

# WOMEN'S INFORMATION SERVICE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## Transcript of Interview with Andi Sebastian

**Interviewer:** Caroline Pascoe

**Interviewee:** Andi Sebastian

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**[00:00:02]**

**PASCOE:** This is an interview with Andi Sebastian by Caroline Pascoe with Kati Murphy recording for the Women's Information Service Oral History Project at the State Library for South Australia on Friday the 20th April 2018.

Welcome Andi.

**SEBASTIAN:** Hi Caroline, thank you.

**PASCOE:** Just a brief look at where you born and grew up please?

**SEBASTIAN:** I was born in the early 1950s and I grew up in the South Australian countryside. So I was a country girl and came to Adelaide to go to University. So by, so I came to Adelaide to live .. ohh I can't remember ... it was sixty-nine, to go to University and did a Bachelor of Arts at Flinders University

**PASCOE:** The 1970s was a ---

**SEBASTIAN:** Fun time

**PASCOE:** exciting time for women, just the second wave of feminism and all those sort of things. What was the situation for women in the seventies from your experience? That maybe prompted you to start looking at the social position on women.

**SEBASTIAN:** I think what really influenced me was the situation of women in the sixties. So growing up in the South Australian countryside observing women who, whose marriages broke down for example, couldn't leave their husbands and take their children. So women stayed in situations of extreme violence, extreme unhappiness. The Married Women's Property Act wasn't revoked until, can't remember when, but something like sixty-nine. So when I was growing up as a teenager observing, you know teenage girls really look at what's happening, very observant and what I saw was that women couldn't work often without the permission of their husbands and that was true in my own family. Probably shouldn't go there too much. But you know typically if a woman wanted to work part time if her husband was a man with some authority in the town then if he didn't want her to work she wouldn't be working. Women going to the Bank to try to get loans, women trying to leave unhappy situations with their kids, this was --- My growing up was pre the Family Law Court and the Family Law Act which made a huge difference. So coming into the seventies I mean I was just, just a young woman coming into the seventies in nineteen seventy I was at University, I can't remember which year and in all sorts of ways it was so much fun because it was an explosion of a whole generation of us coming in to adulthood at the same time as Anne Summers wrote ---

**PASCOE:** Dammed Whores ---

**SEBASTIAN:** 'Dammed Whores and God's Police', Simone De Beauvoir had written the 'Second Sex' you know --- what are those --- my goodness my brain is going on me ---

**[00:03:32]**

**PASCOE:** Betty Friedan.

**SEBASTIAN:** Betty Friedan, exactly. So there were all these theoretical work that was happening that was the same time as the reality for us was very different. And another really big thing for me was being involved in the Vietnam Moratorium, and it was both a time when some of us came into our political realisation but it was also a time when --- we were starting to feel equal with the young men of our time but we weren't. You know they were still the organisers, they were still this, they were still that. Think the other two things that very much influenced my growing up and maybe again because --- specifically because I was in --- growing up in a country town, the treatment of Aboriginal people. One of the girls I went to school with, her dad had a gammy leg and was something of a drinker. And it was only as a teenager that I discovered the story behind that. He was a man who was very community minded working on a working bee, apparently they were cutting down trees and I don't know how it happened but whether the tree fell on him, or he was cut, or what have you, but as a result according to the story I grew up with, as a result of improper treatment in the hospital, his leg went gangrenous and he lost it. So --- and --- so observing how adults in the town treated him and that, that stayed with me. And one of the other things that happened, I'd just got to University and Oodgeroo Noonuccal who was the Aboriginal Poet who at that stage was known as Kath Walker, came to Finders University, I was a country kid with eyes wide open so I was going to everything, and I had as a teenager, like fifteen I think, discovered her poetry and I remember seeing her name up and I couldn't believe it was this same woman. I kind of didn't care who it was but the very fact Kath Walker, you know that name, and I went and that was a huge political thing for me too.

**[00:06:21]**

And then finally I think the other thing that was really happening to me was just coming up a little bit more towards the time of the mention of the

Switchboard was in my immediate family I had a sister who was involved in a car accident with her very young child and acquired a disability and so I got --- I mean disability had always been part of my awareness but I think the particular situations meant that I was never really exposed to the social aspects of disability and then of course as you know, the year of disabled persons was --- forget exactly what --- maybe nineteen seventy five --- and so this political movement at the same time as I was discovering through personal experience the obstacles for people with a disability.

