

# **WOMEN'S INFORMATION SERVICE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

## **Transcript of Interview with Nicky Dimitropoulos**

**Interviewee: Nicky Dimitropoulos**

**Interviewer: Liz Ahern**

**Date: 31st January, 2018**

**AHERN:** This is an interview with Nicky Dimitropoulos on the 31st January 2018 held at Mile End at Nicky's home. This interview is part of the Women's History Project of the Women's Information Switchboard, later Women's Information Service. Thank you Nicky. Would you like to start our interview by giving us your name and a brief overview of when and where you were born and grew up?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Nicky Dimitropoulos. I was born on the 5th May, 1958. I was born at the Western Community Hospital in what is currently my neighbourhood of Mile End and grew up probably two houses down the road from where we are now, which was my parents' first house and then they bought the property at Number 64, Rose Street. Initially there was a huge house on the block with a lot of land on it, which allowed my father to end up with about 250 rabbits in the back yard, but that's another story and chickens and all of that sort of thing.

So growing up, I went to Thebarton Primary School, which again was across the road from where I lived. Later I went to Adelaide Girls High School. At the end of High School a couple of things happened. I was accepted to do a social work course at the South Australian Institute of Technology, where the courses were run back then, but my father got very, very ill at that time. He had diabetes, but his kidneys were failing and he had major heart problems. My parents had just built a new home and four units on the property and because of some kind of bizarre financial arrangement that

they had made with the bank, had they paid the property off, if they were able to pay the property off within five years, then they would be charged no interest. It was like an interest free loan for that time. So I went to work because Dad couldn't work the heavy work he was doing. I was lucky enough to be employed by the State Library under a State Unemployment Scheme and I did that for just over two years and I worked in cataloguing information back then. That's where I developed some of my information skills and also being in charge of things like rare books and Australiana, so that was fantastic for me, because I loved literature. I also worked in the newspaper section, which was the home of what was then to become Switchboard, but I was downstairs not upstairs. I elevated going upstairs later.

At the end of that two year period I had intended to go back to Uni. in March. However, under the requirements of back then, Social Security, unemployment benefit requirements, I needed to register with Social Security. I had to get Centrelink and Social Security clearance. Social Security at that time, because I was technically unemployed even though I was going to be a student. They sent me for an interview and I was told that I would be required to go to an interview at the Department of Premier and Cabinet. I thought to myself, I hadn't turned twenty yet, I was about to, no I had turned twenty, I was just twenty years old and I thought, no way will I get this because I'm twenty, Greek. I went along to this interview and I remember this so clearly. I was interviewed by probably, at that time, five of the state's most powerful women including Andi Sebastian, Wendy Bowen, Yve Repin, Deborah McCulloch as the Women's Adviser and one other woman, from Education. I can't remember her name. It will come to me later. So these five women interviewed me.

**AHERN:** Eleanor Ramsay?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Eleanor Ramsay. I don't think so.

**AHERN:** She was in Education. I'm just trying to think of names.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Or maybe someone before Eleanor Ramsay.

**AHERN:** Maybe, yes.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Anyway, five women. And I was being interviewed for two hours. I still remember some of the questions. I was informed that the idea was that there would be an Information Service established for women, and women only. What did I think about that? What did I feel about that? And I told them, obviously. And the one thing I remember most clearly was Yve Repin who turned around and said to me, "If a lesbian came into the office and she wanted information from you, what would you do?" And I didn't realize this at the time, and I mean I answered her that I'd give the woman the information that she was after, thinking that was an odd question to ask me because I was being asked about an Information Service. I thought that was bizarre. I only found out later, after I was given the position, that one of the things that gave me the big tick was the look on my face apparently, when Yve asked me that question, like, are you really dumb or are you thinking I'm dumb. That was a really bizarre question. Anyway, so apparently I did well in that interview, but at that time, especially when I was younger, I became very much involved in my local community and I was already promoting women's issues from the age of seventeen or eighteen. In fact I started in High School, but that's another story.

**[00:06:18]**

So the migrant women's thing was always a big thing and I was also involved with a community youth network which was for young people who were unemployed. Through my work with them, at seventeen or eighteen, something like that, we managed to convert that particular service into a truly multicultural service where we provided services specifically for people who were from a non-English speaking background but also from Aboriginal backgrounds. And we did that as a normal thing to do. We weren't directed to do that. It was just something that evolved and

was very much part of our collective conscious back then. At eighteen I was appointed by the Premier to the Adelaide Community Development Board and the Community Development Portfolio was, as I got to understand later, when I became more politically aware, was the Department that was set up for Bannon in terms of part of his grooming for a more active role in politics, which I think was a Dunstan's big mistake, but that's another issue.

**AHERN:** OK. So you and the other paid staff at Switchboard, to my knowledge you were all employed under some employment scheme. The Red Scheme or something wasn't it?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** That's right. Yes. Initially.

**AHERN:** Initially. Everyone started on, it was a six month funding or one year funding or something?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** One year funding. No, we had one year funding and the premise under which we were initially employed and the model under which we were initially employed was a, what they called a collective model, meaning there was no hierarchy. Well, no obvious hierarchy. No hierarchy in terms of pay or conditions. It was all the same. However, human beings being what they are that changed and the type of work and the attitudes towards the paid staff and each other changed in that time. But more of that later. I think after the first year Dunstan resigned. He retired, resigned for a number of reasons of his own and then we had an election and David Tonkin got in and I still remember the day after the election, when we met at Switchboard, we were taking down all the quasi political or political posters and talking about our future and whether we had one. We were basically saying goodbye to each other I think, at that time. But earlier that year what we had done was, we had set up several support structures and one was the Women's Information Switchboard Support Group and a political support group, so that was very strategic, I think in what we did.

**AHERN:** We have to thank Betty Fisher for that. Betty Fisher was the woman who set up the Support group.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Exactly! She was a phenomenal woman.

**AHERN:** She was amazing. And she organised me to make it happen. I ended up being the unofficial representative to get the Support Group together and I was the liaison person a lot of the time, between all the different women's organisations. And that has saved WIS several times over the years.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Absolutely. And Betty was probably the only woman with enough nous to see that we needed political support.

