

Maya Miller and Sheri Rice interview
July 27, 2003 (KOH radio)

(Background music is "I'm a woman")

Sheri: Good afternoon. This is Sheri Rice and welcome to the Sheri Rice Hour. Today we continue with our weekly topic of "People who give their all; volunteers, organizations who give of themselves, their time, their energy, and many times their money and their commitment, and their passion to a cause and to our community. And today, my guest encompasses all of these attributes. She is a long-time activist for not only women's issues, but quality of life issues for all people. She owns a home in Washoe Valley called Washoe Pines Ranch that she donates as a forum for many political and life issues. She was a primary person in the Nevada Choice Campaign in 1989, and during the Gulf War, she was included in a contingent of women who went across the desert to break the embargo to take supplies to the women and children. Her generosity, integrity, and commitment to Nevada, and to the world, has been an inspiration to many of us. Please join me in welcoming Maya Miller. Good afternoon, Maya.

Good afternoon (chuckle). What a welcome!

I stayed up all night writing that for you. I am just thrilled to have you here. And I think that many of my listeners are very knowledgeable about some of the things that you've done for Nevada. But, boy, I just wanta spend this hour talking about your life, and what you've done for our community, Nevada, what have been your role models in your life, what some of your passions have been, and what you want to do still further with your life. How long have you lived in Nevada, Maya?

Since 1945, the end of World War II. That's 40 – almost 50 years ago.

It is, isn't it? How come you settled in Nevada?

Well, we were just refugees from Southern California, like most Nevadans (chuckles). And my husband had gotten a job at the State Museum in Carson City. And it was a Sunday morning, we went across the street and heard the news of Pearl Harbor. So then he went off to the wars in the Navy for three years and I kind of roamed around after him. But always knowing that we were coming back to Nevada, to this job. And so we came and there was no housing at all, so we lived in a motel for four mortal months, looking for a place to live, and finally found the ranch that you spoke about in Washoe Valley.

This was in Reno, where the State Museum was.

What do love about Nevada?

Well, I love the climate first of all. It just is so incredible to have weather. For anyone who was brought up in Southern California, to have snow, and clear days, and to have the

amount of sun that we have, makes it a wonderful place to live. I also like the sparcity of population, and love the people. It seems to me it has always attracted unindividualists.

Yes, it has, hasn't it? Let's talk about when you became active in Nevada in the sense of different political causes, and activism for women and children, and different things. Back in 1945, would you have considered yourself then as an activis around certain issues?

No, no. In 1945, what I was intent to do was to get a job, and did, almost right away, because the English Department at the University was sor of sweeping up the streets for somebody to teach English (chuckles) – there were so many GIs coming back. And I had four classes of 25 each, and had a hundred papers, most of them out of the GI experience, which was a pretty interesting start to teaching. But the University was quite something else then. We taught in a Quonset hut that was down on the lower edge of the property, but that was fun.

When did you find yourself getting involved in activism?

Well, actually, we left to get our PhDs at Stanford after three years of being here. So in the early 50s we were in Long Beach, where we went for the first job my husband had after he got his Phd. I of course, decided to have children, belatedly at that point, and forewent the PhD, but had the children instead in Long Beach. Then it wasn't until 1957 or more that we came back to the Ranch. And it was after that that I became really involved in active politicking. I'd been down in Long Beach – there had been a mile-long beach that was right in front of our house that was threatened by yachtsmen who wanted a sea wall instead of a beach where kids could play – a seawall where yachts could be tied up. And I found myself – a winter when my husband was in the Antarctic – I found myself engaged in trying to fight that seawall. And then when he came back, he asked if I wanted to spend my life on this one mile of beach, or could we move back to Nevada? We had kept our home there and rented it in the winters. So we decided to come back, but I had this legacy then of having “fought city hall,” and I found that pretty stimulating (laughs). And so when we got back here, my husband was a biologist and was very interested in conservation, and we were engaged in taking a good look at Lake Tahoe and trying to preserve some of it. And so I began to do the lobbying part of that, of the Lake Tahoe Park, while my husband was doing some of the scientific stuff, and that really got me started in politics.

Back when you started with this mile-long stretch of beach in Long Beach, were you able to save it?

Yes yes, uh-huh. It was. I don't know that I was able to save it, but some of the people – we really managed to keep it up.

So it gave you a sense of accomplishment.

Well, it wasn't accomplished by the time I left, but the fun of the fight was there.

(laughs) I like that – the fun of the fight! Well, it certainly led you on to many many other things. Let me ask you about your ranch. Can you tell me a little bit about what you love about it – I know it's a very special place for you – and about Foresta.