So you know --- and also I had the other thing that was a huge factor in my level of awareness and my growing up and my social commitment was my grandmother. Both my grandparents were very interested in politics. My grandfather was and I lived with them through my adolescence, my grandfather was a member of State Parliament for a few years and he was on the local council so he was that kind of interest in politics. But my grandmother was a lifelong player in the Country Women's Association and the year, I think the year I was born, she was then National President and she was awarded an MBE for her services to women and children throughout Australia. And one of the things I loved doing --- seventeen, eighteen I hitch-hiked you know all over the place as we did at that stage. You know it was kind of a game that I would always go to the women's restrooms in country towns throughout Australia and sure enough I was finding my grandmother's name on foundation stone and of course the funny background to that I mean was my grandfather was a grazier and by then they'd come thorough the depression and stuff and he enough means and so he often would hire a small plane if grandma wanted to go somewhere. And so many stories. My grandmother was terrified of flying, terrified, like you would not believe. She would be in these little mosquito planes ---

**[00:09:25]**

**PASCOE:** So she was a strong woman.

**SEBASTIAN:** She was a strong woman because she utterly determined you know if the School of the Air in some oonah woop woop wanted her to go, she'd get on that plane. No matter how scared she was so that was ---

**PASCOE:** I can see you come from some very good stock and we've got a really good idea of, of what the young Andi Sebastian was. Can you now take me to the --- how you came involved with the Premier's Department.

**SEBASTIAN:** Well first of all I have to take you to my habit as it already had become --- I had my degree, I'd been working, my habit was save up as much money as I could and then travel. And so I was travelling in the United States of America having a great time. I went with two girlfriends and the sister of one of the girls and her husband lived in America. And it was a couple of wonderful things, we landed in Atlanta Georgia and they knew I loved Jazz and they had bought me a ticket to Ella Fitzgerald's return concert to Atlanta, first time she had returned there since apparently, you know there was an incident with you know the clan (Klu Klux Klan) some many years before that was pretty amazing. Anyway we had a good time travelled around America, went to New York, I love New York, and then we went to San Francisco where we ran out of money and you know it was not surprising run out of money. I had enough sense I had a return ticket but I was also locked into that date. So being able to eat and sleep safely for, can't remember how long it was, two weeks, three weeks, four weeks, I don't remember was a bit of an issue and so we you know we talked to people, you know Australian kids talk to everybody, and we discovered there were a number of ways that you could quite safely survive on the streets in those days. One of them was called 'pan handling' and its basically it the equivalent of the charity collectors. So you're given a tin and a badge and a permit and you go out on the street and you collect for this charity and at the end of the day you get to keep half of what you've collected.

And so you know this is --- what is it --- I don't know, nineteen seventy-six, beginning of seventy-seven, I can't remember something like that. And so you know, you could get a bed for five dollars a night, I don't know, for six or seven dollars you could eat two or three times a day. And we started doing that and one of the other girls was terrific at that. I was not great at that, I didn't like that.

**[00:12:26]**

But you know I ploughed through it for a few days but I kept asking people what else were the options and you could work in the childcare centre, so I did. And there were the trucks that came every day to pick up labourers so I lined up there a few times but I quickly worked out they'd only take men. And then I had the sense to follow the lead. Who on earth set all this up because what I was observing everybody else was just kind of --- I have to say my friends carried me a bit at this point because they were intent on acquiring the means or of course --- Blood! Selling your blood was a big thing and it was only five dollars in New York I think but it was eleven dollars a pint in San Francisco and I can tell you straight away that was where I discovered I'm a nightmare. One of my friends is an Italian girl. Fabulous veins! They would hook her up bloods going whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh.. It would take them forever to find the blood in me and it would crawl. I'm hopeless at that. But while --- so I gave that up after the first time, that was just agonising. I'd be there for an hour and they still didn't have enough blood. So what I did while the others were giving blood was talk, and listen, and ask a lot of questions and so I discovered this absolutely amazing story. All of this was organised through a place called the Haight Ashbury Switchboard and that was started by two guys, one of whom I met who they were older black men and they had you know they were very community minded men they understood absolutely, information was power,

and their people weren't getting it. So they did the equivalent of shimmying up a stobie pole and tap the wires I mean they don't have stobie poles in San Francisco but you know they had this little gerry built switchboard. Literally they had tapped the wires and they started off in this kind of cupboard really. By the time I got there it was a room about this size and it was staffed almost entirely by young people who were travelling around the world and they had created, they had --- you know all these different phone lines and they had the women's switchboard, the dental switchboard, the health switchboard, the education switchboard it was just gob smacking. It was the most fantastic experience. So I returned to Australia having ---