**AHERN:** Yes, her, and the bit I remember most strongly about setting up that Support Group is that she said, "Whatever we do, we have to have a representative from every major organisation." So we had to make sure the Liberal women were on side, we had to make sure ---.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** And they were.

**AHERN:** That Catholic Welfare League, the CWA, all the conservative organisations. Everybody was aboard and still, even up until, I'm not sure if it's still going, but up until the last ten years, I reckon, that Support Group has kept on meeting over all this time, and when there have been attempts to restrict the service in some way or to close it down ---.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** They've stepped in.

**AHERN:** That group has stepped in and shaped up and made sure it hasn't happened. So I need to find out now, what's happening about it, because I agree with you, it was critical back then.

**[00:11:12]**

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I agree.

**AHERN:** And we have to thank Betty Fisher for all her hard work on that, because she was the one with the vision.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Absolutely! Not only for the hard work but just to have the foresight.

**AHERN:** Yes, she had the vision and the rest of us, I don't think we'd thought through the long term implications of it.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Well, I think also she wasn't, there was a practical reality for that. I mean, politics is a game and she recognized that, I think very, I mean, just by the nature of the organisation we should have been apolitical right from the beginning. That is something that I felt very, very strongly. That it didn't matter really where the woman was from, what background the woman had, we were there to provide a service and nothing else mattered. The background was totally irrelevant.

And that's something that I felt very strongly right from the beginning and probably felt very strongly right from High School. My High School time probably taught me that more than anything. Switchboard consolidated that for me, and consolidated that for me in the sense of giving me the direction later in my professional life in how I saw things like individuality and what my role was in any job to make sure that there was equity and what equity meant for me, because I found out at Switchboard that equity means different things to different people and it happens in many professions. I will choose disability just as an example. We talk about equity in a disability context. What people understand is equity for the person with the disability, full stop. They don't understand equity in an organisation or cultural sense. They don't understand equity in terms of what is it about me that prevents me from being equitable? They don't understand that from a training perspective, so you look at the way people in the various disability jobs or disability genre jobs are educated they have no cultural competency skills. They have what they call cultural awareness

that might be a two hour session once every two years, which is nothing. It does not change attitudes, so it is not true cultural competency. If you ask them about attitudinal change and shifting paradigms they don't understand that. If you look at a cultural organisation and look at whether they have lines available for funding for interpreters and translators that doesn't exist. The idea of cultural competency is very nebulous and it's very convenient. If I can say yes, I've given two hours of cultural competency and cultural awareness training to my staff, then I can tick that box. Which is not for me real equity.

**AHERN:** No, it's not enough.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** And Switchboard helped me to clarify that and to make it really, not only clear for me, but give me the direction that I thought I needed to follow in order to make things better and more equitable. Hence, my time at Switchboard, apart from looking after my clients and looking after the women who wanted me to give them information, it was inevitable that Luisa [Sheehan] and I almost developed case histories, because the women we were dealing with had nothing. There were no alternatives.

**[00:15:09]**

**AHERN:** There were no services. Yes, that's right.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** There were no services.

**AHERN:** You were everything.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** We had the Working Women's Centre and their function was purely to look at issues relating to employment. That's one section of a woman's life. We had the Women's Health Centre doing really important work in relation to women's health. And then there was Luisa and myself and we did everything else, everything from recreation to rape, to family law, to criminal law, to compensation law, everything. Everything you could possibly imagine. And I think that aspect of being everything to women

with whom we were dealing was something that a lot of the non-ethnic staff found difficult to deal with. We could not refer anywhere. There was nowhere to refer to.

**AHERN:** You had no options.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** In relation to providing language assistance we had no interpreters back then, so idiots like myself felt it very important that I link up with the development of the NAATI (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) training course to assist them in developing services that were going to be appropriate for women. Which I did, as well as going with women to provide language assistance, particularly in the areas of mental health. I'm not trained in the area of mental health, but there was no-one around. That was it. So Crisis Care would call me at three o'clock in the morning to go and assist in a family violence situation for example, because there was no-one else to do that. They wouldn't call anyone from the Women's Health Centre or the Working Women's Centre. I was it. Yes, it was my choice whether I go or not. I could say no, but it didn't occur to me back then to say no, because I knew that there wasn't anyone else. Yes, I was threatened and all of that sort of stuff. That came with the job I thought. It was just normal.

**AHERN:** Yes, occupational health and safety wasn't really considered very much back then was it? We were left in that building, that creaky old building on our own for quite a lot of time with no ---.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Initially we were open twelve hours a day, seven days a week.

**AHERN:** I know. With no other, sometimes you'd be the only one there.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I know. I remember.

**AHERN:** And now you think about it, you think how dangerous was that, but back in those days we hadn't actually thought through that, and we

were lucky that all of us had enough nous to deal with whatever situations we encountered and survived.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Well, I think we did more than survive. I think we were able to use that to the women's advantage, for women. Like setting up the custody exchange thing. That was one of the most extraordinary things that I think Switchboard ever did.

**AHERN:** A safe environment for handover.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Yes. Because we had those double doors leading from outside the building to inside where Switchboard was and we could lock those, we could provide that service. And we dealt with some really violent men.

**AHERN:** Oh, yes.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Extremely violent men. You know, even when I was called out in the middle of the night, I would just quite bluntly say, "You touch me, I will charge you with assault. You will go to jail." Because the police were there with me and the Crisis Care worker was there. They were all men, but they wouldn't do anything. They just stood there like lumps of ---.

**AHERN:** Jelly.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Meat. But I would be the active one, saying, "You touch me, you're in jail. Straight away. The police are here, they'll take you straight to jail." So of course that acted as a deterrent. But the things that I did, that I don't think the Women's Information Service women would do now, because there are so many different protocols that they follow now, but I quite unashamedly would hide women interstate. I would go in and I would get their children from their homes when their partner was not around and they could take whatever they could with them and I would put them on the plane or the train and get rid of them and they would

disappear. I would arrange for women on the other side of wherever they were going to go to make arrangements for them to be safe, because a lot of the time women, especially women from non-English speaking background, were not believed. Husbands were believed. The women themselves were not believed and I got sick of going to Glenside and hearing from psychiatrists about the mental conditions a battered woman would have, where I could see the bruising and I could see the bandaging because the ribs were broken or whatever and being told by the idiot psychiatrist that, you know, I will give the generic name, Maria had a problem because she was hallucinating, calling on the Saints to help her.

