

# WOMEN'S INFORMATION SERVICE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## Transcript of interview with Stella Hellander

**Interviewee: Stella Hellander**

**Interviewer: Ruth Munro**

**Date: October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

**[00:00:01]**

This is an interview with Stella Hellander conducted by Ruth Munro on Friday the 6th October 2017 at the State Library of South Australia. The interview is being conducted as part of the Women's Information Service history project. Also present at the interview is Liz Ahern who is operating the recording equipment. In the interview the Women's Information Service and its earlier name of Women's Information Switchboard will be referred to by the acronym WIS.

**MUNRO:** Now I'll begin the interview by asking for some personal information. Could you give me your name and a brief overview of when and where you were born and grew up?

**HELLANDER:** My name is Stella Hellander, I was born as Stella Kourtidis in a little village in the northern part of Greece called Macedonia, in Greek, Macedonia. And I lived there until I was sixteen, when I emigrated with my parents and my two brothers to Australia. In December nineteen sixty-five.

**MUNRO:** Right, and I understand that you began at the Women's Switchboard as a volunteer. When did you start working as a volunteer and where was WIS located then?

**HELLANDER:** I started in nineteen eighty nine, it was requested that by the then worker, Sophie Alexiou, or Sophie Rose as she's known now, she asked, she was impressed with my Greek language skills, at the time I was

an interpreter and translator, I had studied at the SACAE, South Australian College of Advanced Education and I had a Bachelor of Arts in Interpreting and Translating Greek and English. And she asked me to volunteer to do the radio program, which I did for twelve months.

**MUNRO:** Can you tell us more about the radio program? Was it conducted in any other language?

**HELLANDER:** My understanding is that at the time it was also conducted in Italian.

**MUNRO:** And, and how, how often did you have a radio program? And how long was each program?

**HELLANDER:** Ok, it was half hour radio program at 5EBI FM, which was the multilingual radio station in Byron Place in the city. And I was to prepare the program during my time, my working. When I was a volunteer, I prepared the program and presented it, for that half hour every Friday afternoon at three thirty [pm], between three thirty [pm] and four [pm] and it was to be an informative program broken with, broken up with a bit of music to break up the talk.

**MUNRO:** So, was it actual talk back radio, did the women get the chance to ask questions?

**HELLANDER:** It wasn't talk back at the time, I don't think there was the facility, but people were able to ring and leave telephone numbers, or leave questions and then, when I subsequently worked as an information officer at WIS in nineteen ninety, I was able to call them back and clarify questions or seek from them topics they would like me to conduct the program in.

**MUNRO:** Right, was it mostly on health issues or was it a general talkback?

**HELLENDAR:** When I started, it was basically health issues. The programs were prepared between WIS and Women's Health and the focus was on health issues. But what I found as time went that there were basically translated information that we used to read out and very often women weren't really clear what we were talking about so as time went I started changing them and try to make them more like radio talk.

**MUNRO:** In your own words rather than...

**HELLANDER:** In more plain language...

**MUNRO:** Yes

**HELLANDER:** Less dense and also chose topics from responses or from queries that women used to ring WIS about, but this happened more when I started working there as an Information Officer...

**MUNRO:** Later, right...

**HELLANDER:** ...and I was employed as the Greek worker therefore I had a lot of Greek women ringing...

**MUNRO:** Right, yes, yes...

**HELLANDER:** ...and then I had a better grasp of the topics they had queries about.

**MUNRO:** And how important was the radio program to the Greek women? And what type of women listened? Were they all ages, or newly arrived migrants, or any specific types listeners?

**[00:05:13]**

**HELLANDER:** At the time there weren't hardly any new arrivals, cause were talking about the 'nineties, the majority of them came in the 'fifties –sixties and some in up to mid 'seventies. But, it was elderly women isolated women, women who sometimes were in domestic violence, in family violence, in controlling situations, so, it was a very important outlet for

them. As they described to me obviously, it's, it's from their responses, their calls.