**[00:15:19]**

**PASCOE:** Did you work at all --- excuse me for interrupting --- did you work at all at that --- in that area?

**SEBASTIAN:** No be they didn't really, you know like --- they wanted people who were going to stay and I absolutely was not. I had the return ticket. But what, what I did do cos I met this one --- one of the older guys and he was happy for me to hang around, and so I did. I hung around and I talked to some of these backpackers who had come --- and there was this one guy, he was a huge guy, he was English, he had arrived, I think it was seven or eight years before, he had, had no intention of staying beyond three weeks. And he was still there, you know, and he was an amazing guy. And so I came back to Australia with no money and in those days Centrelink was a very different beast and it was actually quite civilised if you were tertiary educated. They had, what was it called, the Commonwealth Employment Service, I think, and there was this fabulous bloke, I'd gone to him, because I had this pattern of, I'd get a fabulous job and I'd stay there and save my money and then I'd go travelling. So I'd come back and I'd have nothing to go to so you know I'd kind of worked my path to this place and this man was great he always knew about

good jobs. Anyway so I went to see him and said 'I've got no money, need work really fast and something that pays well would be very good' and he said 'God he said, there's one here that absolutely looks exactly like you but I think they have just closed it'. And I said 'well have you got anything else' and he said 'no don't at the moment' he said look 'give them a go you never know and come back next week'. Now I'm not 100% sure if there is anybody who really knows this story and it would be Maureen Fallon and she would remember. But I think it might have been a Friday that he said that, so he said 'give them a go and if nothing happens come back next week and I'll see if I've got something else'. So I whizzed down and rang and I think it was even late in the afternoon and I got Maureen Fallon and I said you know --- what was his name, Bill or something like that. Anyway I've been to the office and they've given me this job description for an Information Officer in the Women's Advisory Unit and I'd like to apply. And she said 'well I'm afraid we've just closed it', and I said 'well that's a shame' and I just didn't stop talking and a few minutes later she said, 'oh I think we need to talk to you'. (Laugh)

**[00:18:11]**

Bless her I was so grateful to her because I felt oh yes okay, here's a chance. So as I say I'm not sure but I reckon that that was a Friday because we were eating potatoes that had grown in the garden while we were travelling and anyway I went for the interview and I got it. And I think it got it largely because, because of some of the stories and experiences that I alluded to at the beginning because --- and in those days I think --- you know --- like even when I was at University --- this has just suddenly come back into my mind --- I was living in Glenelg in one of those little back streets in a house that was being condemned, so it was cheap enough for me to live in with some other students and, there was a series of tiny houses and big fence across the lane way, and I remember hearing noise and what was utterly clear to me it was

domestic violence happening in Italian across that place. And so I developed a habit whenever the violence started I would go and accost the best looking man in the street and say 'come with me' and we would walk along that alley way talking loudly and of course I'd ask him random questions --- it didn't matter what. As soon as the man in the house could hear a man's voice in the alley he'd quieten down. And then one night I couldn't find anybody and --- so I waited --- because I'd realised by now there was a pattern and I waited until the morning and I went and knocked on the door and it had been a shocking fight that night and the woman's hand was broken. And she didn't speak very much English and I didn't speak very much Italian but you know we kind of got it together and I got her to the hospital and she had --- I took her kid to school and then she had one or two little ones. I forget now, but anyway I started teaching her English and she started bringing a couple of other friends. So you know stories like that were what got me the job and so I started working at the Switchboard---

**PASCOE:** But no you were, were Information Officer at the Women's ---

**SEBASTIAN:** No, no no I'm sorry I started working at the Women's Advisory Unit and in fact, that's right. The obstacle to my getting the job the one obstacle was they had --- they --- the salary was eight thousand dollars and it was under one of those government support schemes that were around at the time and it was a fabulous scheme I forget what --- but the government gave the employer so much to employ somebody for so long. Again Maureen would remember the detail of that I don't.

**[00:21:32]**

But that was for a non-tertiary educated role and I said --- 'I didn't say anything about having a degree, forget I've got a degree' --- I thought eight thousand dollars that's a fine salary. So I started working at the Women's Advisory

Unit. Thank you for that correction Caroline. And my job really was sitting at a desk have a telephone and women --- see Deborah McCulloch who was the Women's Advisor used to say that when she was appointed as Women's Advisor to the Premier, the Premier and Government had one view of what the role should do, the women of South Australia had quite another view and she was spot on when she said that. Because women would ring her and say you're the Women's Advisor I need you to do this or that. So it was those calls that came to me as the Information Officer. So women would ring me up about anything, absolutely anything. Top of the list though was social security, family law, stuff to do with children and you know education, neighbourhood disputes, you name it.

**PASCOE:** Domestic violence

**SEBASTIAN:** Oh yeah domestic violence.

**PASCOE:** And accommodation.

**SEBASTIAN:** Yeah.. Accommodation not so much while I was at the Unit. So there was enough scope and --- and one of the things I discovered really quickly this was no job for one person because these were serious issues right, and so I'd take a call or I'd take any number of calls and then once half the public service is going home for the night I'm sitting there actually working out what phone calls I've got to make, who I can find you know and we didn't have Google at this stage, so I had to use all my networks. So I remember this women, I forget what the issue was, I know it was a --- it was a really hard one, but she was out in Neil Blewett's electorate and Neil had been my politics lecturer at University and so you know, first thing next morning I'm on the phone ringing his Electoral Office to find out who we can talk to da da da. So you know sometimes I was working sixteen hours a day it was a lot. But also I was talking to Deborah and other women in the Unit about the calls that were coming through and Deborah decided that what we would do was do a quick

kind of --- I don't know what you would call it --- run around the State and talk to women about what are the key issues, you know because that's part of her strategic planning. She had at that stage she had Julie Ellis working on part-time work and in fact, I think Maureen might have also been working on part-time work and Sheryl, I forget her surname, but she was an amazing women and she was doing some economic modelling and stats and what have you. Moreover, I think Deborah was trying to work out, okay what are the big picture issues that are really facing the women of South Australia and what's the direction we're going.