**AHERN:** Why wouldn't she? (laugh) No-one else was.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Really! And being told that they needed to have electroshock therapy to jiggle the brain about, so it could go into place. I thought, I was what, twenty two at the time, twenty three, thinking you're nuts yourself. So I'd get rid of the women, quite unashamedly and they would be safe. And I'd come across a couple of them when I moved to Melbourne later in my life and went shopping in the market.

**[00:21:21]**

**AHERN:** And you met them.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** And I had this woman fling herself at me and hug me and I'm thinking, oh my God, what's happening here at the Vic. market and I looked at her and she said, "Do you remember me?" And of course I remembered her. She said, "You saved my life."

**AHERN:** Yes.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** But we don't do that sort of thing any more.

**AHERN:** Well, I think it's more tricky too in this internet age and with modern communications, makes it much more difficult to escape and Family Law changing has made women being able to get up and go and

move interstate much more tricky. It's really tied them up in knots. It's not necessarily been an improvement.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Do you know what, Liz, well, there are ways.

**AHERN:** Oh, yes. There's still ways and means, but it's still tricky. It's much more difficult now. So let's go back to when you started working. You were one of six or eight paid staff. How many were there back in those days?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Carmel [O'Loughlin], me, Luisa [Sheenan], Pamela Verral. There were six of us I think. Andi [Sebastian] was working there for a while.

**AHERN:** Andi. Who else was there? Yes, Andi was there for a while until we got ---. Ros Johnson, did we say Ros. Yes, we said Ros.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** There was Ros, Pamela, Andi, Luisa, me, Pamela Verral.

**AHERN:** Yes, there were six I reckon. Yes, I think there were six. And there were about twenty of us, twenty odd volunteers.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** We realised pretty quickly that we needed volunteers.

**AHERN:** Yes, we weren't going to manage without.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** What an amazing bunch of women though. I mean, not only did we have an amazing bunch of women who rallied to us as our Support Group, but again the number of volunteers that we had and the longevity of them. Some of them stayed with us forever, it seemed.

**AHERN:** Some of them gave ten, twenty, I reckon some got up to twenty years. There's a volunteer at the moment, I know, Pat Ellis, who has just got up to fifteen years. So that's pretty impressive, isn't it? Fifteen years of working in the organisation as a volunteer.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** That is amazing. But the diversity of these women ---.

**AHERN:** That was the best bit.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** And the diversity of skills that they brought with them was astonishing and none of them seemed to really get it. Especially in the early days. I don't think they really understood how much, I'll say Switchboard, because that's what it was for all the time that I was there, I don't think they understood how much Switchboard was dependent on them. I don't think they ever really got it. And I'm not sure that we actually let them know. I think that's one of the failings of the permanent staff. I don't think we did enough for our volunteers back then. We offered them training and development as part of a thank you for doing things but ---.

**AHERN:** We had those wonderful camps.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Well, yes, but then later in life when I started working in aged care and disability more so, I realised that we didn't do enough for them, really.

**AHERN:** I remember the carcough. You know, you feel because, remember that? That was our model of counselling or listening or whatever. It still makes me laugh when I think about it.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I think there were a number of issues for me. I think the training we had was not only inadequate, I mean I had no training in cultural competency, for example.

**[00:25:17]**

**AHERN:** Well there wasn't any back then.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I know.

**AHERN:** There wasn't any. You and Luisa were making it up as you went.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I know. And then I went to Melbourne and I developed the handbook for the Victorian Ethnic Affairs Commission on their cultural competency training from my experience, but not only that, from the experience of the others that I worked with when I was part of the Greek Welfare Workers' Association and whatever other groups I was associated

with. The ..... and everything else. And it was important for Luisa and I to be part of those groups, because we were so isolated within Switchboard. We were isolated, full stop, because we were bilingual workers and everybody was isolated, but even more because we had a feminist bent and we worked primarily with women. On occasion I would work with men who were working for their women and I believed them. That caused a bit of a hoo-haa, that I had men visit me at Switchboard and it's like well ---.

**AHERN:** Sometimes they cared about their sisters or their mothers or their daughters.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Exactly right. This man's daughter's been beaten up.

**AHERN:** I had these calls too.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Yes, and that's fine. There were just so many inconsistencies, really. You know how there was a Gay Line when we first started?

**AHERN:** Oh, yes, I do.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Remember Gay Line? I used to have so many women contact me and have to ring Gay Line because there was nothing for them. No women's service. I was the one who established the Lesbian Line, back then, like a million years ago and the Women's Liberation Movement women got angry with me. And I said, "Why?" They said, "You're not a lesbian." I said, "So! I'm a woman. I'm working here. I'm getting the calls that I can't deal with, so I think it is appropriate that we set up a service for women." I said, "You're not doing it. Why aren't you doing it?"

**AHERN:** That's right. They need someone else to tell them what's required. That went for a while didn't it? I can't remember how long.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** It did. It did.

**AHERN:** They were, gay women were rostered in to answer those particular calls.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Absolutely. The whole point was for a lesbian woman to be able to speak to another woman if she was more comfortable to do so. I was happy to deal with anyone. I had no problem with that.

**AHERN:** Yes, me too.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** And I was just so chuffed when Aboriginal women would come in and I'd get goosebumps up my spine. I had dealt with some right at the beginning of Switchboard because I had a, one of my clients was a Greek woman who had been married to an Aboriginal man, so her children were half Aboriginal, half Greek. They identified themselves as being Greek, not Aboriginal. That was my first introduction to the interface between Greek people and Aboriginal people and there's quite a lot of it. Later I found out just how much and what the reasons were for that, but putting that aside, I remember Jo Willmot, who was the Aboriginal worker for a while.

**AHERN:** She was the first Aboriginal worker, wasn't she? I learnt a lot from that woman.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** She was a darling woman. I loved that woman to bits.