**MUNRO:** Yes, it would have been very important to them. Who was the manager of WIS at that time?

**HELLANDER:** When I started, so then I went...

**MUNRO:** That was...

**HELLANDER:** ...we'll talk about when I started working there...

**MUNRO:** Oh, okay...

**HELLANDER:** ...the manager when I worked there was Linda Matthews.

**MUNRO:** Right, and so after you'd been a volunteer you became a member of the paid staff. Can you tell us how this came about? That you were on the paid staff?

**HELLANDER:** Sophie Alexiou, Sophie Rose got seconded elsewhere and the position became vacant, there were only able to publicise it within the Public Service, I wasn't a Public Servant, I was a freelance interpreter, translator, so the person that got the position decided that she wasn't able to do the radio program, so Linda Matthews invited me, to ask me to do the radio program, not a volunteer basis, which was more ad hoc, but to actually be responsible to prepare and produce the program. With pay and I did and then very shortly afterwards, the paid worker decided to leave and having met me, Linda Matthews really wanted me to do the job so she found a way to employ me for a very short period of time, which was then extended and extended and extended and I ended up being at WIS for six and half years.

**MUNRO:** And what...

**HELLANDER:** ...as a paid staff.

**MUNRO:** ...what was your position there, the job title?

**HELLANDER:** Information Officer. I think we were called Information and Support Officer, but that's what we did.

**MUNRO:** Right, and, and what can you tell me about the work you did in this position? Your responsibilities and duties of that position?

**HELLANDER:** It was basically to provide information and support to women who called in and supervise the volunteers and assist whenever they needed. Other things that we did is from the, the work that we conducted we were able to recommend training on various things like, if we had too many suicide calls, all the information officers would recommend maybe we should get some training for our volunteers about suicide or about isolation and, child abuse. We even, I remember clearly actually we had a young girl of Greek background who was sexually abused by a family member and she used to come and seek support from us and felt an affinity because I was of Greek background that I would understand her better, you know, so...

**MUNRO:** That would be very important too, too someone like that, yes.

**HELLANDER:** Yes it was

**MUNRO:** And what did you like about working at WIS?

**HELLANDER:** The thing that I liked most about WIS was that I learnt so much. I learnt so much, the six and half years of one of the best schools of my life. Because as much as we gave out information and support in order to do that we had to learn the information and in those days we had a very passionate moto that said, 'No woman will call in here and we will just say we don't know'. We will find out what she needs and we will if we need to refer her, we will make absolutely sure that is the most appropriate and accurate referral.

**MUNRO:** Right, and, and who was the manager during that time, after, after Linda Matthews?

**HELLANDER:** After Linda Matthews, I only worked with Gudren Boessler, the late Gudren Boessler. I was very fond of Gudren, not many people were, but I was. I was very, very fond of her. She was, she was very fair person, I thought anyway.

**MUNRO:** Right, and a little bit about the ethos and culture of WIS. Can you tell us what WIS was like when you working there? What were its aims and objectives and how did it operate? You've already said a little bit about making sure that every question was answered, but is there anything more you can add to that?

**[00:10:26]**

**HELLANDER:** I, the majority of the time, particularly the former years that I worked there, I felt that the women that worked there both as paid staff and volunteers were very passionate about assisting women becoming empowered. So it was as I remember it, and I don't know whether it was because I was naive because I was quite naive hence, I learnt a lot, but the people that I worked with then, like Gudren Boessler, like Liz Ahern, Tanya Hosch, Sarah Marshall, these are the names that I remember more prominently, and some of the volunteers, particularly the older women, they had a lot of wisdom, that they shared with us and sometimes if there was a bit of conflict some of them were so gracious. They would write a letter to apologise to other, to, to the member, or a card. And that's my former years, so we were very united, very strong bonds between the workers that I felt. Towards the end of it, it kind of didn't go as well. We had someone come from overseas to be the manger and it just, and some of the workers there were a bit, I don't know if they're idea of what we should be was different, but things didn't work as well.