**[00:25:07]**

**PASCOE:** When you say, run around did you mean phone around or go ---

**SEBASTIAN:** No, no visit, visit.

**PASCOE:** Fly out and visit.

**SEBASTIAN:** So we flew Coober Pedy, we flew to Mt Gambier; think we drove through much of the South East maybe the upper South East. Anyway so. And we went to you know CWA [Country Women's Association] meeting and we had meetings in Town Hall and what have you. It was pretty interesting. But actually I think for me it was also more of what I was hearing on the phone. So by this stage I'm thinking; 'okay this is not a job for one person, I do not want to spend my life here, this is too hard'. There are real issues here and I was absolutely recognising that the issues that my mother, my sisters, my cousins were experiencing these were the issues that the women of South Australia were having and I knew because I'd been helping my mother, my sisters, my cousins, how much time it takes to deal with some of those issues and I knew, no one person could do it and then when Deborah and I did this thing around I was thinking you know like --- Deborah had her own need to do that level of strategic planning but I thought we've got to have something that is going to

answer this. And I'd always been really interested in the Citizen's Advice Bureau. You know, as a country kid you knew about the Citizen's Advice Bureau and if you know if any aunty or grandma anything was to give you advice they'd say if you don't know where to go ring the Citizen's Advice Bureau. And you know country people who got off the train in Adelaide and had to go to you know the hospital or the children's hospital or something, could always rely on the Citizen's Advice Bureau, they were amazing. So my very first thought when I started thinking this is crazy, why is one person doing this I thought well why aren't the Citizen's Advice Bureau doing this and I actually went and loitered really in the Citizen's Advice Bureau for a day or so and started to realise, nup, this wasn't going to crack it and I met with one of the most amazing woman, Marion Disney. She ran the CAB [Citizen's Advice Bureau] in South Australia, certainly in Adelaide, South Australia I think.

**PASCOE:** Where was it?

**[00:27:47]**

**SEBASTIAN:** It was maybe the Town Hall or somewhere like that. It was in town and it had little CABs [Citizen Advice Bureaus) like Elizabeth and Port Adelaide and what have you. Anyway Marion Disney explained to me the charter of the CAB and its roots in the UK [United Kingdom] and da da da da and it was abundantly clear to me that much as I regarded it as the most wonderful service in the world, it wasn't going to meet the specific needs of.. you know it couldn't go far enough. And so I started to think about; Right! So how can I do this so I was very much centred here in the South Australian the Adelaide context but I started thinking of those blokes in San Francisco and the thing I think that triggered those thoughts most of all, was when I met that man, I actually recognised in his stories about doing stuff for his community completely different --- he's a black American man and completely disadvantaged da da dut da da da -- but smart and had managed to get an

education. Whereas me I'm completely privileged white you know da da da so in those ways no commonality but actually we really liked each other and we really got on and it is him who said 'you're just like me the way you talk about your mother and our sisters and the things you are doing you are just like me'. And I felt flattered at the time because I just thought he was amazing. But ---

**PASCOE:** So he triggered the idea of the Switchboard.

**SEBASTIAN:** Well that's right. The thing about that thing he said 'that you were like me' what, what he was talking about was that way of working. And what I understood from that, was that the communities in San Francisco and South Australia are not so very different, if we wanted to be a community and the thing that was striking about women in South Australia at that time in our history is that we were quite a community. But we were you know like if you think about the dialogue at that time --- back to your question of the seventies --- you know we were as the county women, the National Council of Women, the radical lesbians, you know like there are all these very different groups of women and we were all starting to work out what was the women's agenda so we did have a bit of a sense of solidarity because we were also coming to terms with the fact that women weren't being paid the same as men even when they were doing the same work and you know women didn't have the same rights to the children and get a bank account etc. etc. so these issues were providing some commonality across the right to left divide and the biggest one of all was, and I can't remember the year, Roma Mitchell did the Rape and Sexual Assault Law Reform. Now I reckon that was somewhere around like seventy-five. It was somewhere in this seventies period. But I can tell you rape was the uniting thing for women across the spectrum because conservative women knew about rape as much as the radical women did and that --- you know there might be difference on exactly how you deal with it

but there was a commonality so there was a spirit of wanting to coming together.

