

WOMEN'S INFORMATION SERVICE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Edited Transcript of Interview with Carmel O'Loughlin

Interviewee: Carmel O'Loughlin

Interviewer: Allison Murchie

Date: July 27, 2017

[00.00.01]

MURCHIE: This is Oral History eleven twenty [1120], it's the Women's Information Service fortieth history project. It's Allison Murchie interviewing Carmel O'Loughlin at the State Library on the 27th July 2017. Also present is Kati Murphy, one of the volunteers from WIS. So thank you both for coming in and giving your time. Just a couple of little things for the record. If I can have your full name Carmel?

O'LOUGHLIN: Just Carmel O'Loughlin.

MURCHIE: Ok, that's an easy one. And your date and place of birth?

O'LOUGHLIN: Adelaide. Memorial Hospital Adelaide, second of the twelfth 1939.

MURCHIE: I know you've had a long illustrious career in the public sector, but I ...

O'LOUGHLIN: In the women's area. (laughs)

MURCHIE: In the women's area. And in fact when I was doing a little bit of research on you, you went onto the South Australian Women's Honour Roll in 2009, part of the citation was "Leader and long-time campaigner for women in South Australia in many roles and WIS." And so, we'll build up to that. If you could perhaps just give me a very short potted history of Carmel in the workforce.

O'LOUGHLIN: I guess I was part of the big revolution that happened in the 1970s. Before that I had been a good Catholic mother of six children under seven.

MURCHIE: We are just both showing exclamations of, "Oh my god."

O'LOUGHLIN: I'd done my Catholic duty. And then Flinders University opened, and there were the moratoriums, and there were sit-ins, and then they introduced Women's Studies. And I went along to— my children by that stage — I also had two Vietnamese foster children as well but those children had gone back to their parents who came out of the first boat people. And my children were all at school so I did Women's Studies, almost reluctantly, but a bit ... Two of my friends had gone to the first meeting of Women's Electoral Lobby and I looked after all the kids, their kids. So they came back and had a coffee with me afterwards, no, we didn't drink coffee in those days, a nice cup of tea. And told me all about it. I was sort of excited but a bit scared. And then doing Women's Studies we, about after the first term, I was all defending men. That was my socialisation as a good Catholic woman who'd never grown up. The penny dropped and I saw the light. And then a couple of years later I met a woman Pamela Verrall who was one of the initial workers at the WIS. And she said look, they're looking for a middle aged, I was 37. "We are looking for a middle aged woman." And so I was interviewed for the job. And I was absolutely ...

MURCHIE: Which job were you interviewed for?

[00.03.16]

O'LOUGHLIN: For one of the workers there. At that time Andi Sebastian had set it up. I'm sure you're interviewing Andi aren't you?

MURCHIE: You might be in a better position to answer that Kati.

MURPHY: I think we'd like to.

O'LOUGHLIN: Oh, you must.

MURCHIE: Have you got some contact?

MURPHY: It's a matter of contacting ...

O'LOUGHLIN: She's on Linked in.

MURCHIE: Sorry, what's the name again and I'll ...

O'LOUGHLIN: Andi A-N-D-I and Sebastian

MURCHIE: OK, I'll try and track that down. Thanks.

O'LOUGHLIN: And if you can't, you'll get her through Deborah McCulloch.

MURCHIE: Yep.

O'LOUGHLIN: Isn't it funny these names are so here for me but they are in the past for you guys.

MURCHIE: Oh not for me. I'm the same era.

O'LOUGHLIN: Are you, really? Yeah, you are a lot younger than me.

MURCHIE: I was a member of WEL and did all of those things ...

O'LOUGHLIN: I know.

MURCHIE: All of those things, yeah.

O'LOUGHLIN: Anyhow we set up this – Andi had come back from the revolution, the Flower Power revolution in San Francisco, and she'll tell you about this, where she'd been involved in working on the Legal Rights Switchboard for blacks and poor whites. It was quite illegal but they set up this legal service. When she came back to Adelaide she said that's what women need here. And of course it

was such a different era, you know. Women were more like me.
Women with kids.

[00.04.44]:

MURCHIE: But it was also the Dunstan era.

O'LOUGHLIN: It was.

MURCHIE: So that combination led to WIS didn't it?

O'LOUGHLIN: Yes, yes. We started off it was just, I've forgotten what the program, NEIS [New Enterprise Incentive Scheme] I think it was, the employment program. And then after we had been going for about maybe eighteen months I think, we were made permanent public servants. And we recognised at that stage that it was good, that it was bad, that we were in the public sector. I mean, when we started I had no idea about hierarchy.

MURCHIE: You certainly learnt that quickly.

O'LOUGHLIN: No I didn't, no I didn't.

MURCHIE: So what was this initial role that you were interviewed for and got?

O'LOUGHLIN: Just on the workers there. A Catholic mother of six was a really good ...

MURCHIE: So was it a full-time job?

O'LOUGHLIN: Oh yes.

MURCHIE: And what were your duties? What was involved?

