

# WOMEN'S INFORMATION SERVICE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## Transcript of interview with Vaia Proios

**Interviewee: Vaia Proios**

**Interviewer: Ruth Munro**

**Date: 4th July, 2017**

**[00:00:01]**

**MUNRO:** This is an interview with Vaia Proios conducted by Ruth Munro on Tuesday the 4th July, 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 Anna Lynch 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. I'll begin the interview by asking for some personal information. First of all can you tell me your name?

**PROIOS:** My name is Vaia Proios.

**MUNRO:** And where and when were you born and where did you grow up?

**PROIOS:** Well I was born in Greece in a small village up in the mountains in the north, in 1957. My mother said I was born at 6 o'clock in the afternoon. My family migrated to Australia. My father came first in 1960 and mother, my brother and I followed on the boat, The Patrice, through the Suez Canal in 1961. And we lived basically around the Frewville, Parkside area and that's where I grew up and went to school.

**MUNRO:** Right, thank you for that. And how did you come to be working at WIS, which was I believe, the Women's Information Switchboard at that time.

**PROIOS:** Well, I knew about WIS a lot because I was very active in the Women's Liberation Movement, and I remember being at a collective meeting when Deborah McCulloch came to talk about this exciting new initiative that the Labor government was going to fund, which is a Women's Information Switchboard where women could get information, and it was going to be new and in a nice location with some paid staff but also involving volunteers. I didn't realise that come 1994, I'd be working there as the Acting Coordinator.

**MUNRO:** Right, so you started there in 1994, and you were the Acting Coordinator. How long were you there as Acting Coordinator?

**PROIOS:** I had a stint there for ten months and it was a filler in position, because the previous coordinator had left and there were big changes underway and they wanted to bed down those changes before advertising for a coordinator.

**MUNRO:** And where was WIS located then?

**PROIOS:** We were in Kintore Ave, in the lovely library building there. It was one big open room, and there was an office for the coordinator, that I sat in and a sort of half an office for the administrator and another half a kind of office - a petitioned office which had our photocopier and things.

**MUNRO:** And, can you tell me what WIS was like when you started there? What were its aims and objectives and how did it operate?

**[00:03:10]**

**PROIOS:** Well, it was there to empower women through information and also to support women in whichever ways that they needed support. By the time I got there WIS was about sixteen or seventeen years old and it had been in the same location, operating 7 days a week, 12 hours a day, 9am to 9pm. And it had pamphlets which was the first way that we gave

women information and the telephone so women didn't have to come in, they could ring in at any time and get information. They had just newly put in some computers, so all of the paper documents that they had and information could be loaded on to the computer and you could search, anyone taking a call could search on the issue or the location. Many ways to access the information. It was a very large database. It had moved from cards onto the computer.

**MUNRO:** That's very interesting. In the days of the internet now, to think of how you got the information back then.

**PROIOS:** And that was before the email, there were no email or internet pages or internet access at WIS at that point.

**MUNRO:** And how many staff and volunteers were there?

**PROIOS:** I think we had a core group of some fifteen, twenty volunteers. There were six staff, there were six information officers and an office administrator and the coordinator. We had, the staff all had various roles. We had four cultural bi-cultural staff, bi-lingual staff. We had a staff member responsible for supporting volunteers and the volunteer training program. Our bi-cultural staff had very busy lives. They were running radio programs every week, attending community meetings. I think I talked about that it was open twelve hours a day, so actually we had shift workers. All of the staff worked shifts, so there was the 9 am - 5 pm shift and the 1 pm to 9 pm shift. And on weekends as well. So there were very few times when everyone was together. And when I went there, that struck me first off, that people were wonderful women doing what they could, but they weren't working as a team. And partly that's because they were never, ever there at the same time and I do remember just the difficulties even holding staff meetings. So, I used to try to incorporate some fun, a shared lunch or something to make those times when we came together very special.

**[00:06:03]**

**MUNRO:** Right.

**PROIOS:** And, the other thing is that, what I'd been told by staff and I experienced it while I was there, is that their telephone, the numbers of calls were dropping, the complexity of the calls were increasing. People requiring a lot more support. And although we had a steady walk-in, walk-in wasn't, there weren't that many people that walked in to the place.