**AHERN:** She's still around.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I know. Relationships Australia. I know. It was interesting. Jo and I connected really, really quickly and I think she was very comfortable talking to me. She wasn't so comfortable talking to some of the other women because they were white, they were very white. They were also very middle class white and I think that's something that evolved probably in about the third or fourth year of Switchboard, not initially. After the hierarchy had been established and that there was one.

**AHERN:** Yes, such as it was. It was a fairly flat structure though with a coordinator.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** No, not really. I wouldn't say that.

**AHERN:** A coordinator and then paid staff. That was the hierarchy, really. And then volunteers and among the volunteers there was usually a couple of volunteer representatives who went to meetings and things. That's sort of how it worked, isn't it?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I think it depended on who the coordinator was. For some coordinators, or one coordinator the delineation was flat. For another coordinator it wasn't. I think she liked the position of being coordinator and then we saw the introduction of the middle class clothing and that's something that impacted on me. Not that I have any kind of middle class fashion sense, and I refuse to, but the designer names were dropped and all of that kind of stuff, and I thought to myself, I don't know how appropriate that is in a place like this. I really don't know how appropriate that is.

**[00:30:36]**

**AHERN:** That's right. Clothing is not the most important thing. There are always people like Luisa who were glamorous from day one and she didn't ever change. She remained ---.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** No but Luisa you could put in a bloody potato sack and she'd still look like Marlene Dietrich. I mean she was just gorgeous.

**AHERN:** She looked elegant. She did look gorgeous. And some of us stayed in our T-shirts and jeans for a long time.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Some of the other things like dropping the Alexis George names and whatever names were around at the time, I thought I'm not sure about that. Anyway, in time there would be Aboriginal women who

would come into the office and they'd look around and they'd point to me and they'd say, "I want to talk to her." And for a little while I didn't get why. It took me a little while to work it out. Then I talked to them one day and I said, "Why did you pick me? Why me?" And they said, "Because you look like us." Really! OK. I wasn't ever sure what that meant. My skin's not particularly dark. I've got dark hair, dark eyes, but I think what they meant is that I didn't look as though I'd come out of a fashion page. That I looked more normal in quotation marks.

**AHERN:** In their view.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** The more I worked of course with the Aboriginal women, the more they were asking for me, because they'd talk amongst themselves and they'd spread information because it was all oral. And I loved that. I had no problem with that. And I still remember going, in 1984 this was, I still remember the date, the last Women in Labor Conference was in Brisbane and the reason I was allowed to go to that, Luisa didn't want to, is because after the previous Women in Labor Conference two years prior to that there was quite a big kerfuffle because ethnic women's issues and Aboriginal women's issues just weren't addressed at all. So we created a big kerfuffle about that. So 1984 was going to be the year where Aboriginal women's issues and ethnic issues would be the focus with migrant women back then, the language and Aboriginal women. So Jo and I went to Brisbane for this conference.

**AHERN:** That would have been fun. Going with her.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Well, yes and no. I mean, she and I were fine. Not a problem. On the first day of the conference, this is a national conference of enlightened, ideologically sound women who were enlightened enough to realize that we needed an ethnic focus and Aboriginal focus. On the first day I was running a workshop at that time. It was an "Access and Equity" workshop and I was doing something. I can't remember what, delivering a paper or something, and Jo and I were running the workshop together and

I was delivering the paper. I was allocated a room which was like a broom closet. It was probably the size of a small bedroom. I had two hundred women, two hundred and six women waiting to come into my room to do this workshop.

**AHERN:** And there was no space.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** There was no space for them. Just down the hallway there was a lecture theatre that another women's group had, where they had six participants. I thought that was rather odd, so doing the right thing I thought, I went up to the six women and I said, "Hey, look. I've got ---". The women were out in the corridor. I couldn't put them in anywhere. I said, " Look, I've got over two hundred women wanting to come to my workshop." I said, "You've got a small group. Can we swap rooms?" "No, no, the rooms have been allocated." "Pardon. I've got over two hundred women wanting to come to my workshop." "Oh, what are you doing?" And it's like they kept missing the point. There are six of you. You would fit into the other room comfortably. Could we just do a swap? And they wouldn't do that. And it was like, I'm a Taurian anyway, I was also born in the year of the dog, which is an Earth sign. It was like raising a red flag for me. I was so angry that morning.

**[00:35:13]**

**AHERN:** Well, you would be.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** So I called a meeting of the representatives of the various women's groups and Aboriginal women's groups and I said, "This is a joke. We can't do this." And I gave them my example. Another woman had another example and another woman had another, and I thought, "OK, we need to put a stop to this." So we stopped the conference, called an emergency meeting in the lecture theatre that the six women were in, because that was a big room and a number of us spoke up and spoke out. I was, I can't remember what I said, but apparently I was very vocal.

**AHERN:** And articulate probably.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Very vocal. One of the women was a woman called Hanifa Dean, who was from the Victorian Ethnic Affairs Commission. She and I became really good mates. She was an amazing woman. Phenomenal woman. And I said to her, "This is really stupid. I mean it's embarrassing really, to think that we as women are doing this to each other. That's not good." Anyway Freddie Steen was there from the Commonwealth. We effectively put a stop to the conference, called the conference organizers, got everything reallocated. I had to redo the workshop and we did --- . Everything became fine and the Aboriginal women, a lot of them were from the Territory, a lot of them from the Pitjantatjara Lands. They weren't very vocal. They were quite shy.

**AHERN:** Yes, very.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** And I said to them, "Look at what we are doing. We call each other sisters. It's a joke. What sisters? There are some sisters and there are others. Where is the Sisterhood in this? Where is it? It's embarrassing. If nothing else this is embarrassing." Anyway, chat, chat, chat, chat, chat. After the workshops and when the day had finished, Jo tapped me on the shoulder and she said, "You've got an invitation." I said, "OK. What are we doing?" She said that a group of women want you to join them. I said, "Oh, OK." So we went to one of the women's rooms and there was about eight women there, all from the Lands. And Jo said, "They want to thank you." I'm going to start crying. I said, "What for?" "For giving them a voice." Apart from being moved, I was embarrassed. I was embarrassed that somebody like me who really has no connection really with these women would be thanked instead of the right thing being done. So that again is something that shaped me.