Well, it's a choice part of Nevada, I think. It's against the hills and is an old – hundred year old – apple orchard that was planted by Mormons when they lived in that valley. And then it looks across the Lake, which once more is a lake – Washoe Lake – to the Virginia Hills, which are desert. In the early 60s we bought the ranch that is called Washoe Pines Ranch. That was an old divorce ranch, one of the earliest of the divorce ranches, and had had many memorable people from the East and from Hollywood. And when we bought that, we make it into an ecology camp, because my husband and I were not really equipped to run a divorce ranch! (laughs)

But the opportunities that you have in this country, having a range of Desolation Valley, the high granitic country up there, all the way through these forest lands, down through the meadows and the farmlands and over into the desert, means that you have at least 5 different ecological areas. And it seemed to us that the children, the sons and daughters of the kinds of people who had come to our next-door divorce ranch, would like to come to a sort of ecology camp that would teach them a little bit – and more than marshmallows.

Oh, that's fascinating, Maya. It's time to take a break. (Break) Hi, welcome back to the Sheri Rice Hour. Today my guest encompasses so many of the attributes and so many qualities, she is a woman of generosity, integrity, and a commitment to Nevada and the world. That is Maya Miller. Maya, we were laughing at the break. There is so much to cover here, and I want to get to all of it. I wanted to give you some quotes from some people who you have been very very important in their life, and I did call up a few of these people. Joni Kaiser, director of the Committee to Aid Abused Women, said, "You are an inspiration to all women in Nevada, by showing them what it is to be an activist, an to promote sisterhood for all women." Joanie says that you are a "personal and professional mentor to her."

Oh, (laughs) how nice.

I'm sorry, you'll have to endure it. What has been the momentum behind your giving of yourself to so many different areas in Nevada. And we haven't even started on the women's issues and the different organizations, such as the Nevada Women's Fund, and of course Committee to Aid Abused Women, and different things that you have put financial aid into, and also your time and support. What is it that keeps you going, Maya?

(laughs) Well, I like it better than playing bridge! (laughs) A friend of mine once said, "Why do you go on? I mean will it do any good?" you know. And I don't know whether it does any good. But all I know is that I like doing it. I like engaging in activities, particularly ones that seem to me on the forefront, the ones that are starting up. And I'm

not very good at just keeping on with an organization. But I love the beginnings, especially.

Un-huh. The beginning when it's at that neophyte stage – when they're trying to make a difference and make something happen?

Yes, and when not everybody understands why its needed, for instance. That with CAAW, when they first started, and had a little room upstairs at Greenbrae, and people hadn't yet fully understood how important the cause against domestic violence was. It was really interesting to see how that broke through into people's consciousness.

Let's take a phone call. Pam, you're on the air.

Caller: Yeah, I'd like to ask Maya Miller about Barbara Vucanovich. *I'd really like to see her unseated, and I'd like to know, with Maya's political savvy, who she could possibly see that could unseat Barbara, and how could it be accomplished?*

(chuckles) Ooooh well

Sheri: Pam put you on the spot a little bit there, Maya!

(laughs) I don't know how. One of the things that has interested me is how tuned into getting women into positions like Barbara' the Republicans have been. And as a Democrat, I have felt bad that the powers that be haven't say, put up a woman, to be Governor, or for Congress in a powerful position. The last one was Mary Gojack, who ran for Congress, and I can't think of anybody right now that is up for running for Congress. But it's important. Maybe we could get Jan Evans to?

Caller: Oohhh!

Sheri: You like that, Pam?

Caller: That's an interesting idea. I appreciate Maya's input, thank you.

Sheri: Obviously, Pam knows about you running for the State Senate against Harry Reid in 1974.

Maya: Well, it was for the United States Senate, not the State Senate. And it was an occasion when Alan Bible was retiring, and so it was an open seat. And that's what women have to really rely on very largely in running, is the opportunity that a seat that doesn't have an incumbent gives. And it was a very exciting experience. It was one that I probably – nobody ought to try to do the way I did. I had not run for anything – for dogcatcher – and yet we knew that women needed to be in the United States Senate. There was not one woman in the Senate that year! And that was the kind of challenge. We tried to find somebody from Las Vegas, because we knew that's where the population was, but there wasn't a woman who was able to. And Nancy Gomes, and

some others, kept encouraging me, and maybe with a lot of folly, I did. But we made a good enough record so that it wasn't just an idle performance.

So it was a worthwhile experience for you?

Yes, we got 38% of the vote.

For goodness sakes! What does it take to run that major of a campaign, Maya?

Well it took lots less money than it does now. I think altogether it cost less than \$100,000. But we did a lot with volunteers – we had a lot of volunteer young people, a lot of women from the very politically savvy black West Side of Las Vegas were very active.

So it was a real grassroots effort.

It was grassroots and it was fun. And we had a very good, very savvy manager named Ken Bode, who used to work for NBC as a political.