**[00:32:01]**

Have to tell you the worst thing about Dame Roma's wonderful work on those laws was that the first case that happened after those laws when she had done all this wonderful stuff and it was a young woman, I don't know, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen something like that, and the defense tried to raise her past sexual history, and Roma agreed. [Exclamation] Anyway!.

**PASCOE:** So there's a growing awareness, a real underground movement you might say ---

**SEBASTION:** Well a certain level of women as a community want a fair go. They want stuff, they've got legitimate needs and how are we going to get it. So I started to build in my mind a picture and in the process of doing that there was some key interviews that I had. Marion Disney was one of them; I went and interviewed Jo Willmot who was at the Institute of Aboriginal Studies, which is the kind of early precursor, no not Jo Willmot, Maryann Bin Sallik. Jo came later; Jo was the first Aboriginal worker. Maryann Bin Sallik was the Director I think or the Coordinator whatever it was called of the Institute of Aboriginal Studies and she then --- because that of course became part of University of South Australia and she ended her working career as a Professor of Aboriginal Studies at the University of South Australia. Maryann Bin Sallik was extraordinary and she was, she was very confronting for me because she really pointed for me the difference between family violence and how Aboriginal women saw the remedies. That it could never, the violence could never be disassociated from the dispossession and the systemic racism. So that was a whole other growth period for me. I went and met with, oh god this is embarrassing with these names do not easily come to mind ---

**PASCOE:** It was quite a long time ago Andi. I think you can be forgiven.

**SEBASTION:** It is. But there's --- her name will come back to me. She was great; she was a real information expert --- Margaret Wagner, Wagstaff. Margaret Wagstaff I think. Anyway, she was great, I learned a lot about information but of course through all this I'm thinking I'm not an Information Officer's bootlace. I'd never been trained, like what and then --- ah and I also met with the women at Bloor Court. I met with Necia Mocatta who was the head of the National Women's Council and I just asked these women, you know, some .. I don't know .. I was were building this idea in my mind. And then I went down to the Citizen's Advice Bureau in Port Adelaide and met Roslyn Johnson and I knew within ten minutes of getting there that this was the linchpin of the Switchboard. This was the person who --- like my plan coalesced around Roslyn because she absolutely understood where I was coming from. She had very similar --- let's just say values --- she knew, she knew the reality of women's lives the same ways that I did. She was very clever and critically she was an information officer and she was far more stable than me.

**[00:36:05]**

I knew that at some point I --- you know I didn't see myself as having a lifetime thing here. I knew that I was interested for a while but I'd get bored. What I didn't know is that Marion Disney had also realised how brilliant Roslyn was and that Roslyn was her preferred successor for the Citizen's Advice Bureau. And I have to say it is --- you know profound gratitude to Marion Disney that she never held it against me because you know I really in that first meeting we hatched the beginning of a plan that Roslyn would leave the Citizen's Advice Bureau if I could get something going. And it's still something going, it's still this amorphous thing. So back into the Women's Advisory Unit and Deborah

was exactly the right kind of Manager for me at that stage because really she paid no attention. I mean, she sort of did. She was very busy with the business of government and you know she was dealing with Ministers and I would feed up to her particular cases that needed her to go and deal with and you know she was doing all of that and she was you know doing all of this proper work as we thought of it in some ways. That the other stuff you do ---

**PASCOE:** Did you have --- did you have the interference from Don Dunstan [Premier of South Australia] or those members. Was she keeping them off your back perhaps?

**SEBASTIAN:** Well let me get to it, let me get --- Oh no, no, no. At this stage, at this stage I am just an Information Officer in the Premier's Department. And the nearest thing I did that got me into trouble was to bring in my tiny nephew, the one that was in the accident with my sister, who was on my desk being changed when the --- when the --- gorgeous man he was too, the CEO of the Premier's Department came to visit, and he was a lovely man. He had two girls and he went to cluck Mathew under the chin, Mathew pissed in his face (laugh) as I was changing his nappy. That was very funny. But yeah no, no, no I was just a --- I wasn't on anyone's radar at this point. But I was about to put myself there because I --- so --- I'm not complaining about Deborah management style. I don't know that the Switchboard would ever have happened if it was someone who micromanaged. Deborah trusted her staff to do the work they were supposed to do. What she knew was that I was answering the phone, I was treating these phone calls seriously, I was feeding up the ones that needed to happen and all she was hearing was good feedback so that was okay.

**[00:38:58]**

I went to see Maureen Fallon, now she was the one who had conducted the interview and actually appointed me into that role and taken that first phone call. And I had a lot of time for Maureen. She was a complete opposite to me she was a Librarian I think by training, she was very proper as a public servant, she --- but she was a wheeler and dealer in her own way, like, she knew everybody she paid serious attention to what was happening. She always knew where the money was, where the grants etc. etc. and I think I got to a point in my thinking where I needed to just see if there was a way to go forward with this. So I can't even remember how I put the idea to her but I remember her response which was to say 'Don Dunstan has just released these fabulous grants'. I forget what they were called it was some --- it ---- because Dunstan did this amazing revitalisation of the whole State Library system and he offered grants, I think it was something like ten thousand dollars for community groups because they wanted --- and this --- there was a link to information you know, Libraries - information - and it was specifically around innovation. Anyway, she said why don't we put in an application. So thank goodness she helped me with it and we put it in and we got it. And so at this point I think, Deborah's overseas (hearty laugh).