**MUNRO:** Do you think that was because they didn't know about it?

**PROIOS:** Possibly two things, or perhaps they didn't come to the city very often and I think that's why the telephone service was so important. More important in a sense than location because not a lot of people come into the city. I should say too, that this was now 1994 - 1995 that I am talking about and a lot had happened around Adelaide. There were a lot more information services - we had Senior's Line, there was an information service at Marion, there was one at Salisbury. A lot of them were run along the same lines, which is there to support. Information was power to empower local people. A lot of women were involved in those services, so women from the community could go there and get the same sort of support, so it was a very different environment in the nineties and what struck me about that time is that it was a transition time for WIS too. It had done what it had done so well, it had a wonderful reputation, it had steady supporters, some of the volunteers had been there since day one and they kept staying and coming every week to their shifts so that shows you the kind of support that it had amongst the women's groups.

**MUNRO:** Right, and what changes were introduced to WIS while you were there as coordinator?

**PROIOS:** So I tried to revitalise some of our, to re-energise the staff and the volunteers. We updated the volunteer training program, we had an

active recruitment to get new volunteers. The training program, as I said, was much improved. We got different staff and other people from outside to come in to do sessions, we gave people a certificate at the end so that they had something to show for that and they got to work with - I involved the other volunteers in training the new volunteers and I think that worked really well.

At that same time we started a conversation about, well what is the core, what should the core business be now of WIS given the changing circumstances that we found ourselves in? Those changing circumstances though meant that women still needed support - don't get me wrong - that didn't change. But how do we support people, how do we work with others who are supporting women? All those questions. So we had a kind of planning process that took stock of who else was around and how could we, what place did we have therefore in this new community landscape? And that meant things looking at what were the volunteers doing, what were the staff doing, what did they think of each other and one of the changes that arose as a result of that was that we asked the bi-cultural workers to start to move away from the weekly commitment of a radio program and to train up volunteers, women in the community who had a passion for radio and communication, so that they could run the radio program and we could continue to provide them with updated information. We could give ideas of topics, guest speakers that they could bring in and play that kind of a role rather than the front role.

**[00:10:25]**

**MUNRO:** So it sounds like there was a lot of changes happening during the time you were there. So, you were Acting Coordinator from May 1994 to March 1995.

**PROIOS:** Yes

**MUNRO:** What did you do after that?

**PROIOS:** I had come --- I was in the --- the Women's Information Switchboard was part of the Women's Office, which had a Women's Adviser to the Premier and the Unit was called the Women's Information and Policy Unit and it sat in the Department of the Premier and Cabinet right at the heart, the top of the Public Sector. So I started there in their Policy wing. I had those wonderful ten months in the actual WIS itself, and then I went to Sydney to work at the Redfern Legal Centre, to do a project and on my return three months later, I resumed my role in what was the Women's Unit, which was then called The Office for the Status of Women. So at the end of 1993, after the election of a new government we had a new Minister, Diana Laidlaw, and the Office for the Status of Women, rather than reporting to the Premier, reported to our Minister, and the Office was relocated to be close to the Minister. She was also the Minister for Transport, the Arts and later Planning, I think. So, very diverse portfolios and she wanted her Office for the Status of Women close by, and so we moved out of Victoria Square, where we had been and over to the Station Arcade building, which the Minister later renamed Dame Roma Mitchell in honour of the Governor as she was at the time. I basically worked there through to about 2001, so reflecting my eight years in this area, I actually had a different relationship with WIS, but I maintained my interest and involvement in WIS.

**MUNRO:** What was your role then in regard to WIS?

**PROIOS:** We undertook again, a review of the whole Women's portfolio, which at that time had WIS, it had the Policy Unit and it also had a newly established South Australian Women's Advisory Council. There were the three prongs to the Government's resources to the Women's portfolio. We wanted to work better together, rather than separately and for each of us to inform the other, so one of the things that WIS did, is they kept statistics on the calls, or the people who contacted them and what it was about. We

wanted to have a way to feed that into the Policy wing. Therefore, what could we do in a systemic way across government to meet these concerns?