**AHERN:** That it was necessary. That it was necessary in that case.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Yes

**AHERN:** But Jo was a great educator for all of us who worked at Switchboard about Aboriginal women and Aboriginal issues and really confronted us with our white racism, especially those of us who were middle class and had never ever thought about some of the issues. I learnt a huge amount from that woman.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Liz, it wasn't a learning thing for me from her. It was just normal. Do you know what I mean?

**AHERN:** Yes, well that's right. Well I learnt.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** When I was a kid, just up the road here was an Aboriginal family. I'd play with their kids, their kids would come here, we'd play together. They would eat here. It was just normal. My parents didn't know how to discriminate back then, when they first came here and I was a little one. They didn't know. They didn't have enough information to discriminate. As far as they were concerned they were just neighbours. So I haven't grown up having any negative ---.

**AHERN:** Connotations.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Thinking about Aboriginal people. I just didn't do that.

**AHERN:** Well, that was good.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Across the road there was an Italian family and another Aboriginal family. We had about three or four families living along this street and we would all, in summer time, when it was hot and Dad used to work at the East End markets, he'd buy boxes of rockmelons that would be about the size of my fist and he'd get tubs of ice cream. We'd cut them in half and we'd have like thirty kids over where we'd scoop up the melon seeds and fill it with ice cream. We'd be eating the melon with the ice cream and all the kids would be there. That's normal for us.

**AHERN:** That's right.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** So Switchboard, apart from the negative stuff, and there was some negative stuff, had a profound impact on me and how I would work later and ---.

**[00:40:10]**

**AHERN:** So you were there between '78 and '80, '80 when, '85 or --- ?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Yes, I left in September '85.

**AHERN:** September '85. OK. Because I know I was away. I went away in '81 I think.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** That's right. You were missed.

**AHERN:** Well, I was having a nice time somewhere else. But anyway, Switchboard was still in Kintore Avenue and not too many big changes really. Had we set up the Welfare Rights Centre by then? We had. Had that come along? Had Maggie Martinelli turned up by then for the Welfare Rights Centre to get started? So that was all later. That happened in the late '80s then.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** That's right.

**AHERN:** OK. Because I'm trying to think. A few times I've had these discussions with people and we've thought of things that began. Were we doing phone-ins, back in your day? Housing phone-ins?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Yes, we did have a couple of phone-ins. Yes.

**AHERN:** Housing phone-ins. What other phone-ins were there? There was parental stress, domestic violence, women and disability. Were you involved with those? They were usually held on a Saturday or Sunday, weren't they? Often over both days, if I remember rightly.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I was always involved with those. Because I was available. I didn't have kids, see, so I was always available. For me the women's disability thing started fairly early because I had clients who had

kids with disabilities, so I got involved in that area fairly quickly. And because I had that initial kind of experience I guess that whenever there was a disability issue it would be referred to me. People thought I was comfortable in the area and certainly knowledgeable. You used to tell me off.

**AHERN:** Did I?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Yes, you did.

**AHERN:** About?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I would memorize information. I would memorize phone numbers, addresses, names, contacts and so on.

**AHERN:** Better brain than me then.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** And you kept telling me to look it up. I said, "But I remembered. No point in looking it up if I remember."

**AHERN:** That's exactly right.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** And unfortunately I still have that bad trait, that my legs don't work so much any more, but my brain is still very active and very precise. I just have a very strong elephantine memory and it complements my partner who doesn't.

**AHERN:** That's really useful though, Nicky, and some of us have not got such a good memory. Really good that other people do.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** But yes, the phone-ins were good and I remember the major campaign we had with Social Security about women receiving the supporting parents' benefit, who might have had a male visitor and often they would be cut off their pensions because of assumptions made by the department and that was a major campaign. That was wonderful. For me, the really exciting stuff was being able to work with the Working Women's Centre and the Health Centre and do the women's camps. The Greek

women's camps and being told that I would never have anyone turn up to them. That they were a waste of my time and they just kept getting bigger and bigger and in the end I had to turn women away because we didn't have enough room.

**AHERN:** Didn't have the space.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** And they were amazing. All these dependent Greek women leaving their families to come along for a weekend where they were provided with a lot of information. And also we need to, Deborah McCulloch was an amazing Women's Adviser and I don't think there will ever be somebody else like that, but we need to also give credit to the next woman who ---.

**AHERN:** Rosemary Wighton.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Yes, Rosemary.

**AHERN:** She was very sensible. Really very firm way, was wonderfully clear and firm and ---

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Yes, she was very practical and ---.

**AHERN:** Down to earth, yes.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I think she probably got the cultural diversity thing. She definitely got it better than Deborah did at the time. She established the two radio programs for Luisa and myself.

**AHERN:** I was about to ask you that very question. So when did the radio programs start?

**[00:44:53]**

**DIMITROPOULOS:** The radio programs started in the early 1980s and they were called "Today's Woman" - *La Donna d' Oggi* in Italian and *Simerini Gynaika?* in Greek. That was fantastic because that reached so many women.

**AHERN:** That was 5EBI, wasn't it?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Yes, that's right.

**AHERN:** The so called ethnic broadcasting station in those days.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** And now it's been taken over by SBS as part of the SBS Network. Back then it was independent. I think the reason that was quite, it was extraordinary for a number of reasons, primarily because it reached so many women where we could disperse information and things of interest to them. That was wonderful. It put pressure on us because there was no information in other languages that we'd just read out on air. We'd have to translate everything. That took time. To put together a half hour radio program as you would now be aware takes a lot of time. I couldn't do this in my work time because it wasn't considered to be my work. My work was to be on the phone and to deal with the women ringing up or coming into the office. So this time, and I think this was one of the things that Luisa was very bitter about, that was never acknowledged as being our work. The time I spent on that was my own time and nobody ever got that.

