a positive outlook at the education level?

S: Yes. I know I have before. I used to go like to Casselton when I was invited, I would always go out . . . I know a lot of people who have done that . . . . A lot of things being taught that shouldn't be, you know, even as far as that goes I . . . went to . . . some of the colleges when I [was] invited . . and talked about things yet again I can't talk about a lot of things simply because I don't have that right, you know, it's just part of the culture where you respect the people that do have that right . . . [ADDED: People have gotten upset because they feel they are obligated to know the answers to all questions or demands.]

M: Is there anything else you want to mention about like youth groups or the Justice Circle or anything we haven't covered?

S: Um, I guess, just, um, I didn't mention this part but I've been a part of some of the National Issues Forums that have been out here and I think that's a really important piece of our people who need to come together and talk about these issues . . . because

otherwise . . . they will just continue to be swept away and we need to know to have people involved who are [in positions to make] positive [changes] . . . . We have to be sure that we're including the people of color . . . because a lot of the times people won't come forward, for instance, with the police department . . . people won't come forward because they are feeling that they will be retaliated or asked a stupid question . . . so somehow we need to give them . . . support each other that way. . . support . . . victims . . . so that people can come forward and . . .start talking about these things.

It takes a community to raise a child, you know, it's the kids that get confused, but what we're focusing on is how are we going to turn these things around and for instance, health issues, you know, that's such a major issue in the Native community. So many of us are diabetic, I just found out last month that I'm borderline diabetic so know I gotta start watching what I eat and everything, but I mean you go to the reservations and it's, I'm alarmed by, for instance I went to a funeral of a very good friend of mine last fall and there was hardly any elders there. This whole community room was filled with people—her family, she had a humongous family, the community was all there, but I think, I couldn't even count on one hand, I mean there were just three to five elderly with gray hair . . . so all the Native American community is telling me that I am old, you know, there were very few that were elderly and if they were, they had limbs missing from diabetes . . . if you look at. . .you have to look at the whole picture . . .

I just had a person who just came here over Easter actually and his name is Brain Eaglehelper and his wife Jeanna [NOTE: from Nashville, TN]. He is in a wheelchair and he has a guide dog but they're traveling across the United States. They're zigzagging from Alaska all the way to the White House and they were suppose to start this January

but after September 11, they had to put it off a year so now they're out building support for what they're doing. What they are doing is trying to build awareness across the country of the needs of people with disabilities . . . he has his chair and he said his chair costs. . . he had. . .I think it was . . . $10,000, I don't even know how much, $10,000 for a chair but he said there are so many people on reservations with disabilities and they can't go out of their house because there is only dirt roads and their wheelchairs were not made for that. They were made for sidewalks . . . so they are held hostage in their own homes or they don't even have a wheelchair . . and there are no ramps. The government . . came up with the reservations to begin with . . . to exterminate Native Americans, well, you know, laws have changed, a lot of things have changed, but it seems like still there is a lot of mentality that has not changed. And it will take a while before we get to that, to really be able to . . open peoples eyes up to where they just don't go and visit the reservation and leave again but really [move people] to do something . . . . We are bringing in all kinds of refugees and doing all this wonderful work, but we need to look in our own backyard because there is so much not even being mentioned. . . . I think [there] is an important opportunity that [now] allows us [ADDED: to speak up and get involved], so that when people are concerned . . .asking what can we do, but[ADDED: it is important] to do it in a way that is respectful . . . "We don't want a hand out, we want a hand up" . . . that's the difference . . . [we need to change the] mentality . . . to be able to [make] change[s] [to] open new doors [ADDED: of communication]--that's what we need to do.