**[00:13:37]**

And interestingly, technology was just starting to take off in the nineties, and it emerged as an issue for women and we were concerned that we didn't want women to be left behind in this race for technology. So we looked at some policies and procedures and things that we advised Government about, but there were also very practical things that we could do. And the Women's Information Service was a wonderful service vehicle for ---, we would look at trends and the impact on women of change, and the Women's Information Service as it was then called and was relocated - we haven't talked about that - one of the things we did is move them closer to us, so we were all in the same building, albeit they were in a shopfront, right at the heart of the city, not tucked away, but right there at the Station Arcade close to the Adelaide Railway Station. It was prime location, and they ran services and found ways to reach women.

I can remember two, what I think were wonderful, innovative - I think we were the first to do it - and one was actually email addresses. I think at the time we didn't even have an email address. Maybe we were all starting and we might have had one to share for the whole office - the whole office had one to share - but it was the new way to communicate. You could communicate with people across the world. For our people here from other countries, they could communicate with their families and so there was a concerted campaign really to let women establish an email address. They were free and so I don't know how many women got their first email address through the Women's Information Service. I recall this beautiful, beautiful lady, whose name I can't remember, she was in her early eighties, she lived at Gawler, she used to catch the train in and she would come in and use, because we had some computers that any woman could come in

and use, and go in there and communicate with her grandchildren who were all doing fabulous things across Australia and across the world. I remember how, for her in her eighties, she was right in there with the latest technology.

We used to, our Vietnamese worker, Lien [Nguyen-Navas], used to bring Vietnamese women in on the weekend, on Saturdays when we were open and she could train the women in how to use computers, in how to access the internet, how to establish an email, how to use email. That was really exciting. It was geared towards older women, women without computers at home and women from other cultures. Our young women were already using it. They didn't need that service quite as much, although we did have computers they could come in and use and find their own information or make their own arrangements.

**[00:17:01]**

The other one that I would like to talk about was actually - at that time banking had changed and so people were moving away from having the cards - you know - their books, their deposit books and the card was coming in and the best way to use the card, obviously you could use it anywhere at any ATM machine. You could use it night and day. It liberated people. It meant that you could access your money when you wanted it, not within the working hours of the bank. But a lot of women said they were very nervous about using it. What if they lost it, what if they moved the wrong money, whatever? We were discussing this with the Minister, Di Laidlaw, and she said " Well, why don't you get one in, get an ATM in and run classes"? And then it was like, gosh, where do you get an ATM from? And we got one through People's Choice, which was our Credit Union and they were very excited about this program to teach women in a safe place, one on one, it didn't matter if they made mistakes, nobody could see them and they could learn it. And that is what we did. They lent us an ATM

machine and we had it sitting in the Shopfront and women booked in or if they were visiting they came in and learnt to use it. What we did was, that was great and that introduced a whole new group of women to the service and then we were able to negotiate with the key banks. By that stage a lot of the key banks had women officers to look at women's businesses and we convinced them that this was something they should be doing, and so they did. So that was a kind of revolution across Adelaide, really, that the banks themselves, would have a bank officer available at an ATM inside the bank so that anyone who banked with them could learn and they could move to a keycard. My own mother got a keycard and learnt how to use it and she was a Greek lady who didn't speak much English.

**MUNRO:** What a wonderful idea to teach them there. And what about learning the internet for the older women? Was there a program to help them?

**PROIOS:** There was a program. I should talk about how did the ---. WIS used to operate by having kind of two functions. There was the telephone function and we had that in a back room in the shopfront because you needed some quiet, so that's why that was there. The main shopfront had a series of computers and anyone could walk in at any time, because we always had rostered staff and volunteers and they could be taught. They could also book in if they were only going to be in town at a particular time. That probably was one of the busiest services.

I talked earlier about when we were over in Kintore Avenue, our statistics showed people accessed us mainly through the telephone. When we got to the shopfront, I think actually, our walk-ins were really high. In fact they may have even surpassed the phones at some stage. Our walk-ins changed the stats.