**AHERN:** No, that's ridiculous.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** All of the hours that I spent.

**AHERN:** With hindsight you would wish that it had been very different, but everyone who I have spoken to over the last twenty odd years has always said one of the most important things about Switchboard back at the beginning was those two radio programs. So they may not have been recognized and valued then, but in retrospect they certainly are.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I think, what happened is that a lot of the Greek women and Italian women of the time probably had the best information and the best sources of information they could possibly have. That was exciting. I mean I deal with fairly, Luisa was a little bit more conservative than me and I was a bit more, I don't know, not radical, I mean I just thought there was more, there was information that women had to have, so if it was about

sexually transmitted disease then I'd pass that on. I mean, not pass it on, I'd provide information about it. If it was about family law issues or family violence issues, I mean Switchboard was very much part of getting what we used to call restraining orders in place. I did a lot of work with the police back then, mostly in my own time again, because that wasn't really part of my job.

**AHERN:** Yes, I know. It's crazy isn't it?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I was young and carefree and had no commitments so that was all OK. It was so vital that we did that sort of extracurricular stuff, because that was the only way that we could initiate any kind of change for women whose first language was not English. And at the time that extracurricular stuff was really not perceived as being important or being part of work. That was seen to be advocacy rather than information. I could never quite understand that. Later in life, having been in advocacy roles and managing advocacy services and chairing them and all that sort of stuff, for me there is quite a clear delineation in being an advocate and providing information and what we were doing was definitely providing information.

**AHERN:** And you were the only source of information for a lot of those women who didn't get out of the house. They could turn their radio on during the day when they had their children and they could listen in their own language.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** That's exactly right. And we were anonymous.

**AHERN:** And they could be anonymous - very important.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Very! It was like, I don't know whether you remember, you remember the Family Law Handbook that I developed for the use of our staff and our volunteers. It was just a very simple, go to resource about family law. A lot of our volunteers complained that they really didn't get the Family Law Act with what was available and I wrote a handbook. I don't

even know what's happened to that. I was dealing with women's shelters all the time.

**AHERN:** Oh yes, we all were.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** They would contact me all the time because of the Greek women that they had in them and they didn't know what to do. I had the idea of developing a shelter for women of non-English speaking background and I must have a giggle. When the Migrant Women's Shelter turned twenty I went along to the birthday party and they were talking about blah, blah, blah. I said, "No, you have your history wrong. No you didn't do that. I did." Nobody remembered that I actually wrote the first women's submission for that.

**[00:50:18]**

**AHERN:** Yes, I know. There's a lot of things that get lost in the mists of time, aren't there?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Well no. There's a lot of people taking credit for things that they shouldn't take credit for.

**AHERN:** I know. But they do. It does happen.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I know.

**AHERN:** And it gets forgotten by others.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** And they looked at me and said, "Who are you?" And I said blah, blah. "Oh yes, I've heard about you." And I said, "Well you should. I wrote the first submission." I still have copies of it.

**AHERN:** Actually you should provide copies of that to both WIS and put them in the State Library because those kind of ---.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I have a lot of information that I probably need to give to the State Library.

**AHERN:** You need to give them to the State Library because there is a real, anyone tries to write a history. At one stage I had a vague idea I was going to do a Masters and I was going to write a story of the history of the Women's Information Service. I had this wild plan at one a stage and then I decided it was just too big and there wasn't good enough resources to do it. I gave up and thought why am I doing this and is there any point? So I decided I wasn't going to do it. But if, for the future, it's a really important resource. I've given a lot of the resources that I had. Remember that "Everywoman's Survival Guide". Do you remember that? Well, I've given all my copies of all of that material, I've given to WIS and the State Library. So it would be a good thing to do Nicky and to link it to this Women's History Project because then it will get used in a more, it's an opportunity.

I know you are busy and you've got lots of things to do, but it's an opportunity this year when they're reflecting over the forty years and there will be huge gaps in their knowledge that they don't have and --- .

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Yes, I'll get them to bring my boxes down and I'll go through them. I'll get that done.

**AHERN:** If you can provide some of that stuff to them it would be really valuable, I think. You remember stuff that I can't remember. We were there for some time together and yet I don't remember some of the things that you remember or I wasn't at the same meetings or I was busy off with my small children and doing other things and I was a volunteer in those days, you know.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** You know that I was the first person to ever write about family violence in the immigrant family. I'm using language that was used at the time.

**AHERN:** Yes, that's right.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I was the first person to write about violence in the Greek community and just linked it to some of the medications these women were on. They were all like heavily medicated. It was crap. And some of the most horrendous acts of violence that I came across were from, because I was dealing with the people from non-English speaking backgrounds, not only Greeks, but I dealt with Italian, French, German. I speak some of those languages as well. And Luisa's Italian and German was much better than mine, but we both muddled through a number of languages together. I worked with Penny Straughan, who was one of the lawyers employed by Rosemary.

**AHERN:** Oh, Penny Stratton. Stratmann.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Yes, Stratmann.

**AHERN:** Stratmann I think. Penny Stratmann. She later became the Administrator of Government House. In charge of being the link between the Governor and the bureaucracy. So she did very well, Penny. Lovely woman.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** She is lovely. She worked with me because of libel. I had to be careful of that. That sort of got me recognized as being somebody who knew about family violence issues and the area of that. It also got me smacked by George Papadopoulos who was the Chairman of the Victorian Ethnic Affairs Commission back then. He was worried about stereotyping and it was like, these are based on the cases with which I've worked, so there's no libel issue there. These have been checked by a lawyer. He was trying to scare me because he thought that was the manly thing to do.

**AHERN:** He didn't want anyone criticising his community.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** He later apologised which I thought was really cute. When I worked for him.

**AHERN:** You were right and I was wrong.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Because as you kept saying I was the only one, or Luisa was the only one to do this, we had a choice. We could either raise these issues as being issues of concern so that something could be done, and me raising this issue, writing about violence, writing a submission for a women's shelter raised enough awareness for other people to go and do things. I'm happy with that. I'm happy to be planting the seed. That was my role in terms of providing information. Using the information that I was getting, putting it together and having somebody else move with it. And I loved being in that position.