Well it sounds like it was a fascinating experience. [station break]

“Maya Miller is one of those very special people who I think has been an inspiration to everyone particularly women the last 25, 30 years. She's clearly made a difference – all the causes that she's had with the women's movement, the environment. I mean she's certainly been at the head of the parade and given her time, money, her sweat equaty whatever you want to call it she's certainly been there and I think that hers is a life that has made a difference.”

And that was our attorney general Frankie Sue del Papa. Let's go to a phone call. Jan, you've been holding awhile – do you have a question or comment?

Jan: Yes, I wanted to ask Maya what she thought about the Governor's race coming up?

Sheri: Good Question – Maya?

(chuckle) Well, I'm thrilled that Jan Jones is running. It's just 20 years after I ran for the United States Senate, and I think that it's exciting that there is a woman, and one who is so prepared now, running for the Governor's race. An, in essence really, challenging the “old boys” of the Democratic Party of Nevada. And that, I think, is what's the most important. It doesn't occur to them to find a good woman to run for one thing or another, but it has to be done this way. And I think she's a great candidate.

Jan, what do you think of the governor's race.

Jan: Oh, I agree with Maya a hundred percent!

Maya, let's turn to some issues that are important to you. Today in your life, what issues are of vital interest to you?

Well, welfare reform is the overriding passion of my life, and has been now for 20 years, since I began to realize what it was. And in Nevada, it is the 11,000 women who take care of around 25,000 children. And why that should be something we're ashamed of, that we don't like, that we try to cheat from, that we take money away from, and that we punish with legislation, I don't know. And I keep trying to figure out how we can present the subject so that it's a positive subject. I mean, here are these women taking care of these children! Isn't that a good thing to do? And isn't that a contribution to the Gross National Product? The fact that we have failed to factor in childcare and housework into the Gross National Product is one of the problems of our welfare system. It's that we look at it as something we're beneficent about, whereas really, these women are doing a service for the future.

What would you like to see happen, Maya, with this issue?

Well, I'd like to see a better system. First of all, they need a decent underpinning. The safety net for the elderly, the disabled for the other people that we feel it's important to undergird, is far nearer the actual need. The State establishes a need – what they call the standard of basic need, with no frills, for welfare women. And for them they say, “we will give only 80% of that need. So whatever we establish and know that they need, we still will give them only 80%. That's not true for these other categories. And so I'd like a decent level. But then I think the whole question of jobs is important to look at creatively, and with a real understanding of what it takes. Because I don't know whether you know what the job level is – for maids and for retail sales people tends to be around \$5.00 an hour. It's much lower here than it is in Las Vegas because of the unions, but that is not enough for a woman with two children. To get to the poverty level, you would have to have a seven dollar and a half job to start with to be at Poverty. And a lot of those jobs are part-time. They're jobs where you're called in in the morning, and you're laid off when the season is slow. So actually, what's happened with the building of every new casino-hotel, there's a rise in the ADC rolls (Aid to Dependent Children, or Welfare). And that's because so many of the jobs they tout, are jobs which are contingency, as they call them, part-time jobs.

Project C brings up a whole other issue about what we're going to do with these people working at \$5 an hour and how they support families.

The first welfare woman who came up from Las Vegas who showed me what it was like, and what the economics of it was, was a woman named Essie Henderson, who had come from an abusing husband in Texas with her four children. She worked as a maid in one of the hotels. She was so good that when the season came along, and they had to ay her off as she was among the last hired, her housekeeper told her about welfare. She didn't know about it. So that gives you the clue that the welfare system – the middle class taxpayer – is undergirding the casino-hotel, which has this ability to let go of people when it's convenient.

Well, let me ask you Maya, in your lifetime as a woman, how have you seen things change for women? Do you think that we've come a long way? Where do you think we are today. And where would you like to see us go?

I think we've come a long way with professional women. There are so many more lawyers now, and doctors and professional people, that it's exciting. And there are even many more people who are willing to do things like run for governor. There are 24 states, I think, where a woman is running for governor. That's exciting. And we've done well with things like domestic violence, an understanding of that. But the place where I think we haven't addressed ourselves is poverty in America. And the name of poverty is women who stay and take care of children.

Uh-huh. Women and children. That is the poverty level that exists here.

And over the last 10 years, it has not gotten better. I mean it has gotten materially worse. The rich have gotten richer. And the poor have gotten poorer. The top 1% of the wealthiest people have seen their wealth rise 136%, where the bottom 10% have dropped 20%.

