

WOMEN'S INFORMATION SERVICE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Transcript of Interview with Linda Matthews

Interviewee: Linda Matthews

Interviewer: Allison Murchie

Date: 12th September, 2017

[00:00:01]

MURCHIE: This is Oral History 1120, the WIS (Women' information Service) Oral History Project for the 40th Anniversary. Today, it's Allison Murchie interviewing Linda Matthews at the State Library on the 12th September, 2017.

MURCHIE: First, could I have your full name, Linda?

MATTHEWS: Linda Rae Matthews.

MURCHIE: And your date and place of birth?

MATTHEWS: 9/4/53, Adelaide.

MURCHIE: Another Adelaide girl.

MATTHEWS: Yes.

MURCHIE: I have a series of questions to go through, but first --- I've been quite amazed by your CV (Curriculum Vitae). The lots and lots of senior management positions, lots with an emphasis on equality, human rights issues. So I know I am going to enjoy interviewing you. But perhaps you could just give a couple of minutes summary on your work career.

MATTHEWS: WIS I started in --- well probably the significant lead up to the job at WIS was I worked at Legal Aid in 1980 – 85 and that was --- I was one of the first non-legal people to be employed there and I did advocacy work for women who were losing their--- one of the things I did, I did a

number of things there, but a particular interest there --- I was recruited because single parents, single women particularly ---- it was at that time were being knocked off benefits, because they were alleged to be cohabitating with men. I became an advocate in the Social Security Appeals Tribunal and did a lot of work there. And that's when I first came across the domestic violence phenomenon, because of course most of the women that --- I mean I knew about it, but in a very direct ---.

MURCHIE: Most of them were actually victims of it?

MATTHEWS: Most of them were domestic -- they were, they were. In a very direct sense I encountered it. So I did that for five years and other work at Legal Aid, community education and community legal education and from that, I suppose that equipped me well for my next job, which was to run The Parks Legal Service.

MURCHIE: Perfectly set you up.

MATTHEWS: Yes. For three years. Because ---although I didn't have a Law Degree, I have an Arts Degree. I learnt masses when I was at the Legal Services Commission, because lawyers were very generous at that time, because it was a real --- they were really trying to do lots of law reform for disadvantaged people, so I was kind of there at the right time, I think. And I was the first non-lawyer to run a Community Legal Centre.

MURCHIE: Were you intimidated by those sorts of things?

MATTHEWS: Look, at times I was, because it was hard managing lawyers when you weren't a lawyer, but that's, I suppose I found ways to do that and try and keep them on side.

MURCHIE: Because that really has led to the rest of your career, hasn't it?

MATTHEWS: Yes, it has.

MURCHIE: Those very senior management roles ---.

MATTHEWS: Early on.

MURCHIE: Governance, change process, all those sorts of things.

MATTHEWS: But all with a social justice bent. You'll see there's almost nothing I've done that doesn't have that --- have that as ---.

MURCHIE: And also a very strong focus on working with women?

[00:03:31]

MATTHEWS: Yes, yes. That's my passion. Yep. Although I did have a wonderful stint working in disability as well for a couple of years. So I did love that as well, but women ---.

MURCHIE: That was the IDS?

MATTHEWS: Yes, Intellectual Disability Services Council. That was after I had done the Rape and Sexual Assault Director's job and I felt like I needed a change. I needed to do something different because I set up Yarrow Place.

MURCHIE: Oh you set up ---

MATTHEWS: I was the first Director of Yarrow Place. That was after the merger of the old Rape Crisis Service and Sexual Assault Services at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, the Forensic Medical Services.

MURCHIE: And Yarrow Place made a massive difference.

MATTHEWS: It did. That was putting it together. It was hugely contested, but I could see the benefit of it, of having a service that had everything under the one roof, so that women didn't have to go to different places for --- if they'd been raped. They could have a doctor, they could have a nurse, they could have a counsellor, they could be put in touch with other services if they needed it. I think it has worked --- well, it's stood the test of time. They are still in the same place of the location that I chose. So that was

very good. You never know with these things of course, if they are going to work out.

MURCHIE: Well I think when they do pass that test of time that's when you know it's worked pretty well.

MATTHEWS: Then you know it's worked. That's right. And I went --- so I'm going backwards and forwards here.

MURCHIE: That's fine.

MATTHEWS: I'll probably have to look at my CV to refresh ---to refresh what I did. Yes, the Women's Information Service, as it was called then ---.

MURCHIE: That's right.

MATTHEWS: It wasn't Switchboard until--- sorry.

MURCHIE: No, it was Switchboard when you started.

MATTHEWS: It was Switchboard then and then it became Service.

[00:05:30]

MURCHIE: So you started there, according to my records, 1988. Is that right?

MATTHEWS: '88. Yes. And left in 1990. It was a couple of years.

MURCHIE: So, tell me. How did you get the job?

MATTHEWS: I answered an advertisement. The job was advertised.

MURCHIE: Just in the press?

MATTHEWS: Yes, yes.

MURCHIE: Did you know about it?

MATTHEWS: Yes, I knew about it. I didn't know a lot about it.

MURCHIE: You knew it existed?

MATTHEWS: I knew it existed and I knew the kind of work it did and I could just see that the background that I'd had at Legal Aid and The Parks, I thought would probably be a good mix. And as it turned out that was exactly the case.

MURCHIE: Had you ever visited it?

MATTHEWS: Yes.

MURCHIE: So you knew a bit more than just that it existed?

MATTHEWS: Yes, I had visited it. Yes, and I'd referred women to it, yes, that needed information.