**MUNRO:** Right, now you've said a little bit about some of people you worked with, do you have any other memories of the times you shared with the volunteers and workers? Or...

**HELLANDER:** Well, one of the things that I remember, one of the things that we used love about, Luisa Sheehan, the Italian worker, when someone used, because it was a walk-in as well, it wasn't just on the phone, we were in the Mortlock library in Kintore Avenue, so we were, from Kintore Avenue that side street, part of the Library, I can't remember what it was called, but it was part of the Mortlock Library, was just one big room. And then another big room at the back, which was our meeting room. And I vividly remember Luisa Sheehan as soon as she saw someone walk in she would leap off her seat and strut to the door, 'cause she was a tall, elegant lady, and I used to imitate her and the workers and we used to have a laugh and so, that's a vivid memory. The other thing that I recall that I found very interesting is that we used to do a lot of talks, information, informative talks to schools and women's group and we even used to do an outreach programme, go out to the regional areas like Port Pirie and, where else did we go, a number of places anyway. And then an idea came up to go to Marla and Mintabie, up, in, in the North, but we had to fly there and they all recommend that I go and said I no, I don't want to go, I don't want to fly on a little plane, but they encouraged me to do it, and I did, and it was one thing, was wonderful experiences to go up there to service towns of Mintabie and Marla area...region...

**MUNRO:** Yes, it would have been very...

**HELLANDER:** Yes, it was...

**MUNRO:** ...interesting and very...

**HELLANDER:** ...I will never be able to that trip again, so I was lucky.

**MUNRO:** Yes, yes and were you well received there?

**HELLANDER:** Yes, well look, we went along with a range of other places, so workers from other areas such as domestic violence from up in North Adelaide, it has a special name, but it was about women and the police officer also came along and I think there was a legal person so we gave a

holistic information to the women there so and the people there, so that was good.

**[00:15:08]**

**MUNRO:** Oh, very interesting, yes and WIS has seen many changes over the years. Were you, what were some of the changes introduced when you worked there, or have you covered that?

**HELLANDER:** The major one that I remember 'cause we are talking it about quite some time ago now, I worked there from nineteen-ninety to mid ninety six. During that period there was a review of WIS and there were lots of ideas of change, a lot people didn't take it well, but I always embrace change because, 'cause change is good because it makes you to rethink and if it's done well you take with you the good stuff and let go of the stuff that needs to be changed. Other changes that I recall, and may not have a very clear memory of them but, the system that we used was changed, it became computerised and that's when we, Tanya Hosch and Sarah Marshall, two young women and me the older woman, we got together to prepare a new programme to train the volunteers. The majority of volunteers embraced that, some were a bit difficult to embrace it but we were able to help them turn around and accept the computerised system, yes.

**MUNRO:** Well before the computer and the Internet, how did you go about getting the information you needed to respond to the women's queries?

**HELLANDER:** We had books. I can't remember what they were called. They were made by some office, CISSA, that's it! CISSA produced some books that had information and we used those. If there were any alterations we used to hand do those. But we used to keep records as well.

**MUNRO:** So you could look back on past questions, and see the...

**HELLANDER:** We could collate and work out where we need to renew information. Yeah, so we had a very successful programme and it went really well, yes.

**MUNRO:** Was the Internet actually introduced while you were still there?

**HELLANDER:** Yes, yes

**MUNRO:** It was, yes, and, and...

**HELLANDER:** Very primary, very archaic but we, I remember we had an email address, one. Yeah.

**MUNRO:** Very different from now. So how did that change things, how did, well you already said how it impacted on the workers and volunteers, and, but, how did you help WIS, how did WIS help women to learn this new technology. Was the women's internet access programme available then?

**HELLANDER:** No...

**MUNRO:** No, that was...

**HELLANDER:** ...no, no, no, no, that was much, much later...

**MUNRO:** Yeah. Alright let's talk a bit about the clients. What do you remember who used WIS? For example their age or ethnic background, and what, what involvement did you have with these women?