The other thing that we did were regional and local visits, so we would go out to regions. We often went with the transport people. They had a kind of bus that went around to regional areas and people could come in and pay their driver's licence or whatever, SA Water and all those kind of bills. We would go along too, because they had Internet access, and we would teach the women how to use the internet and access how to find information for themselves in regional locations. We also did shopping centres and we had a series of advertisements which would pose some questions - are you interested in this, have you ever wondered about that? Someone is going to be in your local shopping centre at this day, this time, so come in. So the telephone became the lesser way and it was kind of face to face, internet, email became the new way. But again, I presume that has increased a lot since I was involved.

**[00:21:53]**

**MUNRO:** So at the actual shopfront, did you have a program to teach?

**PROIOS:** Yes, we did. As I said, people could either come in and run through the program or book a time to have time with a trainer, I suppose.

**MUNRO:** And did the hours change when you moved to the Station Arcade?

**PROIOS:** So one of the things we started to do - I talked about in the early days, there hadn't been a lot of investment in WIS and so part of the investment was having a review and looking at what services, what the usage was, when were the core busy times, so that we could make sure we had more staff on then. It showed pretty much that after six or seven

o'clock, phone calls dropped right off and the kind of calls that came in were really calls where I think a service like Lifeline probably had better support and trained people to be able to offer them.

So there was a huge consultation process, because WIS is owned by a lot of people, not just the staff or even the volunteers. All the women's groups that over the years have supported WIS and there was a WIS Support Group, which was always a bipartisan group. It had women from all the political parties, every women's group, the Girl Guides, so many women's groups, so it was kind of owned by a lot of people. Everyone loved WIS and needed to have a say. It wasn't an easy process. I think sometimes you fought to defend a place you don't want to see changed, but the facts kind of spoke for themselves. Also we wanted to be able to use our resources differently, because the times had changed and we needed to kind of go with them too, so that we could make sure women weren't left behind.

So we did change the times when we moved to the shopfront. We were open six days a week and we were open from nine o'clock to six o'clock, I think, initially, and on Saturdays it was probably nine or ten through to about four or five. That really was - I don't think it was a bad thing and I think that our statistics showed that we weren't suffering by having the less hours. It meant the staff didn't have to have so much shift work, it meant people could work together as a team. But it was a painful process - I have to say that - yeah! As I said I hope we heard everyone. There were written submissions, there were meetings to discuss. I hope everyone's voice was heard, but in the end, you have to make decisions on resources and those were made.

**[00:25:04]**

**MUNRO:** Did you establish a website at that time?

**PROIOS:** Yes. So I talked about when the whole women's area, the three prongs, the three W's as we called them - the WIS, the Women's Policy and the Women's Advisory and we had a kind of joint letterhead which was three W's, very flowing W's and each with its own colour, and the website reflected that too. The page on the Women's Advisory Council had a page and it talked about - it did massive consultations across the state and it became the new way to share information.

So, I talked about, we started with info on cards, we moved into a database and then it was beyond the database - it was frequently asked questions, it was alerting women to things that were coming up or issues that were starting to emerge, links to other sites, other women's sites, both here and internationally. It just, I think we wanted a presence, because we didn't want to be left behind and it was a challenge to find - how can we get our information across, but also how can we empower women to seek their own information - how can we make it easier for them so that they don't need us, but they still can use the tools. And I think that one is still a challenge for today. Because today is different to then and tomorrow will be different again, so whoever are the custodians of the resource called WIS need to make sure that they are good advocates for women and make things easier for women.

**MUNRO:** So, having the internet did change quite a lot the way that the workers and volunteers provided information to the clients. Did you have brochures in the shopfront?

**PROIOS:** We still had brochures, we did, but they were less reliable, because as soon as you printed them they were out of date and I don't think phone numbers changed that much, but it is really surprising how the services changed. So I think brochures are lovely, but they became a little bit superfluous, but we did have some - a very small display really.

**MUNRO:** So it did change it quite a lot, yes.

**PROIOS:** It wasn't quite the main way to give people information.

**MUNRO:** No

**PROIOS:** And I talked about our bilingual, and with bilingual it was just easier to find websites where people could get that information in their own language. It just opened a new world.

**[00:28:04]**

**MUNRO:** Yes, yes. It would have changed a lot.

**PROIOS:** And the beauty is our beautiful volunteers, some of whom had been there from day one, and who were quite elderly, but still coming, they all learnt it too. And it was wonderful, absolutely wonderful.