MURCHIE: What appealed to you about that job?

MATTHEWS: I just loved the idea of advocacy for women. And I really did think back then, and I think I was right and other women have probably said this too, there was a chance to make a real difference back then. There really was. We had a lot more freedom to do all kinds of things. There was a culture of innovation. I had a good relationship --- I developed one --- I didn't know the then Women's Adviser, Carol Treloar. I didn't know her before I started at WIS, but she was the Chair of the Panel.

MURCHIE: She was the Women's Adviser?

MATTHEWS: She was the Women's Adviser. She was my line manager, because that was the hierarchy.

MURCHIE: Well, that was one of the questions I was going to ask. Who you reported to? So direct to Carol?

MATTHEWS: I was reporting direct to Carol. And that worked very well, because I soon formed a really good bond with her, because we agreed about a lot of things, so there wasn't that conflict that there might have been.

MURCHIE: What was the interview process like? Because I presume there would have been other applicants.

MATTHEWS: Clearly there was. There were a lot of people went for it. I --- do you know it's so long ago it's hard for me to remember, but perhaps my enthusiasm, hopefully my enthusiasm was ---. But also I had skills. I think it was --- I think it was that too.

MURCHIE: Certainly those two jobs that you'd had.

MATTHEWS: I think gave me some real skills. And maybe at that stage that's what they were looking for.

MURCHIE: And that passion would have come through, I'm sure.

MATTHEWS: The passion. I think in every job you need that, passion and skill. When I - do you want to keep going with the CV? Yes, we'll do that and then I'll come back and talk about WIS. That's probably a better way to do it.

MURCHIE: OK

[00:08:04]

MATTHEWS: From there I went to the Rape --- Domestic Violence Prevention Unit, which was doing a lot of interesting reforms at that time, including big legal reforms around restraining orders and lots and lots of different---.

MURCHIE: Well a lot of that was led by the government of the time, wasn't it?

MATTHEWS: Yes, it was, it was. They were interested and they had a Domestic Violence Prevention Council and I was the Executive Officer for that, so we did do a lot in that time. And from that job I went to head up Yarrow Place Rape and Sexual Assault Service as it was --- I think it's still called that, as far as I know.

MURCHIE: Well, that's what I still call it. I presume it's still the same.

MATTHEWS: They still call it Yarrow Place, I know that.

MURCHIE: Yes, I think that's what most people would call it.

MATTHEWS: But --- and that was quite a business choosing that name as well.

MURCHIE: How did you come about --- ?

MATTHEWS: Well, we had lots and lots of consultations because we wanted to brand it. But eventually we came to Yarrow because yarrow was a healing herb.

MURCHIE: Oh! Okay!

MATTHEWS: And that's was --- we thought well that's what we want this to be.

MURCHIE: What a clever ---I didn't know that.

MATTHEWS: Well I didn't until that time either. It wasn't my idea - it was someone else suggested it.

MURCHIE: No, no, it's an excellent name.

MATTHEWS: And I thought well that's exactly right, that's what we want - a healing - this is a place of healing and it has been.

MURCHIE: And it proved to be.

MATTHEWS: It proved to be.

MURCHIE: And it continues to prove to be.

MATTHEWS: And we didn't want to have that long name, Rape and Sexual Assault Service. I mean you have to have that, because people have to know what it is. But we were also - this was the first time that we were providing a service to adult survivors of child sexual abuse at that time and

so we were again wanting a more, I suppose less confrontational name for people to say they were just going to Yarrow Place.

[00:10:01]

MURCHIE: And unless you were involved you wouldn't know.

MATTHEWS: You wouldn't know. No, that's right. Just going to visit there. And it could be anywhere, couldn't it, a wellness centre, anything?

MURCHIE: It could be anything.

MATTHEWS: Yeah and that was particularly important for adult survivors who were just starting to tell their stories at that stage. So, that was Rape and Sexual Assault and from there, as I just said, I went to Intellectual Disability Services Council. Originally, that was only going to be a secondment, because I was replacing ---.

MURCHIE: You were there awhile though weren't you?

MATTHEWS: I was. And I would have stayed, because I just loved the job, because that was providing services for people with intellectual disability. But I then saw the Equal Opportunity Commissioner's job and that was ---.

MURCHIE: And that's what you are known for. And that one you couldn't turn down.

MATTHEWS: That one - I thought, oh no! I'd love that. That was --- to get that would just be wonderful. And I did. And I did it for nearly fifteen years. It's the job, I have to say, I have loved most of everything I've done. I've liked them all and they've all had their good and bad points, but this one---.

MURCHIE: But in that job you made huge differences.

MATTHEWS: I worked like crazy in that.

MURCHIE: I can remember listening to a few public talks and things that you gave. Public servants were always going to talks and information sessions and I was so impressed --- not just with you as an individual, but the organisation and what they were actually able to achieve and were doing --- changes in legislation --- it was breathtaking.

MATTHEWS: We did do a lot. I mean I had good people as well, of course, but I decided to make the most of this job, because I wasn't technically a public servant. I was a statutory officer.

MURCHIE: Okay.

MATTHEWS: I had more powers than a public servant did. I certainly noticed that when I went into public service positions where you were really quite constrained in many ways. I was able to speak to the media. Well, no public servant would be able to do that without the approval of the Minister.

MURCHIE: So you could set your own rules?

MATTHEWS: I could. Mind you towards the end of my time, there was moves to try and change that, but I managed to hold on to that, because they wanted it to be ----.