**HELLANDER:** I can't really say about the ethnic background because we didn't check on that. People just rang...

**MUNRO:** Yes, yes

**HELLANDER:** ...or walked in. Obviously, I was there for the Greek women...

**MUNRO:** ...Greek...

**HELLANDER:** One of the things that I did quite a lot when I started with the Greek is make application to the Housing Trust. They would make an

application for a home in the Housing Trust, if they were from low income, or single or separated women and we used to write a letter of support so that was, that went, that was a very successful thing to the point where just a couple of years ago I bumped into one of the women that I assisted and she says that she will always remember me, because I helped her with the letter. So, obviously it was something that was important not just for the women but for the services, for the Housing Trust to pay enough attention to assist the women more promptly to access Housing Home. So, the women that called us, my memories about mainly women being in need and particularly women from domestic violence. I guess it's understandable that people will not wake up one morning and say I think I'm going to call Women's Information Switchboard or Service as you subsequently changed to that name, because I would like to know a bit of information about this or that. Most people reach out for information when they need it. So we got women who were in need. It would be because they were in domestic violence and they would ring us. One of my vivid memories is that very often, or, or a substantial percentage of them wanted to talk about it and the thing that surprised me and subsequently helped me in my own life is to let go quicker of these things. Because we would get women ring us and say my ex-husband does this to me and does that, this is after they have separated, and as they were talking, you, you got the impression they had just separated. And then when you ask how long have you been separated and they would say 10 years and I would be in shock, thinking oh my god, you need to, you need to move on. So we learnt at WIS to assist them to become empowered, that was very important for WIS. To help women move on and not to be there for them as their crutch or as their, as a shoulder they leant onto and kept coming back, so that was very clear in my mind, quite earlier on in the piece and I took a lot of, I felt really rewarded to assist women to do that. At the same time we would listen, just listen to them. You know active listening. Listen to comfort and active listening and often they would ring without knowing

exactly what, without being able to articulate what they needed and active listening is about helping them work what is it that they're asking you.

**MUNRO:** Yes, very important, yes, yeah

**[00:22:17]**

**HELLANDER:** So I learnt all that and excellent customer service, that's what I learnt at WIS. Which I used later on in my other work and very successfully.

**MUNRO:** Yes and you said before that you, there was never a question asked that you didn't find an answer for. Is that the, the way it went?

**HELLANDER:** Well, not dismissing it. We may not eventually find an answer, but we would turn every stone to make sure that if we said there is nothing we can do about this situation, there was nothing in South Australia.

**MUNRO:** So, you left no stone unturned, to get an answer if you could.

**HELLANDER:** That's right

**MUNRO:** Right, do you think there is still a need for an information service for women?

**HELLANDER:** Absolutely, absolutely. Because as much as the world has moved on there are still lots of pockets in our society, in our community where people are isolated, they have no-one to go to, we have lots of new groups moving in and they come from backgrounds that they didn't have any of the information that we have here. Or women were not in the public arena. They may come from isolated areas, from villages where they had nothing. So we got a lot of new arrivals, refugees or new groups of people, so the Women's Information Service is a much needed service because unfortunately domestic violence hasn't stopped despite our world being advanced technologically so much, people still, relationships is the

area where we still quite behind, and that's why I think Women's Information is very, very much needed.

**MUNRO:** Still relevant, yes

**HELLANDER:** Absolutely relevant, yes. It may be, it may be the way we provide it differently, but it's still needed, yes.

**MUNRO:** Right, WIS has collaborated with numerous government, women's and community groups to provide programs that assist women. For example, legal advice with Women's Legal Service, financial advice service, modern banking for older women, tax help, were you involved in organising or participating in these programs or any other programs like that?

**HELLANDER:** Yes, we had, we had the legal advice which was on a Tuesday night and Saturday morning and obviously as a worker I was there to assist, I didn't do any of the legal information obviously, but, we conducted working alongside the legal aid and financial advice I think we had as well. Can't remember when that was. At the time I working at WIS the office was open from 9.00 o'clock in the morning until 9.00 o'clock at night.