**PASCOE:** So she didn't know anything about it at this stage.

**SEBASTIAN:** Oh, she sort of did yeah you know she's approving everything and signing everything. But you know I think her head's busy in a bigger world but --- and I can't remember the exact timing of all of this stuff. If you really want the exact, you've got to go to Maureen.

**PASCOE:** So your grant was for your unit or for you and Maureen.

**SEBASTIAN:** It was for the Women's Advisor Unit to set up --- we might even have come up with the name straight away the Women's Information Switchboard as under --- yeah that's what it was, and so with the ten thousand

dollars this amazing grant that I can't remember the name of that they employed me on initially was how I was able to employ staff, Maureen and I worked that out. So I worked out I could employ I think it was five women and so and Maureen helped me negotiate with the Library the lease of the Institute that we could be in that space and I can't even remember what the --- you know did we lease it, I don't think we did, I think we could just be in it.

**[00:42:19]**

**PASCOE:** Is this the premises in Kintore Avenue.

**SEBASTIAN:** Yes.

**PASCOE:** Exact, so it was where you started, where you started and that's where it is.

**SEBASTIAN:** Exact yes, yeah and Valmai Hankel was the State Librarian at the time. It would be great to get her recollections on this cos I'm sure, I'm sure she'd have a much better recollection than I do. And of course Deborah was involved in those negotiations and signing and what have you. I think it was really, it was me and Maureen who you know talked about how it was going to be and in particular I was making it up as I was going along absolutely. So you know like Valmai would ask a question (click of fingers) and I would have the answer there. So things like how would we deal with the children in there, and I said well we could have a play space. I hadn't thought of that but I knew absolutely we're having women coming in, we're having kids coming in, there will be play space. 'Where will I get the toys' and what have you, 'will we be having a childcare worker'? No. We'll get all the toys donated and we'll construct it so it's perfectly safe space. You know I'd just make it up. It was hilarious because a little bit later on when we were safely in there --- no that's right --- now that's right, the issue about children --- so if children are going to be there and going to be running around then there is a great concern that

they might shake the floors and dust will go down into the archives, how will we guard against that. And I ---

**PASCOE:** You hadn't thought about that had you?

(Laugh)

**SEBASTIAN:** No absolutely I hadn't. And some of these questions you know were kind of like --- and there were other library people there and in fact I've got a feeling that the gentleman who was in charge of the archives under down below asked that question and I've got a feeling nobody else in the room had thought about it either. And I said quick as a flash we will have the best quality carpet with a lot of under felt. (Both laugh) I do remember Maureen going --- now this is where Mary Beasley comes in to this story. She was --- what was her role --- she was --- now I know she was Commissioner for Equal Opportunity, I'm not sure if she was in that role at that moment. But she was you know --- she was a serious big wig. (pause) I've got another twenty minutes? Ok. Deborah McCulloch was overseas she'd gone on some Women's Advisor thing and this --- we've got to this moment in time where we've got the premises and we've got to get in there you know cos possession is nine-tenths of the law and because I'm doing all this negotiation to get staff. I'm doing everything at the same time with no idea what I'm doing and Mary Beasley came up with this wonderful idea cos I needed good quality carpet with a lot of felt. Mary discovered that some department somewhere was re-carpeting. And she managed to get, for free, this proper beautiful carpet with felt and what have you and we did a little test with the Archivists and they declared themselves happy. We had children we invited children in to come around and run and they stood underneath with pieces of clean paper to test if the dust came down and it didn't.

**[00:46:15]**

**PASCOE:** Isn't that a superb example of how a woman deals with something, thinking on your feet and sorting the problem.

**SEBASTIAN:** Thinking on your feet and working as a group. Like, you know it was extraordinary this whole bit and like... without Maureen and Mary and other people it would never have happened. So anyway then there are a few other key things now. So we kind of got in there and we planned for this launch and what have you. Now I can't remember the absolute accuracy of this but it was so much my gleeful feeling at the time I'm absolutely accurate in saying that on the day --- okay so I have this recollection I think its accurate that on the day the Premier launch the Switchboard there was not in existence a piece of paper that actually authorised it coming into being, in the fashion in which it did. Now just before we launched it, remember I'm tracking around all the women's organisations and notable women like, women who had a lot of smarts. And Betty Fisher who was for very many years a communist. She came out of the printer's trade. I completely don't remember what she was involved in she was part of some women's group or something, I don't know -- - I don't even really recollect how, how I knew Betty and she was very much older than me but I absolutely remember being captivated by some of her stories. And I had gone to her and said 'this is what I am planning to do what do you think'. She had a bit of a think and she said 'right well that's a good idea, I like that.' She said 'now to make it last that's the challenge'. She said 'don't doubt you --- you're a bright young thing, you're putting it all together, you'll get it happening, but you have to think about how it's going to last.' And I thought well yes that's a good idea I kind of like that plan. And I said do you have some ideas. Thank goodness I asked that question because of course Betty did have an idea and she said 'yes absolutely, what you need to create is a Women's Information Switchboard Support Group and need every women's group on it. And we created the Women's Information Switchboard Support