O'LOUGHLIN: Giving information to women. We set it up, I've got some funny stories if we've got time for them. Like the men in the newspaper reading room. We were going to be a twenty four hour

service to start with. And so they brought in one of those dreadful deer-hide, do you remember deer-hide, it's like plastic, imitation leather, a bed, so that we could sleep overnight. And when the men saw it coming in they said, "That's where they are going to do the abortions." (laughs)

MURCHIE: It was that era, yes.

[00.6.14]

O'LOUGHLIN: Yes, yes, it was. They hated us. They were so worried and scared of us. But then we found that, we had no idea about hierarchy, we were working as a collective, we consulted all the time. I had no qualms about ringing Ministers.

MURCHIE: What years did you work there?

O'LOUGHLIN: This is 1978.

MURCHIE: 78. So very early, very early on.

O'LOUGHLIN: Yes. We were the initial people there. So there was Luisa Sheehan who was the Italian worker, Nicky Dimitropoulos was the Greek worker.

MURPHY: What was her name?

O'LOUGHLIN: Nicky Dimitropoulos. D-I-M-I just as it sounds. I'm sure you'll find it all there. Luisa actually spoke about five languages. So Nicky, Ros Johnson who ran the Port Adelaide Information Service before she came to WIS.

MURCHIE: Do you have contact details for any of these women that we can get after the interview?

O'LOUGHLIN: No. Luisa is dead. Nicky I don't know, her brother owns Eros Café, you could probably find that.

MURCHIE: OK.

O'LOUGHLIN: Ros lives in Melbourne now I think. Andi will know how to contact her.

MURCHIE: I think Andi will be our best starting point to contact some of these people. So you started in '78. How long did you work there for?

O'LOUGHLIN: 'Til ... I rose through the ranks.

MURCHIE: Yes.

O'LOUGHLIN: I started off as a worker, then I became the Volunteer Coordinator, but also the public speaker. And I was thinking about this on the bus coming in. It was really interesting because I didn't think I could do public speaking. And I heard Connie Fraser. I don't know if you remember Connie Fraser.

MURCHIE: No I don't.

O'LOUGHLIN: She was one of the women that set up the Christies Beach Women's Shelter.

MURCHIE: Oh yes, yes.

O'LOUGHLIN: And she was the most retiring, frumpy, not nervous, not an attractive woman at all. But once she started to talk about women and domestic violence, and her work there, she was riveting. And I thought, that's what you need, you need to be authentic.

MURCHIE: So you learnt from that?

[00.08.59]

O'LOUGHLIN: Yes I did, she was my role model. She's dead now too. But that was very good for me to actually see someone that spoke from the heart. If you speak from the heart you are a good public

speaker, because what people pick is the genuine. [section of transcript deleted].

[00.09.05]

O'LOUGHLIN: Anyhow.

MURCHIE: No, that's fine.

O'LOUGHLIN: Then I was volunteer coordinator. That was interviewing, training the volunteers. Then I went on to be the Coordinator, and I think I held that job for about, it must have been about 95, it was about five years. Ninety three to ...

MURCHIE: From my research I've got you down there as the Manager from '93 to '98. Would that be right?

O'LOUGHLIN: That's right. Eighty eight.

MURCHIE: Oh, ok, so, I just looked on Linked In.

O'LOUGHLIN: No, no. It wasn't the WEL Coordinator, we weren't called that.

MURCHIE: So you were coordinator for five years in the eighties?

O'LOUGHLIN: I think so. Yep.

MURCHIE: OK. And then later in the nineties did you go on to be Manager.

O'LOUGHLIN: No, I didn't come – then I went to, 1998 I went on to set up Domestic Violence Prevention Unit in the Welfare Department.

MURCHIE: Oh, right.

O'LOUGHLIN: Then I went interstate.

MURCHIE: You went to Darwin, is that right?

O'LOUGHLIN: Yes I did. Via Brisbane.

MURCHIE: It's a long way to get there.

O'LOUGHLIN: Yes, we set up the Women's Information Service in Queensland and I acted as consultant.

MURCHIE: Yes, you came with experience.

O'LOUGHLIN: And then I went to Darwin as the Women's Adviser, as we called ourselves in those days. The Director of the Office for Women's Affairs, which everyone thought was a hoot. They would say, "How can we have affairs?" (all laugh) And then came back to Adelaide in '94 as the Director of the Office for Status of Women.

[00.10.53]

MURCHIE: Yep, I think that's where we met.

O'LOUGHLIN: Yes.

MURCHIE: OK. Well, that's a long history to squeeze in. Let's perhaps start in those early years. What were the issues that women were coming in and talking about?

O'LOUGHLIN: A lot of it was very mundane. There was a lot of stuff about domestic violence. Women in those days were ashamed of it, and so they'd only tell you about it after a few ... they'd ask you about, "How do I change the locks?" They'd suss you out because they were so used to being judged. So you'd know that they were going to build up and they ring back. You'd always invite them to ring back. By the way, our first query was someone wanting to know where they could hire a bridesmaid's dress.(all laugh)

MURCHIE: Your very first enquiry. I love that.