**MUNRO:** That's, that's long hours.

**HELLANDER:** But we had two shifts, so you worked...

**MUNRO:** 5 days a week?

**HELLANDER:** Yes and Saturday morning because of the legal, legal information sessions as well.

**MUNRO:** That was a very good service.

**HELLANDER:** It was excellent, excellent.

**MUNRO:** During the nineteen-eighties WIS held several phone in's on women's issues, such as domestic violence, women and housing, parental

stress and women and disability. Did any of these phone in's happen after you started at WIS or do you know the outcome of any of them?

**[00:26:11]**

**HELLANDER:** I can't remember you know if we had some, I'm pretty sure we would have had a phone in, but I cannot recall unfortunately...

**MUNRO:** No

**HELLANDER:** ...the topics, all I remember is that we had loads and loads of training sessions with psychologists, psychiatrists, all sorts of professionals would come, social security, you know how, today its not called social security, but in those days social security changes every 5 minutes, one of their rulings or one of their regulations or, so we had lots of liaison with those offices, but I don't recall anything specific.

**MUNRO:** No, I think the phone in's happened before you started, yeah. What do you know about the WIS support group and the role it played over many years?

**HELLANDER:** I can't say I know a lot about it, I must admit, so its, its I'm aware that there was, but I cannot remember specifics and it could be because I was, I was very new and green in the area and I concentrated on the task at hand, you know what I needed to do,

**MUNRO:** Yeah, yes

**HELLANDER:** But we did have, I don't know why I don't remember much about the WIS support group.

**MUNRO:** No, it probably wasn't terribly relevant to what you were actually doing.

**HELLANDER:** It's because they met after hours and I wasn't, I wasn't involved as well.

**MUNRO:** Yes, did you know who the Women's Advisor or Director of the Office of the Status for Women were?

**HELLANDER:** Yes, I did at the time, yes

**MUNRO:** Do you remember who...

**HELLANDER:** No I can't remember now

**MUNRO:** ...no you can't remember now. And how did your time at WIS influence or lead you to your next career move?

**HELLANDER:** My time at WIS provided me with wealth of knowledge and understanding. My, my move from WIS was to Working Women's Centre for six months and then I went, I didn't want to continue there. One of the things that affected me adversely was that I found it too much to listen to women, to women relating to me there. Sexual harassment cases. I personally and this is just a very personal thing, I felt that they, they needed to say it but it was too lengthy. I had personally --- I had moved on from wanting to talk about something that troubles to briefly mention it and move on to, to what do I do to move on, to get to my next, to, to become more assertive and so it was not the right mix between me and the job. And I'm not being critical of the women that felt they had to sit there and talk to you for an hour about the minute details of the sexual harassment. I just wasn't at that place anymore, I, I was somewhere else. So, I wanted to come back to WIS, but the then Director of, Advisor for the Office of Women said no, you have to come up to the office. I spent a brief time up there, it wasn't a very happy time and then I moved on and I got a job at Workplace Services Industrial Affairs, whatever you want to call it, for a year, then I resigned because my husband was writing for Lonely Planet travel guides, travelling the world and I wasn't going to be stuck here working, so I resigned. He came back from Israel and I said guess what honey? I've resigned and I'm coming with you.

**MUNRO:** That sounds a very good idea!

**HELLANDER:** Yes and I did that until, from ninety-eight to two thousand and four ---.

**MUNRO:** Wonderful

**HELLANDER:** and then I went back into the public service.

**MUNRO:** That sounds a wonderful lifestyle. Finally, is there anything you would like to add to what you have already said?

**HELLANDER:** No, I'd be very pleased to see a really good outcome of this...

**MUNRO:** ...right

**HELLANDER:** ...nothing more.

**MUNRO:** Thank you for taking part in this interview

**HELLANDER:** Thank you for, thank you for inviting me.

**[00:31:04]**

**END OF INTERVIEW**