**MUNRO:** And who were the WIS coordinators during this time?

**PROIOS:** Okay so there was Gudrun [Boessler], who left, and then me who came on. Margaret Porter was there. Linda Forrest, and Linda was probably there --- Margaret was there for the move, the relocation. She did a wonderful job of making sure that the new WIS was so visually very beautiful. Worked with a lovely woman designer, and we had not very much money at all. Luckily Diana Laidlaw had found some money for us and so our lovely designer, Maria Gianquitto, from Hassell's she used beautiful silk fabrics and lighting and we managed to get some, I think they were donated actually, beautiful glassware from the Jam Factory and we had little spots for them to sit and lots of colours, beautiful colours, so visually it was very beautiful. I found it very beautiful and very inviting. And it showed. I think most people came in and went wow! The idea being - well, women deserved to be in a very restful, calm, safe place.

One of the biggest challenges was the amount of window space. So it was a shopfront so of course that is all window and people found it - they weren't

used to being exposed and on show because Kintore Avenue was tucked away - nobody ever saw you, and it took some getting used to. Initially people put screens and pamphlet stands and things, just to try to get - I don't know - feel less exposed but by the end, no. (Laugh) I think people saw that it is actually quite good to be exposed, to have that level of visibility, because so many women just came and said we didn't know what this was and, you know, it was wonderful.

**MUNRO:** Well that sounds really good. Good move and good setup. And did you work with anyone else in the Policy Unit who had an impact on WIS?

**PROIOS:** I did, in fact all of the areas had so much overlap, obviously, because we were the one family, so to speak. So, for example when I started work in the Policy Unit, Jane Taylor was the last Women's Adviser to the Premier and when she left, Linda Matthews came on as Acting Director to set up the new office and re-orient it towards the Minister. And of course Linda had been a WIS coordinator, so there was that connection. And then I said, the Minister wanted her Office to be close to her. She created a position called the Director of the Office for the Status of Women. It was advertised and Carmel O'Loughlin won that position - again a previous WIS coordinator. So, we kind of had a lot of cross-over and women who had started in WIS had gone on to do other things and then brought them back through the Women's Policy Office. So it was kind of exciting.

**MUNRO:** So you all worked in together in various roles.

**PROIOS:** People brought different knowledge and experience to the table. As I said the Women's Movement had experienced a lot of changes. I mean a lot of what we were fighting for in the seventies, we got. We got Women's Health Centres, we got Women's Offices in various departments and in the Union Movement, the banks had women, people just specifically

looking after women customers. I mean that was a big thing that we wanted all of the agencies of government and firms to see women as customers, because, you know, previously we weren't allowed to be customers because we weren't allowed to have bank accounts or loans. Well that had changed and so, it was a different world and that's why I think we felt we had to be one step ahead always, and not rest on our laurels, but keep going.

**[00:32:49]**

**MUNRO:** And what memories do you have of the times you shared with other workers and volunteers during your time at WIS? You've talked about some of them but, is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

**PROIOS:** I just, I kind of think that I'm a pretty out there kind of person, and I think that probably was quite good for that transition period where people weren't sure what would happen. So we had a new Minister, a new Government, change was going to come. I think a lot of the staff and volunteers had been waiting for something to happen and had been a bit dispirited, so, as I said I'm a firm believer in people working together and really sharpening their own thinking and making sure that we all knew what the contribution was that we wanted to make.

I'm also a very social person, so I did, kind of, try to get staff to stay behind at 5 o'clock and stay and have a talk and a de-brief and have a drink and to sort of just unwind a bit. People, staff often had really difficult phone calls and not many opportunities to debrief, and so, and to learn from each other and to share the day and what had happened and so that was ---. I think I did introduce a bit of that, but the other thing is just reconnecting with why we're here. What is it that we're here to do? And to be very conscious about that and make sure that our direction, our policies, our procedures, our rosters, how we conducted ourselves, our values, that everything was aligned so that we could be more effective. So my memory

is really of some people, perhaps weren't so keen on change, but I think at the end of the day everyone pulled together as we always have and made sure that the next phase, you know, was successful and they were on board and people who didn't want to be on board left graciously, actually, not with bitterness but left graciously to allow the new people to come through.