**[00:55:47]**

**AHERN:** Well lots of things grew out of Switchboard, like having that Women's Family Law Advice on a Saturday afternoon. That probably grew out of your little brochure. Having volunteer lawyers. And I still see a lot of those volunteer lawyers around town today who remember very clearly coming in to answer those calls on a Saturday afternoon. Eventually we got the technology where we could switch the calls through to them at home and they just had to sit by their home phone. And the Women's Legal Service today wouldn't exist without all that work that you and others did at that time, putting that service together and making it happen.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I remember on the weekends in particular having phone calls from women who would be in absolute terror and these would be women who were very middle class women, often married to people in the legal profession or to people who had very significant social status and they would say, "How can I leave? I'm bound. I can't ---."

**AHERN:** Doctor's wives.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Yes exactly.

**AHERN:** Police officers' wives.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Exactly.

**AHERN:** Those were people really tied up in knots.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Not police officers. I am talking much higher up. I am talking about really significant positions. I had a woman call me week after week, because I'd often work Sunday nights because no-one else wanted to, when we were working Sunday nights. And she said to me, "All I had was your voice. I never want to meet you. I just want to know that you are listening to me."

**AHERN:** The role of being an ear and being a non-judgmental, empowering, listening ear was very important for a lot of women, especially at nights and weekends when they were lonely and sad and unhappy and they felt like there was no-one they could talk to. It was very important wasn't it?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Yes, and I still remember this woman saying to me, "I won't ring you soon. You won't hear from me." And she said, "I will kill myself and then you won't hear from me." So there came a time where one Sunday or Saturday, whenever she rang, I didn't hear from her and I thought, oh OK. I didn't think much of it and then two or three weeks later I thought oh! And I was too frightened to go and look at the papers. I didn't want to do that.

**AHERN:** Well, you didn't always ---. That was one of the things about working there that women I've talked to who work there now, still find is that not knowing the end of the story. You may have helped at a specific moment in time, but you didn't ever always hear the end of the story and it's quite rare that you get approached at the markets by someone who is saying you saved my life. And you don't actually need that after a while, but when you first start, I think that's the thing I used to find the hardest when I was first a volunteer. Not knowing what happened, the end of the story. And there is no end of most people's stories. But it took a while to learn that. For me, I took a while to learn that.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I was just going to say there really isn't one. I remember having a client whose child was removed by forceps and he sustained quite a severe disability, and she knew why he had that disability, and she was fighting the doctor for years, and she was from another state. She came to Adelaide because there was family here and she ended up at Switchboard. Really amazing woman and this amazing little kid that she'd totally devoted herself towards and he had intellectual disability because, and she was convinced of this. So we put her onto one of the Switchboard's best lawyers and what a legal team we had behind us. Well they were extraordinary. We had some of the best people behind us supporting us and we were supporting them because they were getting clients. I get that, but these really top notch lawyers often went a step beyond what they needed to do.

**[01:00:18]**

**AHERN:** Oh yes. Above and beyond. Above and beyond the call of duty.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** It was a shaky association to start with, but I think once we managed to convince them that we would do the preparatory work for them, and get that all prepared for the woman to just go and say whatever and we'd be there for her support, then that was all cool. Anyway she ended up winning a case and it took, I think she came in when I was there in my third year, probably took two years and that was finalized before I left to go to Melbourne. One of the really exciting things for me is that in 1985 this young man became chairperson of MALSSA, which is the disability advocacy organisation that I was supporting at that time, and I was chairing. He became chairperson after me because I had to leave, and he was part of my team beforehand and working with him, he became so confident and able to do things and fantastic. Really, really happy. He was also doing some extraordinary work with IT, running his own business and doing very well. That story ended up well.

**AHERN:** Good story. Yes, sometimes you heard the end of the story but mostly you didn't and you had to deal with it. Can you think of any other, do you think there's still a need for an Information Service for women, because this is a question that comes up periodically. Some governments decide that it's not necessary. What do you think?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** There will always be a need for Women's Information Service. Quite simply women, I think even now prefer to speak to other women, number one, the level, and I'm not saying men are not empathetic. I am fortunate to have an incredibly empathetic man in my life, but I think there's a different kind of empathy with women and women. I think women do have expectations of services and I think they often get very disappointed with the services that they get to, and there's both a familiarity as well as an anonymity in dealing with the Women's Information Service that is safe and reliable for women and just having been away from that for a while I have become very much aware as to how unreliable information sources are, especially government.

**AHERN:** And especially the Internet, Facebook.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** The Internet is a joke. Unless you know how to navigate it properly then you can be caught. The Internet and Cyberspace provides a whole range of different types of danger for women.

**AHERN:** Oh yes.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** And I don't know how much the Women's Information Service is prepared for that, but for that alone, yes we need a Women's Information Service. But I suspect we need to be much more informed about Cyberspace and some of the dangers that lurk therein. I also think there's a role for the Women's Information Service to provide information more widely to women about some issues.

**AHERN:** Such as?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Like we did with the radio programs.

**AHERN:** Those sort of programs. Yes, that's right.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** The radio programs were extremely successful in their time for reaching their target group. The funding has been removed and I think was taken over and became a bit of a joke in that it became an entertainment program rather than an information program.

**AHERN:** There was a lot of music in the end wasn't there?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** With me it was really hard core. Hard core information and very ideologically sound of music.

**AHERN:** I'm not sure when, who was the last Greek worker. There was Sophie Rose after you and Stella Hellander or Mavrogeorgis, later Hellander and I'm not sure if there was another Greek worker after she left. They seemed to have lost those.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I suspect there wasn't because it was assumed that the demographics would change and there were other more emerging groups that are necessary. The thing that has saddened me is that, and I have this argument with people all the time, there will never be enough workers for the cultural diversity that we deal with. We are not going to get it. What we need is for the existing workers to be competently trained so that they --.

**AHERN:** Culturally competent.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Well, it is cultural competency but they need how to use interpreters, they need to learn how to do that, they need how to shift their thinking. I do a lot of cultural competency training. That's one of the areas I specialize in these days and the days of cultural awareness have well and truly gone. That means nothing. You give them to me for a couple of days and I will set them right.