O'LOUGHLIN: And we decided that we couldn't be a 24 hour service, it wasn't going to work. And a lot of the women that volunteered at the beginning were very prominent women in Adelaide, you know, academics.

MURCHIE: This is in the 70s early 70s when you started?

O'LOUGHLIN: Just before it opened. I think of people like Janie Barber, Jackie Cook, they were all very keen on ...

MURCHIE: Prominent.

O'LOUGHLIN: Yeah, yeah.

[00.12.20]

O'LOUGHLIN: And of course Deborah McCulloch was doing a fantastic job as the first Women's Advisor to Dunstan. She was inspirational, a real role model.

MURCHIE: She still is. Really.

O'LOUGHLIN: Yeah. I think so.

MURCHIE: And did your confidence grow quickly from someone that was even quite frightened to do that women's course when Flinders opened?

O'LOUGHLIN: Yeah, I also, I think I identified a lot more with ordinary women, women who were as nervous about life as I was.

MURCHIE: Apart from DV [domestic violence] what other issues were coming up, because it was the women's revolution of the 70s so women were getting more confident in speaking?

O'LOUGHLIN: It took time. To start with they weren't, they weren't getting services. A lot of women were deciding to leave their husbands.

MURCHIE: Because of the DV and other issues, and the way they were being treated?

O'LOUGHLIN: It was really because women were deciding - they'd say, "It's like living with a log." You know. I was talking about this the other day.

MURCHIE: You like that one? [to Kati]

MURPHY: Oh, I don't want to talk too much.

MURCHIE: No, that's fine, I want you to contribute in any way.

O'LOUGHLIN: What was I going to say? Back then there was a division of labour. Men were the breadwinners, women were the homemakers and there was a very much – men has a feeling of entitlement and masculinity. And women had, mind you it's not that much different today. Women were with the peace-makers, the socialisers, the ones that really kept things going. But they wanted more from their husbands, they were looking now for a best friend, not just someone to earn money. And men didn't know how to respond to that. And so women were deciding they wanted another chance, they didn't want to end up in this marriage that wasn't satisfying.

MURCHIE: In those early days of the Switchboard you were providing a front on service at the Institute Building next door and you also had a phone service?

O'LOUGHLIN: Oh, definitely, mainly phones.

MURCHIE: Mainly phones, that was my question, which was the more popular? OK. How many clients did you have, did you keep records of that or can you remember at all?

O'LOUGHLIN: Oh darling, no, I can't remember. No, I've got no idea.

MURCHIE: Was it like doing it 9 to 5, was it constantly busy?

O'LOUGHLIN: No, it was 9 to 9. Sometimes it would be really busy and sometimes it would be very slow. Yeah.

MURCHIE: How many women were working there at the time when you were there?

[00.15.06]

O'LOUGHLIN: There were the six of us who were the paid workers and there were about I think about twenty volunteers. And then of course there was the management committee. There were two women from the library, and Deborah, and a few I can't remember, a couple of others I think. And then there was the Support Group. And the Support Group ...

MURCHIE: You are reading my questions in advance. (laughs) So when did the Support Group start?

O'LOUGHLIN: Almost immediately. And it comprised all the women's services and women-like services. Like for instance, Martin Hamilton-Smith's mother Barbara, I can't think of her surname, terrifying woman (whispers), who ran the childcare centres in Adelaide. She was so ... and there was the woman who ran the Girl Guides movement, and the YWCA, and the Citizen's Advice Bureau. So, a whole range of women's – people who were interested in women.

MURCHIE: Had the Working Women's Centre started by that time?

O'LOUGHLIN: No, no. They came on later.

MURCHIE: Because, certainly when I was in the Support Group those groups you mentioned were still going.

O'LOUGHLIN: Yeah. I know. It was amazing. Because when I came back to Adelaide some of the same women were still there.

MURCHIE: I mean, I wasn't surprised at that at Working Women's Centre, Domestic violence groups, but I was pleasantly surprised. I

must say, women from the Y and the Girl Guides, because they still had a lot to offer from a completely different perspective.

O'LOUGHLIN: Totally, absolutely.

MURCHIE: Did you have much involvement with the Support Group?

O'LOUGHLIN: Yeah, a lot.

MURCHIE: So talk a little bit more about how that operated.

O'LOUGHLIN: It was really just – what we wanted was, we wanted the government to know that we had this group of diverse – oh, the Liberal women's, Labor women, the Democrats, the wonderful Janine Haines. We wanted the government to realise, to recognise that this wasn't just a feminist, lesbian lobby, that this was a service that was valued by all the women in South Australia. And we considered that their meetings were very special and I attended most of them in those days.

MURCHIE: How often did they meet?

O'LOUGHLIN: Must have been once a month I think. I can't remember. It was a long time ago.

MURCHIE: That sounds about right I think though.

O'LOUGHLIN: And of course, the irascible, wonderful Betty Fisher.

MURCHIE: She's still going. So Betty was on the Support Group?

O'LOUGHLIN: Of course. Bloody hell, was she ever.

MURCHIE: Did Betty run the Support Group, in her mind? Have you come across Betty Fisher? (to Kati) We will explain that one to you later.