The volunteers, because we had such long shifts and we were open so long, we always had to have a pool of casual staff to come in if staff were on sick leave, or running one of the regional consultations, and we managed to get opportunities for many of those women to be employed as WIS workers. So we had a lovely breed, new refreshing, refreshing of staff through our volunteers through our casual pool, and that's a real strength I think.

**[00:35:43]**

I worked with some gorgeous women, I can't believe how lucky I was to be there and I look with such pride now, when I see, I read about them in the newspapers, like Tanya Hosch, the AFL footy league diversity person. Wow! She was a wonderful young WIS worker, and she acknowledges WIS, which is really great. And I look at many of our people that have gone into the public service proper and they're running amazing programs in transport, with the northern connector, and disability services, so you'll find, there are WIS people everywhere. I did a little straw count when I was there in '95, and I figured we'd had something like close to a thousand volunteers, WIS Support Group people just in that, in well, since 1977, or whenever it opened, so it was an important place. And it's done the public service a huge service by having people who are customer focussed, because I don't think the public service was very customer focussed before that.

**MUNRO:** Now, I think you've probably talked about - the next question was, do you want to talk about any other women who made an important contribution to WIS during your time there?

**PROIOS:** Well I've mentioned some. So in my time I think that we were very lucky to have Diana Laidlaw as our Minister. Previous to that we had the wonderful Anne Levy, and she was an incredible Minister. She was also the Minister for the Arts. And then Diana came in and she managed to increase our budget and give us the money to relocate, give us the money to buy new computers, so gave us great ideas of things and also was very can do - if you think that's a problem just go out and do it, so that's pretty good.

We had Carmel O'Loughlin - I just want to really mention her here because Carmel was an extraordinary person. Her knowledge of the women's area, Women's Liberation, Women Electoral Lobby, through WIS, her work in domestic violence, she was the perfect person to be the Director during this change period, and she was always true - I think her passion for women has never changed and she was an extraordinary leader. She was wonderful for me, she gave me lots of opportunities, lots of support and I just loved --- we used to work around a table similar to how we're sitting now and we'd edit beautiful publications and, just changing the way that we produced stuff to make sure that, we were, we had case studies highlighting women, we'd photographs of real women, it was just nice. Beautiful time, really.

**MUNRO:** We might just pause for a minute.

(Pause for a drink)

**[00:39:05]**

**MUNRO:** We might move on to talk about the clients. What do you remember about the clients who used WIS, for example age or ethnic background and what involvement did you have with these women?

**PROIOS:** When I was at WIS, the client group was mainly through phone, and so I think we had a real mixture of women who would call. I think some of the issues were, obviously, domestic violence, some of the issues were poverty, seeking financial assistance and relief, which is one of the reasons why we re-oriented that to financial independence and women being able to understand that more. There weren't many clients who came in. We had our regulars who would come, I think, just to take the weight of their shoulders and just to have a sit down, and we also had some, occasionally we had some very angry men who came to the service. I can recall a very unpleasant fellow that came in and I had to bring him into my office, actually, to calm him down and give the staff and the volunteers some reprieve. I don't know if that was very smart, because what I know now, is I probably should, I should have sat closer to the door, but anyway.

We had a varied clientele. It reflected the staff, because we had a Greek speaker, a Spanish speaker, a Vietnamese speaker. We had large groups of women from those cultural groups who would call and also who would volunteer in the radio programs. I think we had a younger group too, who were used to coming to look through our database to get information for themselves. I think it has probably changed now. I am not even sure that we profile very much now the client. We tended to mainly profile the issue and that was because we needed to make sure that if we saw a pattern of requests for certain information we would do some research to make sure we had what they needed and that it was on our database.