Group and we had Mary Gallagher who was leading the Liberal Women's Liberal Party Women's group, Marion Disney from the Citizen's Advice Bureau, Paola from Bloor Court, the radical lesbians and so on so on so on. I think there was thirty organisations and Betty said: 'If you have all the women's organisations on it and you have the complete spectrum and you always work with those women then no government will ever undo it'.

**[00:49:49]**

**PASCOE:** What a superb idea what terrific support.

**SEBASTIAN:** What a superb idea. Now one of the other critical things to tell because I'm not sure other people --- I'm trying --- what I'm trying to do is tell the bits I'm not sure other people will.

**PASCOE:** And you're doing a splendid job with that, that's terrific

**SEBASTIAN:** Okay. The other bit as far as I was concerned that was utterly key to all of this was as the idea was really starting to take shape in my mind, I thought okay so I can use this government program to get some paid workers but I don't know how long that program would last and wasn't sure --- I was quite sure we could have one position and I knew that as soon as possible I would vacate that and that would be Roslyn. That was very clear in my mind she was the only person that I had met who had the capability. She was definitely the right one. So I knew there'd be one paid position but I thought what happens if everything you know like if all those other positions disappear then how's this gonna run, it's going to have to run and so I trucked myself around in --- At that time you might remember in women's colleges and TAFEs (Technical and Further Education) and neighbour houses etc. there were these little women's studies groups everywhere, women's health classes, women's martial arts classes, and what have you. So I went everywhere and I talked about this and I particularly remember, I think it was a women's studies group

the college up in Panorama a woman called Liz Hooper can't remember her surname at the moment. It was an amazing group of women. And there was a mother and daughter combination there, it was Pat Rowe and her daughter Rosie.

**[00:51:47]**

And Pat Rowe at that stage must have been --- it's hard because I was only twenty five so you know anybody over forty looked old. I reckon Pat was probably at least fifty maybe closer to sixty I don't remember. But she was one of those women with a gravelly voice from long time smoking. She was catholic mother of six. There were no flies on Pat. She --- and you know she had every experience know to women and so she, she lead the questioning. My goodness talk about being grilled. I thought anything I'd had up to that point was easy peasy. Answering Pat was amazing and at the end of it she said 'right'. So, she said when --- having she got every bit of everything out of me including my terror that these job would go so she said 'right so what you need to do set this up on a volunteer model, now you're going to have to do that properly, you better go and learn how to do that properly because if you do it properly then we'll run it for you when the paid workers go, so have you got a piece of paper for us to sign up'. And she was the first volunteer to sign up and several of those other women in that course signed up that day ---

**PASCOE:** On that night ---

**SEBASTIAN:** They gave their address and their phone number and they said as soon as you're ready let us know we're here. And at that point I thought she's exactly right, and I've just remembered Margaret Wagstaff not only was brilliant on information but Joy Noble... and I forget how Margaret was tied into it, but anyway volunteers. Joy Noble was writing all this stuff on

volunteers at Volunteer SA I think. I don't know if it was called that then but it was happening. And it was this beginning of thinking, part of the women's consciousness like, 'its all very well to be the lavender ladies but hold on; how do we get to be volunteers and have our expertise recognised?' and that was the point. Because all --- by now I had clearly articulated right from the beginning the philosophy this was going to run on and it was going to be that information is power and women often need assistance and support to put that information into practice and that is where the advocacy role sits both individual and systemic and so I had that very clear and now with Pat's confrontation and suggestion and I thought of course, that's the other thing. This can't work without the full diversity of the women community. If we've got one Greek woman, one Italian woman etc. which is kind of how I set it up that --- like one young Greek woman doesn't represent the whole (community) so you need to have that broader diversity, get that from volunteers. But it's not fair to exploit women because this is serious work and I knew perfectly well how, how much serious work it was.