MURPHY: OK.

MURCHIE: Icon of the women's movement in South Australia.

O'LOUGHLIN: But Betty has had the most wonderful stories about what happened to women in the Depression. She was ... and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom [WILPF], and the UNAA [United Nations Association of Australia] women. Yes. I'm pretty sure it should all be recorded.

MURCHIE: I'm sure it would. Yes. I'm pretty sure it should all be recorded. It's more that we are interested in your involvement at the time.

[00.18.41]

O'LOUGHLIN: Right.

MURCHIE: But a lot of those groups did start to fall off later, but WILPF is particularly is still strong. And UNAA did fall of a bit because of lack of numbers and the older women were just dying off.

O'LOUGHLIN: That's right, they were dying off.

MURCHIE: Whereas WILPF is still as strong as it ever was.

O'LOUGHLIN: Yeah. So we saw that as integral to the whole process. But we used to, for a lot of stuff for women, a lot of issues for women who couldn't get what they wanted from government services, they couldn't get what they wanted from their lawyers or they didn't understand the legal process. And so we'd often go with them to the Family Court.

MURCHIE: Is that similar to the service that operates now with the Legal Support Service or was that just one offs?

O'LOUGHLIN: No idea.

MURCHIE: I'm not sure when that Legal Support – I would probably have it in my documentation, but that became a formalised system,

which actually leads to my next question. What sort of training was provided for the volunteers? Certainly there was specific ones.

O'LOUGHLIN: I've got to tell you it was bloody brilliant training. When we got enough money, we used to get – it was personal growth, it was counselling skills. We considered our volunteers were as important as ... because we saw working at WIS as an emancipation process for women. They might start off with us and hopefully get confidence and go off and try other things. I mean, you wouldn't ... it's hard to believe now that women, we were in a transition phase from the home. I always remember one of our lovely volunteers, her husband left her. She was English, and her mother said, "What have you done to make him leave you, why didn't you wear make-up?" You know. It's hard to believe now, it really is. We've come such a long way.

MURCHIE: In a relatively short time.

O'LOUGHLIN: I think it's a short time, yeah. I was telling my physiotherapist about all this, she's a young woman, she's got no idea. They've don't realise what their mothers have gone through. And we don't want them to.

MURCHIE: And did you see that growth, certain in yourself, but within the rest of the paid staff and the volunteers through this training and mentoring?

O'LOUGHLIN: Well I always thought the paid staff were much more sophisticated than I was. I was sort of like, I was this good Catholic girl. I'd never met a lesbian.

MURCHIE: Not unusual for that time. You would have met them, you just didn't know.

O'LOUGHLIN: That's right. That's right. And my first thought was, "Oh my god, they are going to be like men, they are going to start touching us." It took me a while to realise that women are not like

that. In my whole career, I've never ever been approached, harassed by a woman.

MURCHIE: So your individual growth ...

O'LOUGHLIN: Enormous.

MURCHIE: ... was that perhaps an example of how WIS has grown and helped the women of South Australia?

O'LOUGHLIN: I said that when ... I was very fortunate when I applied for the job as Coordinator of Women's Switchboard. A few of the beautiful women around Deborah and Yve Repin and a couple of others gave me a pre-interview.

MURCHIE: A mock interview?

O'LOUGHLIN: A mock interview. That's one of the things that they liked, I said, "WIS was growing with me, and I've grown with WIS."

MURCHIE: Because as you said, your own lack of confidence, was it people like Deb that encouraged you to apply for that Coordinator position?

[00.22.34]

O'LOUGHLIN: Yes, oh god yes. Completely.

MURCHIE: It wasn't off your own initiative? You knew you could do it.

O'LOUGHLIN: I wanted it and I knew I deserved it. That's terrible, that entitlement, but I'd been there a long time, and I'd seen it through bad times. Yeah, I was part of it, it was integral to part of my growth. And plus, every time I talked to a woman, I'd come out feeling better about who I was. Giving women the opportunity to develop their own decision making that they didn't have. It wasn't about telling them, "if I was you, I'd" ... it was about sitting down,

“How do you think that would go?” Just listening, it was just marvellous, it was energising and I loved every day. I loved going to work because there would be a different group of volunteers every day. It was exciting. And when I started to have some influence, we got a coffee maker, we put it on the front counter so that when women came in they could smell the coffee brewing.

MURCHIE: Excellent.

O’LOUGHLIN: We had a lovely time. We had fun. It was fun. Coming to work was fun.

MURCHIE: How did you celebrate with your staff, you know, if you had a success or if you had a particularly difficult case, did you debrief with the others? How did you – what was the atmosphere that you worked in?

O’LOUGHLIN: It was just, we talked together a lot you know. We knew each others’ lives inside and out.

MURCHIE: You were friends as well as colleagues?

O’LOUGHLIN: Yeah. Not always, I had a few altercations. We ganged up on Nicky at one stage. Then the big girls had to come in and ... even Deborah and I can’t remember who else just to make us sort it out. We worked as a collective, we really did.