We had some unusual, I don't want to downplay it - the hard issues are hard issues. I recall we had quite a few grandmothers calling because they were concerned about their children - they were divorcing and they were concerned about the grandchildren and what they could find out. Luckily the Federal Courts used to produce very good booklets for children to help them to understand what Mum and Dad were going through. So we had unusual requests. I will never forget the lady from Kangaroo Island who, I

don't know why, but she needed to locate some lucerne for her cows and guess what? We found it for her. [Laugh] There were often requests for "How do you get red wine out of suede?" We had resource books and we had one which was about cleaning products, so our staff and volunteers could go to that and read out the excerpt. People often wanted to know about the Bilby, the chocolate bilby, so we had a fact sheet on the Bilby. Where to get --- just unusual calls as well as heartbreaking calls. We had quite a few immigration calls. A lot of our non-English speaking wanted to know how they could sponsor relatives to come out to Australia. Our multicultural workers were amazing. They knew a little bit about everything, because they had to kind of field every enquiry from their community.

**MUNRO:** And do you think that the type of women who use WIS has changed much over the years and in what way?

**[00:43:24]**

**PROIOS:** I don't know if I can even answer that. I suspect that WIS still has clients, people who don't know where else to go for whatever their problem is. I think that they, because of the reputation of WIS, I think that it is a caring organisation who will listen to whatever it is - that reputation will mean that people who are at the end of their tether or in despair, will go there because they know they will get a good hearing and some assistance.

I suspect also it is people who want to access our knowledge base --- it could be other service providers, other community group leaders who want to access some of that, because I think it is a very valuable resource. And then there are people who, I think, just want the information they might get that from our internet page, rather than even contact us. They don't want to contact us, just want to use our information. [laugh].

One of the other kind of, they are not really clients, was the WIS Support Group --- I think all the women's services and the various women's groups that are around. The WIS Support Group was such an important group. It saw itself as the sort of political wing, to sort of protect and extend, I suppose, women's services and to always make sure that there were women specific services in whatever area. So that was a very important group. As I said earlier, it was a bipartisan group. There were women from the Liberal party, the Australian Democrats, the Labor Party. It was very well supported and WIS had actually, to its credit, it had the view of being for all women, so not being judgemental about that and sometimes it is easier to be judgemental and to forget and I think the Support Group always reminded us that actually it is about all women and we don't judge, including we who think we are feminists we don't judge about women who aren't feminists. So that was really---

**[00:45:57]**

But as the coordinator you don't actually do a lot of client work. I used to like to take calls because I never liked to hear a ringing phone and occasionally I got to take some of those calls and I was so pleased that we had a great database which you could interrogate and give them local information - hey, did you know that just near you there is this place and it is running this course and you may meet other people who are in the same situation as you, so that was great.

**MUNRO:** During your time at WIS, you might have talked about this, what were the important women's issues of the day and were they reflected in the kind of a calls WIS received?

**PROIOS:** Well, unfortunately, violence against women was as important then as it is today, and I said earlier it was women having no money and not knowing where to go. We used to have some particular kind of special

information, and one was if a woman had decided that she wanted to leave we had of kind of checklist that we could run through with her, if she had made that decision, as well as putting her in touch with all of the domestic violence services and people who could help her. I recall at one stage we - what to do with your pet if you were leaving was really important, and I think we actually wrote that in to the checklist and we managed to find a service that would take care of the pet in the short term while they found new accommodation so that, and not having money, the usual relationship breakups and what to do. Certainly those calls were there. There were also people who were depressed and not coping, so those calls were certainly there as well. I presume they are the calls of today.

**MUNRO:** Yes, my next question was going to be, do you think there is still a need for an Information Service for women today?

**[00:48:33]**

**PROIOS:** Absolutely, absolutely, but the thing that I learnt is that you don't have to provide the service directly yourself to make a difference. In fact our relationships with other service providers - it's about where are the people, meeting them where they are and making sure that wherever they go to get help and support, that if we are holding information we need to share it with those services so that the client, wherever the woman goes, she will get the right information and be put in touch with the right services. So I do think that we will always be needed because we have to be the advocates and someone has to keep the information alive and also make sure that it is being shared. You know, it is not about hanging on to it, we are not selling it, we are giving it away.

Also I do believe that we should go out to where the women are, they shouldn't have to come to us really. Which is why the telephone and internet are great. It means you can access from wherever you are and at

any time - the internet at any time - not the phone - there won't be someone to answer it.