MURCHIE: That would have to be the most challenging job that you've had. How did you cope at that level for fifteen years? It must have been exhausting.

MATTHEWS: It was. It was very ---.

MURCHIE: I mean it wasn't nine to five was it?

MATTHEWS: Oh no! I did --- I was probably - two nights a week I would have done some kind of extra of it and I could be rung by the media at six am and had to be prepared to give a comment. I mean I couldn't always, of course because I didn't always know enough about it. But the media,

because I became approachable, because I was approachable, I really thought it was very important to talk to the media because that was the way this organisation was going to get known. Without that people just wouldn't know about it, they wouldn't ---and I had very, very strong views that, people can't exercise their rights unless they know about them. And that does mean advocacy.

And it also meant doing some commenting in the media where lots of ABC [Australian Broadcasting Commission] watchers, including myself, probably wouldn't necessarily like, but I took the view that it was important because these were the people who watched these shows, who were most likely to need our services. And I was right about that. I'm quite sure I was right about that. The undereducated and very --- people in very disadvantaged circumstances, like those commercial programs, they do.

[00:14:03]

MURCHIE: Yes. And that's where you just have to go on.

MATTHEWS: You have to go to your audience.

MURCHIE: Your ABC [Australian Broadcasting Commission] audience is quite different.

MATTHEWS: It's quite different. I mean, I believed in that too and I think you need to do it all. But ---

MURCHIE: But you needed to do those commercial programs to get through to your real client base, didn't you?

MATTHEWS: Yes. The ones with the needs. The very high needs. I have always had that view that you really should be trying to target your services in all these jobs to those most in need. That's not to say that everyone --- I mean I don't subscribe to the view that people who are well off can't have massive problems. They can and they do. But they've got

more options in terms of accessing services. That's all I'm --- that's what I say.

MURCHIE: That's fair enough. They have access to more things.

MATTHEWS: They've got more money. And that makes a difference.

MURCHIE: Money buys services.

MATTHEWS: It does. It actually does. And particularly in domestic violence because women from middle class or more well to do backgrounds have usually got friends they can go and stay with, so just that --- they've got friends with a spare bedroom that they can go and stay with.

MURCHIE: And they've got money.

MATTHEWS: And they've got money. So they could go and do something else.

MURCHIE: They're not going to live on the street are they?

MATTHEWS: They're not going to be homeless. Exactly! So that's the reason. So that was --- that job was terrific and I did lots in that, but we haven't got time to talk about all of that.

MURCHIE: Not today. We'll leave it at that. Let's get back to your time at WIS.

MATTHEWS: Yes.

MURCHIE: What did you think the role of WIS was when you joined it? I mean you would have done your research. You'd talked to the people there. You knew about it. What did you see as the role and it's almost fitting in with what you've just said to me then, I think?

MATTHEWS: Well, it really was to empower women and to enable them to make better choices in their lives, to give them the tools to be able to do that. And you won't be surprised to know that most of the calls we got were around domestic violence and family breakdown. That was by far the

biggest number of calls that we were getting. Mostly by phone, we didn't have a lot of women walk in.

MURCHIE: That was my next question. How did you operate - more by phone?

MATTHEWS: Mostly by phone, because the women liked that because of the anonymity. Often they were disclosing things that they'd not talked about to anybody else.

MURCHIE: But they were quite happy to talk to someone on the phone.

MATTHEWS: But they were fine to talk to a sympathetic ear. But what I did realise though, Alison, was that a lot of the volunteers, they were mostly volunteers doing that work and we had some paid staff, but they were doing various other things and certainly supporting the volunteers, but their skill level was not that good.

MURCHIE: The volunteers? Because they hadn't ---?

MATTHEWS: Because they hadn't encountered it. They'd never been trained. I mean you can't blame them. So I set about doing a lot of training courses and I did some of the training myself.

MURCHIE: What sort of training did you give them?

MATTHEWS: To understand how a restraining order works, what happens with custody, with family law, basic family law advice. I taught them how they could do that first level of advice before they referred on. And I taught them how, what the level of your expertise, when you need to refer to someone with more information and more knowledge.

[00:17:36]

And we had a roster of lawyers that they could see as well. We had a lot of good volunteer female lawyers that would come in, so we had backup. Of

course, there was Legal Aid as well that we could refer to --- and Community Legal Centres. So there were a number of referral points. I ensured that they understood where the best referral points were and had all that information available, so that they could quickly and easily get that information to our clients who rang.

So that was --- that was a big thing, because one day I walked around as a good manager should always do and I heard them giving advice and I thought, "Oh no! This isn't really very good". They're being lovely and sympathetic and kind and understanding, but not able to give them advice that was going to be useful to them. I mean there's only so far tea and sympathy can take you.

MURCHIE: Well, a neighbour can do that.

MATTHEWS: A neighbour can do that. Exactly. A friend can do that.

MURCHIE: I mean if I ring up and I've been bashed by my husband or partner, whatever, I want - what do I do next? How do I look after my kids? You want that real ground knowledge, don't you?

MATTHEWS: Yes, you've got to have that. Absolutely, and accurate, because sometimes they were giving advice that wasn't accurate as well.

MURCHIE: How did you handle telling them that they didn't have the knowledge or did you just say we're going to do some training?

MATTHEWS: I said look --- I called a - because we had staff or volunteer meetings and I talked about my background and I said I could I think we could give you some training and I'd bring others in as well - it wasn't just me of course, and I'll give you some training - get some training going, because I can hear that some of you are floundering. And that's not surprising, so no blame - there's never --- and I also said this is an area that's changing a lot, which it was. So in order for us to be up to date with

the information that we're giving it would be really good to be able to do that. And they were fine. They were looking for training.