MURCHIE: How would you describe the feminist ethos? I struggle to say that.

O’LOUGHLIN: That was probably one of the things that ... The Murphy sisters set up, I think Fij Miller and Gail Mahon, set up the Murphy Sisters Book Shop [established in Norwood in 1982], and I always saw that as the feminist hub. I saw the Women’s Switchboard as a place where women could come and feel safe. Working on a feminist collective model, and certainly with feminism, oh my god, we do. Once you’re a feminist you’re a feminist. And that was one of

the things that shocked me years later. I thought that once you discovered feminism that was your modus operandi. Then I found out years later many women had their allegiance to the Labor Party and not to feminism. It shocked me. I couldn't believe anyone. And the factions in the Labor Party. I understand it a lot more now. But back there.

[00.25.49]

MURCHIE: Were you political at all?

O'LOUGHLIN: Yeah.

MURCHIE: ALP?

O'LOUGHLIN: I'm a political junkie ... yeah.

MURCHIE: Right from the start? Political junkie, nice to meet you. (they shake hands) And once it becomes part of you, you can't get rid of it can you?

O'LOUGHLIN: I don't want to, I love it.

MURCHIE: No, no. But sometimes being a feminist you sort of slip into politics, the general politics of life, and then when you actually get involved with a party, it's under your skin, isn't it?

O'LOUGHLIN: I imagine. I gave up being in the party in the eighties because of the factions and because they kept asking me to choose and I said, "No, I choose women." And the boys didn't like that at all.

[section of transcript deleted].

[00.26.37]

MURCHIE: Then you met some beautiful women like Steph Key.

O'LOUGHLIN: Steph was running the – I'm varying, aren't I?

MURCHIE: That's alright we can do this.

O'LOUGHLIN: When she got the job.

MURCHIE: Sorry we should say Steph was the Minister for Women for a while [section of transcript deleted].

[00.26.57]

O'LOUGHLIN: The first woman was Bev Good who got the job at the Working Women's Centre.

MURCHIE: First woman? Got the job of?

O'LOUGHLIN: At the Working Women's Centre. And she was out of her depth, and she couldn't say anything about it. And then Steph. And then someone else. Anyhow that's not the history of women ...

MURCHIE: We have got a history of the Working Women's Centre, or a fair chunk of it.

O'LOUGHLIN: And then Steph came in and my god and then it started.

MURCHIE: And then you had Jude Elton and then Sandra Dann.

O'LOUGHLIN: Yes, well I has most to do with Steph.

MURCHIE: I knew you had a long history with Steph.

O'LOUGHLIN: And then Judith Wright started to run the Women's Health Centre. And so Judith, that's when I was running Women's Switchboard. And Steph and Judith and I used to meet once a month just to debrief because by that stage, we weren't working so much as a collective, you've got to take responsibility as the leader.

MURCHIE: What makes a good leader?

O'LOUGHLIN: The way I've seen it is when you are a worker, you've got a picture that big, you're a manager, you've got a picture that big, so when you're here, you think, "Why can't they decide to do that?" And it's because you've got a bigger view. And you can see this, this and this. And as a Minister, you see this. So it's where you sit in the hierarchy, and it is a hierarchy.

MURCHIE: Is that where you started to learn about the hierarchy, when you became the Coordinator, mixing with people like Steph. Did you have anything to do with Ministers and ...?

O'LOUGHLIN: You shouldn't ask me about that.

MURCHIE: I'm just trying to work out who was Minister.

O'LOUGHLIN: Well we answered to the Premier at that stage. And that was Bannon. And then ... we used to have lots of parties at WIS too.

MURCHIE: I know.

O'LOUGHLIN: In fact one of the wonderful things was that I used to provide a lot of the grog for those parties, out of my own pocket. It was a time when everyone thought red wine had, what is it called, major asthmatic ...

MURCHIE: Anti-histamines?

O'LOUGHLIN: Yeah. And so we used to buy Pirramimma vintage wine. They couldn't sell red wine, we'd buy flagons of it for about \$2. And cheap.

MURCHIE: Flagon wine was very popular.

O'LOUGHLIN: No wonder, because when I talked to Pirramimma years later they said, "We used to buy our best wine because they couldn't sell it." No-one would drink red wine, except we did. And then we would buy cheap bubbly, not the good stuff at all. But gee,

we had some good parties. Really, really good parties, and that brought the lawyers in, the politicians would come, everyone, it was a place to be seen actually, it was at our parties. It was, yeah, yeah, in the political sphere.

[00.30.30]

MURCHIE: Now you were always strongly supported financially?

O'LOUGHLIN: No, we ran on a shoestring, on the smell of an oily rag.

MURCHIE: So, where did you money come from?

O'LOUGHLIN: Premiers [Department of Premier]. Out of, first of all Deborah then Rosemary Wighton took over. I didn't get on with Rosemary.

MURCHIE: As the Women's Officer?

O'LOUGHLIN: The Women's Adviser.

MURCHIE: Why didn't you get on?

O'LOUGHLIN: I reckon it was class. She saw me as working class and I saw her as uppity. Whereas Deborah was, she was upper class too, but I just thought Rosemary was a bad appointment.