**[00:55:15]**

So I constructed volunteer program and I did it on the basis that we ran first class training for the volunteers that there was a really good support program for volunteers so that they really got to do good stuff and to extend their capabilities and, when they went for paid work we would give them a fabulous reference. And so very quickly what we discovered was that we created quite a high turnover amongst the women, the young women who were returning to work after having babies and what have you, and underpinned by the older women who made that utter passionate commitment. People like Pat Rowe, Merle Tonkin, Rita, Rita Shortland from the Women's, the UN Women's Peace and what have you. Okay so I now we're running out of time so a couple of other really critical stories. Once we got this up and running, like just about the

time of the launch either immediately before or immediately after, I agreed to go on Radio and Television more Radio than Television but both, and talk about it. And two interviews in particular stand out in my mind, Phillip Satchell and Jeremy Cordeaux. Both quite confronting in some ways these were you know male gurus of --- you know they there the shock jocks of their time. Phillip was probably more you know --- Jeremy Cordeaux was a bit confrontational, he was a bit of a shock jock but they were both men who were very confronted as a lot of men were by this whole idea of this whole thing of for, for women only. And so you know I did this, and both of them, neither listen to the other, cos the second one would never have done it if he'd heard the response to the first one. Both of them said to me so what did women how did women manage before we had this sort of Switchboard. And first time I was asked that question I thought what am I going to say to that and had the wit to say 'Phillip why don't you open the lines and ask you listeners'. Oh thank goodness I did and I tell you what if you could ever get recordings of those interviews you would find they are striking. I can't remember exactly in which order and which interview. But the first caller on the line and both instances were really old women and I remember one woman got on and said 'Jeremy I'll tell you how women managed before this young woman came along'. And she told this horrific story of domestic violence which even thinking about now just like... I sat in that studio like just listening to this woman's experience and, she was a country woman. She had rung in because somewhere in the interview he had elicited the fact that I had come from the country and she said you'll understand what I am talking about. And she told this story and you know the beatings and her and the children in the car. Anyway so and that open the flood, other women ---

**PASCOE:** This was just a ---

**SEBASTIAN:** just rang in ---

**PASCOE:** leap of faith on your behalf that people would ring in and they did. Well it was.

**SEBASTIAN:** Well.. I well.. see having grown up in the country particularly with my grandparents I listened to the radio because we didn't have television and I knew that particularly the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission) I knew people would ring in on certain talk shows. So I mean my family never had but I knew they did.

**[00:59:32]**

**PASCOE:** That seems remarkable to me that you have done that and that's a marvellous thing, so what did they say, what did Jeremy and ---

**SEBASTIAN:** Oh, oh completely shut them up. They became very respectful, very respectful because they absolutely understood I think in a way that I.. I could never have told them. And to be fair there are these blokes who are both of them would have been men in their prime there you know, they're serious professionals and they take one look at this mad redhead kid really, I mean you know I wasn't a kid I was twenty five but you know who takes seriously a twenty five year old with all these bright ideas whose going to change the world. That was not common for you know in that time. And so I'd never have been able to convince of what --- I'd never been able to convince them, that women in South Australia had an experience that most men had no idea of. That was what attracted women to the Women's Information Switchboard in those early days. That's what they responded to when I asked that question, the subliminal thing was I was talking about real lives of women and I was talking not in any, any --- there was no charity in it --- I was always very clear that this was about women had a right to information and that was part of the whole Don Dunstan thing about the Libraries and the right to information. I'm very clear about that and that it was quite difficult for women to access information. You know to go into a big government

department or into a Bank where everybody was male and if you came from the country or you came from the suburbs if you didn't feel like you had an education and a lot of women were still you know.. like, I was the generation that was finishing school and going to University but a lot of my mother's generation finished school at thirteen, fourteen! So if you then had to go and argue your case to somebody who had a professional education and was a man to boot. So it was a right to information. And we recognised like many instances going to court or what have you women would need support and it will be peer support. This is not about providing you with professional social workers. If you need a social worker or need a doctor we will refer you to those people because that's part of helping you understand what is available. And if there are enough women having the same sorts of experiences then we will ask the Women's Advisory Unit to take that issue on and some of those issues around violence, family law, social security, women's accommodation later on became a very big issue, did go up to the Switchboard for that sort of systemic thing but it was not a charity, and women of South Australia liked the idea and that is why the Switchboard was successful I think.

**[01:02:58]**

**PACSOE:** Andi it's been absolutely remarkable talking to you. You really opened up all those things that we wondered about and I just would like to say to you, you should be very very pleased that really the Women's Information Service which the name has changed from the Switchboard ---

**SEBASTIAN:** Of course, it has, yes.

**PASCOE:** and that has really carried on the basis of those thoughts you've talked about the volunteering and the whole --- the ethics behind it have really been carried on to this day, so you should be very proud of that and I'm very proud to have met you.

**SEBASTIAN:** Wasn't Betty's idea a brilliant one though because she was right. She was the one that foresaw actually it could last.

**PASCOE:** Yes it's wonderful. But you were the one that took it up and ran with it. So thank you very much for coming in today I really appreciate it. Thank you.

**SEBASTIAN:** Cool, thank you.

**[01:03:50]**

**END OF INTERVIEW**