MURCHIE: They wanted the help.

MATTHEWS: They wanted help. So there were only a couple --- there's always a couple that feel they don't want it, but the majority were absolutely ---.

[00:20:01]

MURCHIE: How many volunteers did you have under you at that time?

MATTHEWS: I think we had about - I'm just trying to think - about fifty or sixty.

MURCHIE: That's substantial. And they were rostered on?

MATTHEWS: Yes. Yes.

MURCHIE: Did they all come in each week?

MATTHEWS: Mostly they would come in each week. We worked hard on volunteer programs as well - to try and give support to volunteers.

MURCHIE: What sort of programs did you run for them?

MATTHEWS: Well to --- better orientation, because that wasn't always done with volunteers. And a bit of screening as well - a bit more screening. But we had a fantastic diversity of volunteers, which was what I loved. I'm a great fan of diversity. We had some very --- women in their seventies and some of them stayed longer than that. I think we had one in her eighties, to students. So you had good --- we were trying to get a better cultural mix as well.

MURCHIE: That's what I was about to say --- you had a lot of --- early on there was some Greek volunteers and you had ---.

MATTHEWS: We had ---when I was there we had an Aboriginal staff member, we had Italian, Greek, Vietnamese and another one I've forgotten, sorry.

MURCHIE: In fact, at one stage I think you had a Vietnamese Information officer or something, didn't you?

MATTHEWS: Yes, I recruited her.

MURCHIE: Right.

MATTHEWS: Yes Lien [Nguyen-Navas]. Yes, she was terrific. So we did have --- we tried to get as much diversity as we could, but you still - they were public servants, so we had to recruit through a Public Service.

MURCHIE: I mean it would certainly be true to say it had a very strong feminist ethos?

MATTHEWS: Yes.

MURCHIE: And previous people I have spoken to said that they didn't necessarily know that when they came in, but that was supported --- like some of the volunteers didn't necessarily ---

MATTHEWS: Have that ---

MURCHIE: have that background. Certainly people like yourself and some of the paid staff who were more public servant oriented understood that, but it was actually a growth process for a lot of your volunteers as well. Is that something you found?

MATTHEWS: Oh definitely. That was absolutely right. Some of them just - well they didn't know, which is fair enough. They just thought they were coming in to sit on a phone and give advice to women and refer them to various places. Which was true, but --- .

MURCHIE: The rest of that grew.

MATTHEWS: But they ---that did grow and we got more and more people in to talk to them so they did understand. And students often did, because they actually chose it because they were interested in women's issues and may have been studying, so they were very, very interested in that. So that was less of an issue.

MURCHIE: I was just going to ask you something that's just - out of my head.

MATTHEWS: Students, volunteers, advocacy, women's issues?

MURCHIE: No, no. I was going back a few sentences. You said a lot of the work came through phones.

MATTHEWS: Yes.

MURCHIE: Of the total number of contacts you had with women, what sort of percentage would have been by phone compared to drop-ins?

MATTHEWS: About 90 percent. A lot. I mean significantly.

MURCHIE: I remember in the early days calling in there just out of curiosity to see what --- and they had a wonderful array of brochures and information.

MATTHEWS: Oh, yes.

MURCHIE: I didn't even talk to someone.

MATTHEWS: You didn't need to.

MURCHIE: I just collected brochures and go away. And I thought that was an early strength which has certainly continued in the current organisation.

MATTHEWS: Yes. We had a staff member - in fact we had someone who was a librarian, so ---.

[00:23:44]

MURCHIE: Is that Liz [Ahern]? I'm interviewing her in a couple of weeks.

MATTHEWS: Liz. Yes. Oh, terrific! Terrific! Liz was terrific at that. She really did understand what a good resource centre looked like. But also - we had to bridge that gap of not too much information so that people can't find it---

MURCHIE: Not intimidating it.

MATTHEWS: Yes, or so much that you think ---. But we also, when I was there we made a lot of changes to make it look more appealing as well. Because it had started, quite understandably, on the smell of an oily rag and with, you know beg, borrowed and you know --- furniture which was --

MURCHIE: Sort of junky stuff.

MATTHEWS: Pretty junky. So I advocated for a better look, because I realised when I was at The Parks - I probably knew myself, because I didn't grow up with a silver spoon, I grew up in a very --- fairly poor family, and what I realised at The Parks was that when people come to see you, when they are disadvantaged, they don't want to come into something that looks like something they're from, they want it to look professional. I don't mean flash, but nice furniture you know --- a few pot plants. Something that's acceptable and ---.

MURCHIE: Something welcoming.

MATTHEWS: Welcoming. And I suppose respectful of them is how I thought of it. They were coming to us, not people just coming in to get information but people who needed help and they didn't want to feel like they were, I suppose, the poor relation.

[00:25:34]

MURCHIE: Who were you funded by?

MATTHEWS: Government. State Government.

MURCHIE: State Government. So did they come good for the refurbishment?

MATTHEWS: They did. They did. They understood it.

MURCHIE: Who was the --- the titles change --- but Minister for Women, Status of Women. Who was the Minister in your time?

MATTHEWS: Can you go back to Carol on that. I'm not sure. Anne Levy.

MURCHIE: Anne Levy. I'm just looking at the timeframe. Yes, Anne Levy.

MATTHEWS: I've just got it . Anne Levy.

MURCHIE: So did you have much to do with her or was most of your work through Carol?