MURCHIE: Most of the time you would have been under Labor governments. What happened ...?

O'LOUGHLIN: No.

MURCHIE: ... when Liberal governments came in. I just can't think of her name. Minister for Women in the Liberal's government.

O'LOUGHLIN: Di Laidlaw.

MURCHIE: Di Laidlaw.

O'LOUGHLIN: Oh, I liked her. Di is a really dear friend of mine now.

[section of transcript deleted].

[00.31.40]

MURCHIE: But she ...

O'LOUGHLIN: She's wonderful, I loved her. And she was non-bureaucratic. She couldn't stand ... she'd say, "Just do it." And it was great because it was when I was in the Women's Policy Office. And there was never any political interference at all. It could have been any government. Di had been involved in, once again, in WIS. Amanda Vanstone was involved in WIS, in the Support Group, Janine [Haines] was absolutely brilliant, Anne Levy was around. We had clout because of that group, really.

MURCHIE: And I mean they're an incredibly impressive group of women. And often I've found women in politics, that they don't take political factional sides when dealing with WIS and Working Women's Centre and areas like that. They just want them to work, don't they?

O'LOUGHLIN: That's right.

MURCHIE: And I quite strongly agree with you on with Di Laidlaw, she never took political sides on women's issues, and when she was Arts Minister and things like that. Very, very strong. Both sides recognise that. I know Steph Key speaks very highly of her. And I think that's good that the women didn't allow the politics to overcome the issues that were important to women.

[00.33.09]

O'LOUGHLIN: We tried to get prostitution de-criminalised.

MURCHIE: Still trying.

O'LOUGHLIN: There is so much to talk about when I think about it all. The Women's Prostitutes Collective used to meet at WIS. A lot of groups met at WIS.

MURCHIE: What were the various premises that you worked at? You obviously started at the Institute Building?

O'LOUGHLIN: We were always there.

MURCHIE: Have you followed the history of WIS?

O'LOUGHLIN: Only until – no I haven't. After I left the women's area I left it behind. I became very disappointed with WIS when I came ... when I was away I called in and I used to call it the RSL of the women's movement.

MURCHIE: Why?

O'LOUGHLIN: Because you'd walk in and there'd be no ... they could ... It was like going into a really badly run department store. No one said hello and they were all busy talking to each other. It was appalling.

MURCHIE: When was this?

O'LOUGHLIN: This was in the, god ...

MURPHY: Would it have been in the 1990s when you came back from Darwin?

O'LOUGHLIN: It was about in 1990, yeah. And in fact, the volunteers went as a delegation to see, whoever would it have been, whoever was the Women's Adviser, Jane Taylor at that stage I think – oh, Susan Carmen, that's right. Because they were really upset with the way it was being run, and the way it was being run down. So it wasn't just me. I was horrified to think that we got to that stage where it was no longer providing a service, it was just there. And you could see it happening. From time to time, women who believed

that the government owed them a job, not – I had it when I was in the Women’s Office too, not that they were servants of the public. If you are being paid to do a job, you do it. You’re not there out of the goodness of anybody’s heart. But in the early days, if someone was sick we would work from nine in the morning ‘til nine at night, we didn’t think much of it.

MURCHIE: So how did you work out the shift roster for a 12 hour day? Because you said there were six of you.

O’LOUGHLIN: We had a couple of nurses did it. We’d work so many days then you’d have ...

MURCHIE: So you’d do the twelve hour day?

[00.36.09]

O’LOUGHLIN: Only if someone was sick.

MURCHIE: You’d just jump in and do it?

O’LOUGHLIN: You didn’t think twice, we would never ever allow the service to close early. We were always open. And I’ve got to tell you a funny story. When we first moved there, it was a very old creaky building, as you know, and we could hear somebody moving around. It wasn’t the security guards. And then we found out an old bloke called Len used to sleep down in the basement. He was a Newspaper Reading Room man. He cooked his meals, so he lived in the basement. Once we found that out it was so much easier than thinking ...

MURPHY: That’s beautiful.

MURCHIE: How long did that go on for? So you just left it and he continued?

O’LOUGHLIN: Oh god yes, it didn’t matter. As long as you knew what the noise was, hearing and smelling smells, you’d think, oh god. And

on Saturday nights working there on your own it could be a bit daunting.

MURCHIE: So you were there sometimes on your own?

O'LOUGHLIN: Oh yeah, we were always there on our own after hours.

MURCHIE: Of course, because the Library would have closed at five.

O'LOUGHLIN: I had one night when we were working with the prostitutes, a prostitute called Sunshine was – that was really good to get to know those women, the sex workers, they were fantastic women. But we could never get it decriminalised, we tried and tried.

MURCHIE: Still trying.

O'LOUGHLIN: I know, it's disgusting.

MURCHIE: Steph's tried her whole career, Tammy Franks has been heavily involved. It's beyond my understanding why we haven't been able to decriminalise it after all these years.

O'LOUGHLIN: It's beyond my understanding how our wonderful Dunstan era could turn into this. Oh, we know why, you know why Allison.