And I didn't talk earlier actually, but I want to mention now, we did run all these other services. The Lesbian Line was really important. They had a roster, the collective that ran that line, and it was on Tuesday nights from memory and they would come in --- volunteers would be rostered and come in and staff that line and take those calls and they had their own information database of services and activities and events and the other was legal advice. So, we offered legal advice, telephone legal advice service one evening a week and on Saturdays and there were a whole bunch of wonderful women lawyers who gave their time and I recall one (?...?) said that she often was in the garden and had her telephone and would take the calls while she was sitting in her garden and giving women some early advice and certainly where to go next and how to access it. In fact Vicki Chapman, an MP, was one of the women lawyers who gave her services. So, we talked about clients but also there is this huge range of volunteers who also sustained that service.

**[00:51:28]**

**MUNRO:** Yes, I was going to talk about WIS and the community next, but you've covered a fair bit of that. WIS has been involved in providing services to women in the community over a long period of time, for example outreach services like rural outreach, attendance at field days and talks to community groups. Now I think you mentioned the van that went out in the earlier days to the rural areas. Is there any other outreach services that you had involvement with that you'd like to talk about?

**PROIOS:** I think those were probably the main ones, from memory. We were often called upon to come and talk at community groups and women's groups and all the staff took their turn to go and do what we would call the WIS talk. We went to a lot of schools, we went to

universities, to Women's Studies courses. Our public speaking was actually quite a big service that we provided. We often were interviewed on radio. In fact Bob Francis, we went on his radio program. He was great supporter of WIS. Who would have thought! And many a time on his talkback, if you know, he'd say go and see the women at WIS. They will help you. He was tremendous.

**MUNRO:** That's wonderful!

**PROIOS:** I know. Who would have thought! But one of his producers actually was a volunteer. The famous Tuesday group, which, they were long term volunteers, that group. So it worked in mysterious ways. But, yes, I'd forgotten about the public speaking, actually. It was big. We were invited to a lot of groups.

And after the changes when it became the service and there was this new orientation to internet, women's financial security, understanding the superannuation. We talked about the age groups, well actually that was probably how we got some of the younger women accessing our services, who had started work and were concerned about those things. Enterprise bargaining, we did quite a bit of work with the Working Women's Centre, which for one period of time, actually located to the Station Arcade, upstairs. And in fact, Sandra Dann, the Director of the Working Women's Centre, came for, I am not sure, was it six months or twelve months, and was the acting WIS Coordinator when the coordinator at the time went off to do another little job somewhere. So working women tended to go to the Working Women's Centre and we had a reciprocal relationship with that service and they were certainly members of the WIS Support Group, so we would work together when we needed to, but we also referred people to them and they referred to us.

**[00:54:51]**

**MUNRO:** That's wonderful. I mean the working together of the women's services is great. Now, I think that's just about the end of my questions, but one more. How did your time at WIS or the the Office for Status for Women influence or lead you to your next career move?

**PROIOS:** Well I became interested in how can we change the currents and how can we make services better, so for me, I then went to work on a couple of reviews of government services. One was a review of the Public Sector itself and the other was the Generational Health Review. I think my interest in the women's areas ---. I got to see a bit of everything across government as you do with women's programs and I got interested really in how can we make other services and programs that the government funds better and make sure that it is meeting the needs of its customers. WIS taught me to, the other thing WIS taught me to do is to be very bold and brave and to actually imagine a better world and get out there and demand it. So, I think my confidence grew a lot and the other thing I learnt is that you have to do it together - you've got to find ways to work together, otherwise things won't happen. I say to my staff now - we spend so much time together - we spend more time together with each other as a team than we do with our friends. So we have to capitalise on that. So it did, it taught me to, well I think the social justice - that's stronger now maybe, than even then and it was pretty strong in the old days. And getting rid of discrimination and injustice, absolutely. I'm of that generation that thinks that you should fight for those things.

**MUNRO:** And finally, is there anything you would like to add to what you have already said?

**PROIOS:** No, but it's wonderful. I think the project is wonderful. I think you two women are extraordinary and you forget - your memories - the social memory is important and I'm really pleased to be part of this. Thank you very much and I think it's great work and if we can capture some of the

energy and enthusiasm and have that on show for the next generations, I think it's great.

**MUNRO:** Thank you very much for sharing your memories. It's been wonderful.

**[00:57:44]**

**END OF INTERVIEW**