MATTHEWS: Most through Carol. I mean I did meet Anne and I knew her and still see her around the traps and say hello to her.

MURCHIE: She's everywhere. She's still everywhere.

MATTHEWS: She's everywhere. That's right. But not like in later times. There's a much closer relationship now between the Minister and the staff there. Mine was more through Carol. And I did also have some meetings with Bruce Guerin, who was the head of Premier and DPC [Department of Premier and Cabinet], Premier and Cabinet. Mostly Carol. Carol was the main conduit for that. She was the more senior person to me in those days.

MURCHIE: As Director, how did you run your office? First off, you had a stack of volunteers, how many paid staff?

MATTHEWS: About seven paid staff.

MURCHIE: And was there a structure within that? Like some were allocated set positions - like you said Liz did library work.

MATTHEWS: They also had generic work as well. So they had to supervise volunteers. I think most of them did that. They were rostered on for that. But then they had a specialty component as well. And that seemed to work reasonably well. The reasons for doing that were, one, you want them skilled in as much as possible. You don't want people getting bored. And also you don't want one person having all the knowledge in one area for succession planning.

MURCHIE: Well, if they're sick or they leave ---.

MATTHEWS: If they're sick or they leave you've got a big gap.

MURCHIE: That's right.

MATTHEWS: So I understood that from management --- management experience - that you want people to do---

MURCHIE: How did you manage your team?

MATTHEWS: I hope respectfully. I was consultative, but I was also even then, a manager like I have been - that wasn't afraid to take the hard decisions as well. As in management, there are always some issues that you have to deal with.

MURCHIE: How did you deal with --- I don't know that discipline was necessary there, but you must have had problems with both paid staff and volunteers? That's your job to resolve.

MATTHEWS: I did. I found most of the time you could talk to someone . You would be able to resolve it, because most of the time when people were in difficulty it's for one or two reasons --- or there are more than that --- but the main ones --- one, they've got personal difficulties and if you can find that out then you can put supports in to help people who are going through a hard time in their personal life. Or secondly, there's conflict in the workplace which is the most usual reasons.

MURCHIE: That's just human nature.

MATTHEWS: That's human nature, exactly. Every job, everywhere. That was my mediation skills I had as well.

MURCHIE: So all of the jobs you'd had were pushing you in the right area there?

MATTHEWS: Helped! Yes. And try and set some ground rules about respectful conversations and I was very clear about that because there were a few angry people there. So I had to ---.

MURCHIE: What were they angry about?

MATTHEWS: I think ---I think injustice --- they were angry about injustice and of course, as in all of these jobs, people sometimes come into them to deal with their own problems. That's very, very common. But I was very clear that we had to maintain a professional workplace because that was what was necessary. Particularly for volunteers, but also for clients. Because if you're falling to bits yourself ---

MURCHIE: You're not much use ---

MATTHEWS: you are not much use to anyone else. It was before things like --- there wasn't at that stage the other supports that you have now though. So I had to do a lot of it myself.

[00:30:12]

MURCHIE: For a small organisation that's probably always been the case. I mean, now they have a lot more people they can refer to.

MATTHEWS: They have external people that you would refer to.

MURCHIE: That's right, EAPs [Employee Assistance Programs] and things that you can just refer people to.

MATTHEWS: EAPs. But they didn't actually have that back then. So we were --- I guess we were working it out as ---. But it became obvious that was a necessary component of what you needed to do.

MURCHIE: You said a few minutes ago your main issue was obviously domestic violence, family breakdown.

MATTHEWS: Family breakdown.

MURCHIE: What other sort of issues were you dealing with?

MATTHEWS: Workplace issues for women. Women would ring up about problems in the workplace. Of course that old sexual harassment that we didn't --- that was only very early days of that happening.

MURCHIE: We didn't know what to call it, did we?

MATTHEWS: No, we did not. We didn't have a name for it. And boy did we need it!

MURCHIE: A lot of that probably later got picked up by Working Women's Centre too, because they had the specialists in those areas that could help women who weren't in unions.

MATTHEWS: It did. It did. They did. And of course the role of WIS was always to try and refer to people with more specialist knowledge, whatever the issue was. Which is why --- very important information.

MURCHIE: And it probably still is.

MATTHEWS: Absolutely! It would be. Because it's even harder now, because there are so many more specialist places. Where do you go? It probably was easier to train in those days because there were less.

MURCHIE: Because you had that limited range

MATTHEWS: There was a limited choice that you actually had to be able to send women to, so it was good.

MURCHIE: I've actually got a list of some of the ones that I think would have been used in your day. Women's Legal Service. Were they around?

MATTHEWS: No, I don't think so.

MURCHIE: Ombudsman?

MATTHEWS: Yes, yes. The Ombudsman was there. Yes.

MURCHIE: Tax help? I think that's a newer one. That's only come in in more recent ---.

MATTHEWS: We were using Welfare Rights Centre. I think that - the Welfare Rights Centre was an offshoot of --- and Community Legal Centres were doing a lot of this.

MURCHIE: Oh yes. There were a lot of --- yes.

MATTHEWS: So and they --- most of the Community Legal Centres had some kind of specialty. So one of them had Welfare Rights - I can't remember which one now, but there were different ones that provided. In fact, when I was at The Parks I started up with Bowden and Brompton the Neighbourhood Dispute Centre. So we were able to ---that was another referral point.

MURCHIE: In the local area?

MATTHEWS: Yes. Although women didn't ring up WIS much for that kind of thing.

MURCHIE: But the fact that you had them there---.

MATTHEWS: There was there. So we'd be doing more legal aid I think. The women --- we had a women's --- we had a group of women lawyers---.