MURCHIE: I know.

O'LOUGHLIN: It's the right wing of the Labor Party, the DLP.

MURCHIE: And we've already mentioned one of those names, but we will not have anything that could potentially be libellous in this interview.

O'LOUGHLIN: I'd be quite happy.

MURCHIE: I can leave – I think we are quite safe in leaving it at the right wing.

O'LOUGHLIN: And then of course there are the Australian Conservatives now, [section of transcript deleted]. Anyhow, so one night, one Saturday night this big bruiser came in with one of those shirts, you know those knit shirts.

MURCHIE: Yep.

O'LOUGHLIN: “Oh my god,” I thought. It turned out it was Sunshine’s partner, Mike, who turned out to be a lovely man and I had a wonderful conversation with him. He’d come back often on a Saturday night and keep me company.

MURCHIE: Oh, how sweet.

[00.39.08]

MURCHIE: Just to look after you.

O'LOUGHLIN: Oh, he liked talking to me and we really developed quite a friendship. And that introduced me to a whole different world of what it was like for those women. And then when we tried to decriminalise, and had the big push when I was in the Women’s Office, the three parties got together, the women and the three parties, and we still couldn’t move it. And by the time the Upper House had finished with their amendments to it, it wasn’t worth putting through.

MURCHIE: The amendments destroyed the legislation.

O'LOUGHLIN: Yeah.

MURCHIE: Was that one of your big disappointments of your time there? It was a political issue but obviously WIS contributed.

O'LOUGHLIN: Yeah. Yeah. My big disappointment is to see that there is so much this government, this Labor government could do right now, with someone like Jay Weatherill. And it's not going to cost any money but they can't do it because of the right wing. That's my big disappointment now.

MURCHIE: What about some of the things that made you smile, things that made you proud to be a worker at WIS and later a Coordinator at WIS. What were the things that you were proud of achieving?

O'LOUGHLIN: Women coming up on the street and saying, "Thank you," and saying how their lives had changed. That was years later women would say, "Carmel," and it was just great you know, that we'd changed. The disappointment I suppose, my big disappointment was the woman who came in with about five children, and she was having trouble. Her husband was killing the pets. And I was there on my own, it was early in the morning and she traipsed in with these little kids. And I sent her down to a lawyer, I made the appointment with the lawyer. I rang him up and said, or her up, I can't remember who it was now, and I said, "They're coming down." And she never got there. And I've often wondered – and she never came back. And that sort of breaks your heart to think of this man who was killing the kids' pets in front of them. It was horrible. **[section of transcript deleted]**.

[00.41.47]

MURCHIE: Who did you use for lawyers? I know we have the Women's Legal Service now, but in those days what did you do?

O'LOUGHLIN: They chose us. We had a roster, we had lawyers.

MURCHIE: OK.

O'LOUGHLIN: Including Vicki Chapman.

MURCHIE: OK.

O'LOUGHLIN: ... Who used to volunteer their time, so we could ring them any-time. But most women came with problems with their lawyers, they couldn't get through. And so we'd have to ring the lawyers. **[section of transcript deleted]**. The thing that really intimidated the women in the office is the things that are going to get her the results in the court. So what we started to do then was go with the women to the lawyer so that they didn't feel intimidated. And we also go with them to the Family Court, because it was terrible. He's got an affidavit saying she's a slovenly housewife, she doesn't look after the children. And it was really hard for the women to sit there and not say, "That's not true." And we had to keep them quiet because if they spoke, or if they were emotional, they'd often loose out because that's what he was saying, "She's emotional, she's mad." And you asked about the worst – one of the worst things I ever had to do, we had - we had to do access handovers too. That was ...

[00.43.18]

MURCHIE: Where did you do them?

O'LOUGHLIN: At WIS. Dangerous stuff. You know, the men would come to the front door, we'd have the woman and the children inside, he'd come to the front door, and we'd hand the children over. Yeah.

MURCHIE: And you didn't have any security, any police back-up? Anything could have happened.

O'LOUGHLIN: And it did often. I remember one time during the Festival of Arts, on the Sunday I was there by myself, and we had trouble with this big barman, and his little wife. And he was so intimidating. He came in after her, because the whole place was open because it was the Festival of Arts and there were art

exhibitions upstairs and everywhere. And he got in. And she was in one of our side rooms hiding from him. And I frog-marched him out. He was screaming at me and I was one step at a time. And then some idiot came in from outside, some man, and tried to interfere. I was getting him out. I was calming him down. We had learned all of that and we knew how to calm people down. And really – but it was all right. The security guards arrived at that stage and he was thrown out. He was a dangerous one. **[section of transcript deleted]**.

[00.46.09]

MURCHIE: I'm very aware of the time and I'm going to try and wind up.

O'LOUGHLIN: I know, I ...we haven't even really started.

MURCHIE: I'll get to that in a minute. One thing I was asked, in the eighties, who were the Women's Adviser and Directors of the Office of Status of Women? You may have even mentioned them.

O'LOUGHLIN: Rosemary [Wighton], and then ...