[Sheri gushes and does station ID]

I have another quote for you Maya. This is from Bob Fulkerson. He's no longer director of Citizen Alert but he certainly was for years. He says:

"Maya has given her all for the protection of the land the future of Nevada's lakes, Lake Tahoe and Pyramid Lake especially. Maya has been at the forefront of environmental issues, with her emotional, physical and financial support." To Bob, Maya's friendship has meant, "being blessed with a source of support, political and personal." Maya has been a "mentor and role model" for Bob Fulkerson. How nice.

Maya laughs: Will, like having your obituary!

It is not! It's like a roast. It's one of those things. What has influenced your life the greatest Maya?

Well, you know, that goes back so far, and I don't want to go back into my ancestors! But a general inquiring and desire to understand something outside my own immediate ken, I think, was influential in some of the more dramatic parts of my life. Because we lived in this fairly remote spot, and if you're middle class, you're remote. You can live and die and not really know poverty, for instance.

And during the 60s – I think that for anybody who lived through the 60s, they have to be very important years. For me, my way of getting out of where I was came with the League of Women Voters, which is a very moderate organization. But it happened to be studying Equal Opportunity in Employment and Education. And a woman named Nancy Gomes, who is familiar to many northern Nevadans, was interested in studying it with

me, and we put out a paper, and then she began introducing me. For instance, she took me to the Children's Mental Health Wing at the hospital where she worked, and introduced me to them. She kept me introduced and connected with the Black Community of Northern Nevada, And then ultimately, through her and through the League, I got connected with the Black Community of women in Southern Nevada, who in 1971, did a march on the Las Vegas Strip, which was more important, I think, than they were given credit for. Ruby Duncan, who started it and who was one of the women who had an influence in my life, was a Black woman from Louisiana, from Talula, who had only gone to the fourth grade. Who chopped Johnson grass as a child, and then came to Las Vegas and worked as a maid in one of the entertainer's homes, and then ultimately, became acquainted with the Welfare system, and had enough spunk so that she connected with the National Welfare Rights Organization. And that was very important in my life. Nancy Gomes also connected me with a little demonstration that a group of women and children and ministers – Black ministers – were having for the 1970 Census, when they had not hired a Black woman who was fully qualified and should have been hired. And they were picketing for that purpose. And Nancy called and asked if I would be willing to come for the League of Women Voters and picket and I said, "Sure," and so did. And that action, ultimately ended in some very strong confrontation. The police came it's amazing how fearsome three or four ministers and women – old women – and little children can be! (chuckle)

But it did end in the police moving in and one young policeman throttling a Black student from the University, my interceding in that, and our all three landing in jail. That was informative to me (laughter)

Sheri: When you look back over your life, Maya, and we can look back at all the accomplishments you have done. Do you look back on your life knowing it has been as exciting as it seems to have been?

Maya: Well, not very often does that seem (laughs) to be the case. Every once in awhile, I get interested in thinking about how fun it's been, just out of curiosity, to have found new worlds. I began going down to Nicaragua when I realized that they were doing what we had done in Vietnam. And that, then became a whole other world that I got acquainted with. And that was – it's fun to think about doing something that opens up a section that you haven't known about. That there are lots and lots of them, I don't know.

Sheri: Let me read another quote before we run out of time, or else Maggie's gonna get mad at me. Maggie Tracy, who I know was very active in the 1992 Campaign for Choice. She says,

"There are so many things that describe Maya." Maggie says that you "have made a remarkable contribution to the world and to Nevada." Maggie holds you responsible for grassroots activism. You have allowed her to see all the possibilities that exist for women, and, specifically, Maggie says that "you opened doors to her heart and her soul to see herself as a woman and to see her potential. Your patience and perseverance in the

wake of adversity has been an inspiration to her.” The statement “Just do it!” she says, describes you.

What is your focus today, and what more would you like to accomplish in your life? Where are you going to go in the next year, Maya?

(Laughs) Well, I want to get lots more women elected to the Nevada State Legislature, and I would like us to get some kind of realigned picture of what Welfare in this country is. What we want to do to give women an opportunity to work in jobs that are decent enough so that they can be creative, as well as take care of children. Just think that – the challenge there eludes me, and I’m tantalized by what it would take to have broadspread understanding.

Sheri: I can see the twinkle in your eyes when Maya takes on a new challenge. I can see that that’s what peaks your interest, is the challenge, it sounds like.

Yeah, sure. (chuckle)

It’s the challenge of making things happen. Do you feel that, obviously you must feel as an individual – that the things that we do make a difference.

Maya: Well, of course! Yes I think you can make a difference. And if I didn’t think that I would just, sit down (laughs) and think long thoughts.

Sheri (laughs): That’s right. Well, Maya, I want to thank you for this hour – I wish we’d had three. So will you come back again sometime and talk some more?

Thank you. Yes!

Well, thank you for being my guest. And I want to personally thank you for all that you have done for not only Washoe County, but for the world. I admire and respect you tremendously.

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