MURCHIE: Was the Women's Community Centre around then?

MATTHEWS: Yes, yes. The Women's Health Centre was there, so we were able to refer to them.

MURCHIE: When did Working Women's Centre start? That was ---?

MATTHEWS: It's a good question.

MURCHIE: Actually, I probably have got it in my notes. Let's have a look.

MATTHEWS: They would have been close then I reckon.

MURCHIE: I'm sure I wrote that down the other day.

MATTHEWS: I think they were operating actually, but they were very --- but it was very early days for them.

MURCHIE: 1978.

MATTHEWS: Oh gosh! Okay

MURCHIE: But yes, it was a slow start.

MATTHEWS: It was. Because --- so we would have, I'm sure we would have referred --- but it wasn't ---.

MURCHIE: They were complementary groups really weren't they?

MATTHEWS: Yes they were. But they didn't do the work they later did. They did grow.

MURCHIE: Oh. Huge now.

MATTHEWS: Exactly. So there were workplace issues. Often the issues about combining family and work were big issues. The lack of part-time work was a huge issue, we were always flagging that.

[00:33:50]

MURCHIE: Now it's the opposite - it's all part-time work.

MATTHEWS: I know. Very little flexibility, childcare of course was always an issue --- still continues. Look at these things still continue aren't they?

MURCHIE: That's exactly what I was going to say. I mean, the issues then and the client base probably haven't changed a lot --- I mean there is probably more issues now, but they are pretty similar.

MATTHEWS: Very similar. But the interesting thing --- I can say this from my work in Catherine House, my most recent work, is that what we weren't seeing that I think you would see more now, is women with massive mental health issues and drug and alcohol problems. It's not to say they weren't there, but---

MURCHIE: You just didn't see them.

MATTHEWS: They weren't disclosed. Probably because there weren't very many places that they could go to.

MURCHIE: Whereas now there are limitless of them.

MATTHEWS: There's more. And there's more discussion about mental health issues, too. Back then the taboo was huge. Still is of course, but ---.

MURCHIE: It's seen as an illness now.

MATTHEWS: It's seen as an illness. Whereas no-one would have --- women wouldn't have rung us to talk about that, or if they had they probably wouldn't have known how to talk about it. I know we used Lifeline ---.

MURCHIE: But they would have internalised a lot of it.

MATTHEWS: That's right. Lifeline. That was around and if--- we would have some women - we did have women ring up - a few with suicidal issues.

MURCHIE: And your staff certainly wouldn't have been trained for that?

MATTHEWS: No, no. And nor were we ever contemplating that. I always knew that was a very specialist area, and still is. How to deal with it?

MURCHIE: Did you and your paid staff, in a kindly way, monitor those phone calls so that you could see when a volunteer was out of their depth?

MATTHEWS: Yes. We had someone walking the floor the whole time and very strong training that if you ever feel uncomfortable or you're not sure, you can refer to a paid staff member. That was very important, because you couldn't expect them to --- in fact often the paid staff had trouble, you know, dealing with some of this.

MURCHIE: They've only got their own life experience and it obviously wouldn't necessarily extend to mental illness and suicide and those sorts of areas.

MATTHEWS: And it's a bit like domestic violence. If you haven't encountered it, or family breakdown even, what do you know --- you don't know what to do, do you?

MURCHIE: You can be a kindly ear, but that doesn't necessarily help a person.

MATTHEWS: You can be kind, but you don't actually help anyone. But we also had good links with - it's now called Connecting Up, but it was called the Community - CISSA - Community Information Service, which was in Kintore Avenue, in the --- Yvonne Allen ran it.

MURCHIE: Oh okay! Yes, I know Yvonne Allen.

MATTHEWS: And she did great work in that service. I would work with her as well to try and ensure their directories were full of the right information.

MURCHIE: So really, even in those early days you had a lot of resources and people giving you free service like the women lawyers and you had a lot of support in the community.

MATTHEWS: Yes there were. We did. We had lots of women lawyers who were prepared to give their support. We were very, very grateful for that,

which was, as I said the most needed --- definitely the most needed service.

[00:37:23]

MURCHIE: We were talking about the negative side, but the actual vibe in that place was always fantastic wasn't it?

MATTHEWS: Oh, it was terrific. Yes.

MURCHIE: How did you celebrate some of your milestones and big achievements and things like that? Did you celebrate?

MATTHEWS: We did. We did have a lot of morning teas and things like that to celebrate various things or to highlight activities like International Women's Day, was one of them. Any marches that were happening - we all loved a good march - we'd get the banners out (laugh). I carried that on as Equal Opportunity Commissioner too. I used to march in the Peace March and do all of ---.

MURCHIE: Yes, yes. Isn't it great to get in some of those marches?

MATTHEWS: It's great. It feels terrific. I mean, I never put any pressure on anyone to do it because that would ---.

MURCHIE: Did most of them go?

MATTHEWS: Yes. Yes. I didn't have to put pressure on.

MURCHIE: Just tell them about it - that it was on.

MATTHEWS: Yes and if they could they would. They would go. These were different times. We did have, interestingly enough, we did start to do some work with women from non-English speaking background and I remember talking to some of the workers in other areas as well. We tried to do some liaison with other areas like Migrant Resource Centre and it became very

clear that even back then that the women were very --- the husbands or partners, male partners, were not happy with them going into a women's only space. They did think of it as a hot bed of radicalism.

MURCHIE: Which it was.

MATTHEWS: Which it was! (both laugh) That's true. And for good reason.