MURCHIE: So Rosemary was Women's Adviser?

O'LOUGHLIN: Yes, and then Carol Treloar took over.

MURCHIE: Oh, ok.

O'LOUGHLIN: Carol was the best.

MURCHIE: Yes, we are hoping to interview Carol.

MURPHY: I'm actually interviewing her. Early August. Any information that you've got.

O'LOUGHLIN: She is the best boss I have ever had.

MURCHIE: There you go (to Kati).

MURPHY: I'll pass that on to her shall I?

MURCHIE: Quote directly I think on that one.

O'LOUGHLIN: I said that publicly one day.

MURCHIE: And she has – her reputation does precede her, and it is warranted isn't it?

O'LOUGHLIN: She was wonderful. She was so empathetic, understanding, she's just gorgeous. Gentle, just lovely.

MURPHY: I can't wait to meet her.

MURCHIE: And what about Directors of Office of the Status of Women. Do you know who they were in the eighties?

O'LOUGHLIN: Federal?

MURCHIE: No, in the State.

O'LOUGHLIN: In the State, you see, the office was called the Women's Adviser Office back then.

MURCHIE: Oh, ok, yeah.

O'LOUGHLIN: And Carol, I think Carol was the last one probably that was called Women's Adviser.

MURCHIE: Ok, that's fine. Now, I'm not going to ask you is there anything else we haven't covered, because there is a massive amount ...

O'LOUGHLIN: Yeah.

MURCHIE: ... we haven't covered and I would like to follow that up, not as part of this WIS project but with some other interviews.

O'LOUGHLIN: Any questions you want for the WIS stuff, for this now if I can answer quickly with an anecdote.

MURPHY: Perhaps just one that we have been following through on most interviewees is, how much do you think technology has changed in the way WIS offers its services?

O'LOUGHLIN: You see that is something I did actually.

MURPHY: Were you part of the changes to the internet, and how women access information?

O'LOUGHLIN: Oh, definitely, absolutely.

MURPHY: So how do you think that's changed, the way technology has changed the way and the amount of information that women have access to?

O'LOUGHLIN: I think it has been enormously, it's life changing for everybody, but we saw that women weren't having access to the new technology. And that's when we moved from Kintore Avenue to have a new start down at ...

MURPHY: The Railway Station.

MURCHIE: Dame Roma Mitchell Building.

O'LOUGHLIN: Yeah. Much to the chagrin of a lot of people who didn't like the move, but that's the way I could ... my worry always was that WIS would become too bureaucratic, too institutionalised, and stop being innovative. And in the early nineties there was a national project looking at women's access to information. And what that said is that women have information now, more than they ever had ever before. But the women that don't have the information are the refugee women, Aboriginal women, and women from non-English speaking backgrounds who live out in the north and the south. So by being a centralised service, it's not providing the service

where it's needed. And yet it was almost, I couldn't move it. I wanted to. I had two thoughts. One was to bring all the women's services into the Roma Mitchell, not into the building, but into that arcade. Working Women's Centre was up one end.

MURPHY: Still is there.

[00.49.55]

MURCHIE: Still is yeah.

O'LOUGHLIN: Right yeah, and I wanted the Women's Health Centre to move in, so we'd have that have all the women's services in one spot, so that at least when women came to the city and I would have liked, my vision was, but I couldn't do it, it was that WIS could provide a sort of introductory service to Working Women's Centre, so that women would come through there and be directed to either the Women's Health Centre or the Working Women's Centre. And the Women's Legal [Service] if possible. But it didn't ... people were by that stage – new managerialism had come in, people were becoming very protective of their patches, and saw it as a big plot by government. It was a Liberal government, so the Liberal Party was taking over. They saw me as the enemy. I was ... someone called me a liar, which was just appalling. I couldn't believe it, it was at one of the WIS Support Group meetings. She said, "You're a liar." Oh my god. She was telling me that Di had set me up to do something. And I said, "No, it was my idea." It might have been the move, I can't remember. So that was the first time anyone had ever doubted my integrity.

MURCHIE: And that's pretty damaging when someone tries that on.

O'LOUGHLIN: I didn't like it, I didn't like it.

MURCHIE: Particularly after ...

O'LOUGHLIN: I didn't know her.

... no, if she'd known me she would have known.

MURCHIE: It's not just your career. But as a thank you note to your career and your commitment to women and women's issues in this state, for your whole life.

O'LOUGHLIN: The second half of my life.

MURCHIE: And I think you are to be congratulated, and on behalf of the WIS History Project, we would like to thank you very, very much for coming along today.

O'LOUGHLIN: It's a pleasure.

MURCHIE: And I loved some of your stories and I think it is going to be a lovely little contribution to our project. Carmel O'Loughlin, thank you very much.

MURPHY: Thank you.

O'LOUGHLIN: Thank you.

MURCHIE: It's been a total delight. Thank you.

O'LOUGHLIN: Good.

[00:51:57] END OF TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This is an edited version of interview. Minor changes have been made to the original recording and transcript of the recording. These changes have been made in agreement with the Interviewee, Carmel O'Loughlin.