MURCHIE: Yes, that's very strong culture.

MATTHEWS: But I did realise that we would have to tread carefully. We had regular staff meetings - so I said to the staff, why don't we --- we want to attract these women, because they again are some of the most in need women. So what we did was, we would have --- we would get women in from health services to talk about things like infant feeding and breast examination or --- I said to the staff - there was controversy there about not letting men on the premises, and I said, "No, we can't do that. That is not going to help what we are trying to do". So we set up these groups for women from these backgrounds and I said, "Tell them they can bring their husbands".

[00:40:07]

MURCHIE: Really! When you had one of those special medical ones?

MATTHEWS: Yes because I kind of figured --- I was right --- that if you let them come they wouldn't. They didn't want to go into a women's space - those patriarchal men don't like being around lots of other women.

MURCHIE: But you put the offer out?

MATTHEWS: The offer. Because that --- that was controversial because some of the women, the staff, the paid staff didn't agree with that. They thought it should be a women's only space and I said, "I don't think that's going to work. I don't think we'll get the right people, I don't think we will be attracting the right people".

MURCHIE: But I bet you saw a lot of growth in those non-English speaking background women. To get them out of that home environment.

MATTHEWS: We did. We did. Because of course, what we did was we gave them a whole lot of other information, didn't we? In a careful way. But we exposed them to other --- there were these other services just coming in.

MURCHIE: Which they'd never heard of.

MATTHEWS: Rape services, domestic violence services, legal services and we would be able to talk to them about --- with work, we could talk about supporting parent benefit.

MURCHIE: A lot of them were very closeted in the home.

MATTHEWS: They couldn't get out.

MURCHIE: They didn't get out to find out about those services. So that's the clever way of doing it.

MATTHEWS: And we brought interpreters in. We used the interpreter service and, as you would completely understand, the after conversations were of course the best ones. They weren't going to disclose in a group and why would they? They'd be exposing themselves. See, I knew that from my work at The Parks Legal Service, because I used to go and do a clinic at the Vietnamese Association, like a first interview, where I'd talk to people about their, ostensibly legal problems, but invariably they were not and there were a whole lot of other things, to work out if they needed to see a lawyer and if so, how to facilitate that.

I thought then, because there was a lot of talk then about particular cultural groups only wanting to talk to people within their culture. I found the complete opposite. The Vietnamese flocked to see me, but I was what they wanted. Because I wouldn't talk about it in their community. And what they were so concerned about was disclosing what was happening

and it getting out and shame for parents or whatever --- the problems that you have in a very tight community. And recently arrived as well, with all the problems that go with that, how hard that is. No, they wanted to talk to somebody outside their culture. One, because of that, but secondly because these people are not silly. They knew we knew how to help them negotiate the system.

MURCHIE: They just wanted to learn.

MATTHEWS: They wanted to learn. They wanted to know.

MURCHIE: And as you said you ended up recruiting a Vietnamese officer.

[00:43:12]

MATTHEWS: Yeah. Absolutely. Who could speak their language and that was wonderful when we had that service. That really made a difference. I think between us --- I can't remember, but we had a number of different languages because a couple of them spoke more than one language. In fact I think our Italian worker could speak Spanish as well. Which was not uncommon, probably I don't know --- I can't remember now. So that was a really, really important. And we also were doing some work in gay and lesbian issues as well.

MURCHIE: That would have been early days for that to be done.

MATTHEWS: That was early days, very early days. And even had discussions about that terrible subject that was hidden then, lesbian domestic violence.

MURCHIE: Still don't hear a lot about it.

MATTHEWS: You don't hear a lot, but it does happen, as you would expect in any relationship. To relationships sexuality is kind of irrelevant in a way about that.

MURCHIE: How did you get through to that audience? How did you attract them into your services?

MATTHEWS: Trying to make it as welcoming a space for them to come in. Make sure you displayed information. In fact at one stage we had a lesbians only notice board - just for information - not that anyone couldn't see it, but you know but information that was particular for lesbians and contact points for them to go, because there were some counselling services, all voluntary of course, just starting up then. So we did that as well. I am not saying I started all of these things, but I was involved in them and facilitating it. Some of it had started before I got there of course. Carmel would have started some of this.

MURCHIE: No, no. But you were around when it happened. With your role and in fact your whole career was based on feminism and working with women. How did your time at WIS input on your future employment?

[00:45:12]

MATTHEWS: It made me --- I suppose what I understood was the enormity of the task. I probably --- because the more you know the more you know there is to be done and it's never done. That's -- -in fact, when I went and ran Women New South Wales, only a few years ago, we were doing big reforms as you see in my CV with domestic violence and I was a bit worried because I thought, gee it's a long time since I've worked directly in that area. I wonder how out of date I'm going to be. I wasn't.

MURCHIE: Things don't change sadly.

MATTHEWS: I wasn't. And the research was still very current.

MURCHIE: I think the thing we are getting now is people are talking about it.

MATTHEWS: I think that's it.

MURCHIE: We're making Australians of the Year of people who are doing the work.

MATTHEWS: Absolutely. We would never have done that then.

MURCHIE: I mean that's the positive things. So I mean all of that early work has paid off in where we are at now. The sad thing is it's still needed.

MATTHEWS: It's still needed. Absolutely.

MURCHIE: And I find that quite depressing.

MATTHEWS: I suspect it probably always will. Sadly.

MURCHIE: Yeah! It's not getting any less. One thing --- I'm finally looking at my questions. One thing I forgot to ask was the WIS Support Group.

MATTHEWS: Yes. Yes. We did have a Support Group and we held functions and did all kinds of things with them. I'm struggling now to remember the detail of it.

MURCHIE: Well, I was on it in more recent years and it was ---.

MATTHEWS: We didn't meet that often.

MURCHIE: No, I think it was every couple of months, but it was like each organisation would share information from their organisation and then we'd have an update from WIS, so that was the same sort of ---.

MATTHEWS: That's it. That is what happened. WIS, that's it. That's exactly what happened. Same format. Absolutely. Thanks for that reminder. That's exactly - we always did updates - I always did a report to them about what we'd been doing or any issues that I thought would be of interest to them. I'm sure Carmel would have done that too.

MURCHIE: Oh yes. Carmel was saying at one stage it was between fifty and seventy groups were represented at various stages.

MATTHEWS: Yes, it was a bit less by the time ---.

MURCHIE: It's died now, unfortunately, because all of the members were getting quite elderly and it was a real struggle, as with so many organisations to recruit younger people.

MATTHEWS: But it was a good thing to have had, because what it did --- I mean I can remember talking to all the political parties' women's groups, Liberals, Labor.

MURCHIE: That could have been fascinating.

MATTHEWS: But you know what I found though, it breaks down the stereotypes, because I found in all the women in the political groups were all interested in these issues. They all were. I didn't have any pushback from the Liberal women's groups. They wanted domestic violence addressed.

MURCHIE: Well, Di Laidlaw was Minister for a long time and was very supportive of the organisation, so it's not a political thing is it? It's a women's issue.

MATTHEWS: She did a lot. No. No. It was the issue. They understood the issues, most ---or they needed to understand them. If they didn't it was important to go and talk to them as much as you could, because what we all understood then, I think, those of us working in the area, Carol and Carmel certainly understood it, that you had to get bipartisan support, because governments change. That's just - and if you got them offside you risked your funding. So we did a lot of work to make sure we were - we talked to the Democrats. Janine Haines was around. She was a big supporter.

MURCHIE: Certainly would have been.

MATTHEWS: As you would expect. So you really did need to --- you need support --- what we knew then and now --- you need support wherever you can get it, don't you?

[00:49:08]

MURCHIE: And women will come together on an issue.

MATTHEWS: They do. They do.

MURCHIE: They don't let the politics divide do they?

MATTHEWS: No they don't, because they know this issue is more important than political allegiances.

MURCHIE: Another thing that I think was on in your time - you had regular phone-ins on specific issues?

MATTHEWS: Yes, we did. We had phone-ins.

MURCHIE: And what were they about in your time?

MATTHEWS: I think domestic violence was ---.

MURCHIE: I think that's what they started with, but then they extended it to housing and things like that.

MATTHEWS: Housing. Yes. There was some on housing support. I think there were some on childcare as well.

MURCHIE: That makes sense, yes.

MATTHEWS: But I honestly don't remember because I don't have documents about it.

MURCHIE: No, but that's just something that was ---.

MATTHEWS: Oh! I know one - about adoption.

MURCHIE: Oh! Okay.

MATTHEWS: There was a lot of interest at that stage about women, relinquishing mothers. We did some work on that. Women who had been forced, in a way, to give up their children for adoption --- cultural pressure,

but often parental pressure as well and the health system pressure. You can't be a good mother if you ---.

MURCHIE: They were hideous times weren't they?

MATTHEWS: They were shocking, they were just shocking. Awful stories. Heartbreaking actually. So we did work around that as well. I do remember that as being women disclosing for years they'd looked at children in playgrounds thinking you know is that my child --- what's happened to it? Because of course no-one was allowed to continue --- you weren't allowed to----.

MURCHIE: You weren't able to get access to the records?

MATTHEWS: No, they couldn't.

MURCHIE: We are quickly running out of time.

MATTHEWS: Yes, I know, I know.

MURCHIE: I would just like to ask are there any things that I haven't covered or special memories of WIS that you'd like to talk about --- any lasting memories of your time there?

MATTHEWS: I think the time --- I think the way that you could do advocacy at that time was just wonderful. I think for me, because you'd have an idea and you didn't have to go through so many channels, write copious papers, do the --- it was much less bureaucratic. That's probably a way that I could --- because I would go and meet with Carol and say this is an issue coming up where do you think --- how do you think we should best tackle this? Because that was part of the reason for WIS being attached to the Women's Unit, was as Carol, I presume has explained to you, that this was a way of getting grass roots information into the policy settings of government and that did work reasonably well --- not always, not in every way. I'd say I think we need some reform here and then Carol would be able to take it into other environments or talk to the Premier about it and

say we need to put some more resources here. It was --- we still had to have a case but ---.

MURCHIE: But you didn't have to spend six months writing reports?

MATTHEWS: No, you didn't have to do that. And that was the idea that we would find out from the grass roots what was actually going on in people's lives.

MURCHIE: That might be one of the things that's changed. I think we've gone into paperwork a lot more simply because it's a Public Sector job in the modern world.

MATTHEWS: We have.

MURCHIE: We will have to leave it there.

MATTHEWS: Okay, fantastic.

MURCHIE: Thank you, Linda for today. I thoroughly enjoyed it and thank very much for making your time available.

MATTHEWS: Thank you. My pleasure.

[00:52:43]

END OF TRANSCRIPT

Footnotes:

The acronym WIS in this transcript can be either the Women's Information Switchboard or the Women's Information Service.

It will depend on whether the reference is before or after 1995. The Women's Information Switchboard established in 1978 was renamed the Women's Information Service in 1995.