**[01:05:41]**

**AHERN:** Well one of the things I learnt from Switchboard was that need for proper interpreters and as part of my work at the Legal Services Commission I ran a whole lot of training programs for workers from new and emerging communities. The Afghans and the Africans. All the different languages. I encouraged them to come and learn about the Australian law. Because they were going to Court not understanding our Court system and yet being expected to interpret. So we did a lot of training about all those things while I was at the Commission and I learnt that from Switchboard. You and Luisa taught me that. You taught me what was required and we made sure all the interpreters at the time when I was at the Commission, we ran so many different programs and I got funding for it, so that we could make sure the interpreters understood the Court system, understood legal terminology, because that's not easy at all. We have quaint sayings like, "I put it to you." Now what does that mean in English, really? I put it to you. And that's commonly used by a lot of lawyers and lawyers are still not being taught to use plain English, which makes it impossible for someone to interpret and they wonder why sometimes there are cases that have been appealed on the basis of poor interpreting.

And we did a whole lot of work with Aboriginal people about Aboriginal interpreting because, particularly those communities up in the APY Lands and others, have been hugely disadvantaged in many different cases because of the poor quality and the lack of training and the lack of funding for providing a proper interpreter service. So I learnt all that from you, Luisa and Jo and others about interpreters. It's been really important.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I remember just before I left to go to Melbourne, I was invited, one of the interests that I have is cultural competencies, psychiatric practice in mental health practice and cross-cultural psychiatry issues have been part of what I've done for quite a while now and I remember being invited to be part of a panel by, and I won't name anyone, but by a man

who is a significant figure in what he thought was culturally competent psychiatry and he invited all the ethnic communities and service providers to a huge conference, workshop, forum thing at The Parks. He rang me up and he said, "Oh, Nicky, what we'd like ---", because at that time I was the chairperson of the Greek of Australia Welfare Workers' Association. "We'd like you to talk about blah, blah, blah." And I'm thinking to myself. "You've got to be joking." I said, "OK, I'll do that." And he wanted me to talk about the psychiatric needs of my community and how we, my community dealt with them. And I said, "I'd have one request. I'm very busy but I do have one request." He said, "Yes, what is it?" I said, "I want to speak last. I want you to put everybody else first and I will speak last." In the meantime I had spoken to people like, you don't know them, Helena Kyriazopoulos some of the other important people in the ethnic affairs area and said to them, "I've been asked to do this." And they kind of laughed and they said, "What are you going to do?" And I said, "Nothing. I just want you to be there." This is when I was working in aged care, so in fact, I wasn't at Switchboard at that time.

**AHERN:** So you'd moved on.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I was at GOC SA, The Greek Orthodox Community. The thing that I learnt at Switchboard. He'd heard about me from ---.

**[01:10:06]**

**AHERN:** When you were at Switchboard.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** When I was at Switchboard. He had somebody from the Italian community and the Greek community, the Middle Eastern community, the Vietnamese community, the Chinese and whatever. There were about six or seven panel members. So everybody got up and did their thing and funnily enough they all said the same thing. Which I thought was rather extraordinary, really, or not really. Then it was my turn and I got up and I started off by saying that being only one person I couldn't possibly

represent the interests of thirty five thousand people in my community because it's not possible and I said, "Besides which, I think schizophrenia is probably the same for everyone. The same imbalance, the same thing." I said, "But we don't have the problem. The same for us, the same for my Italian friends, it's the same." I said, "It's not our problem, it's your problem. You're the ones who are not trained properly to deal with us. You're the ones who aren't trained to use interpreters effectively or properly. You're the ones whose workplace is unsupportive. You're the ones who do this." So I just threw it all back on the service providers, because that's where the problem lies. It didn't lie with the community. The problem was the service providers had no frigging idea as to what to do. And so let's find out what they do with schizophrenia in their community or anxiety or whatever it is. It's like, it's all the same.

**AHERN:** Of course it is. Well let's just, we need to, we've got a couple more areas that we need to quickly look at. Most topics we have covered. Do you have any comments about using new technology and the introduction of the Internet and information sources at the very beginning. Those famous pink cards and then those very basic computers that we got.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** The Rolodex. My God, I don't even remember computers at Switchboard. I think I got computers when I went to Melbourne.

**AHERN:** We did have them. We got them in ---.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** 1985. Really! I don't think so.

**AHERN:** I think we had some in the back room and we were printing out the pink cards before I went overseas. We were typing them up and printing them out and that was a really basic program and then in about 1990 we actually got our first little network of computers.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Yes, that was after I left.

**AHERN:** So that was after you left.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I was there in the dark ages.

**AHERN:** So what were your main sources of information. Where did you find your information for people? We had the famous pink cards.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Well, apart from the sort of standard stuff that I memorized, much to your chagrin, I think a lot of our information was mainly from pamphlets or actually ringing the people directly and finding out from them. Don't forget that ---.

**AHERN:** We had that yellow book, the CISSA Directory. Was that around then?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** No, the Rolodex.

**AHERN:** We didn't have the CISSA Directory then? The Directory of Information Services.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** No.

**AHERN:** That must have come later then.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** That must have been later.

**AHERN:** I'm trying to remember. We used the telephone book a lot when I was first there.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Yes, that's right. We did.

**AHERN:** The telephone book was very helpful and the Yellow Pages. Not any more.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** For us, the kinds of information that women wanted generally was really quite specific. Again, if it was a health related matter we'd refer on and if it was a worker's related matter we'd generally refer on. For the more complex legal stuff there really wasn't anything to do other than to make a time with the woman to see if she would come in so

we could take some notes and prepare that to go with her to a lawyer. We couldn't do that because we couldn't provide any legal advice at the time. So that was our role really. We did provide information but that was limited. It was more taking that a step further and getting the woman to, teaching the woman how to prepare herself in order to then go on to a lawyer. And that's information we would provide. Or to Legal Aid or whatever was appropriate. But things like emergency housing or the Housing Trust or anything like that there wasn't really ---

**AHERN:** Still a problem. Housing is still an issue.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Well, I formed really good relationships with the Emergency Housing Office.

**AHERN:** I know. But it's still an issue. There still isn't enough.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** But there was no housing. There was nothing available.

**AHERN:** Yes, I know.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** And with Housing Trust stuff it was primarily assisting women with filling in forms and ---.

**AHERN:** Writing letters of support.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Writing letters of support.

**AHERN:** You and Luisa were really good at that.

**[01:15:03]**

**DIMITROPOULOS:** We did tons of them.

**AHERN:** I know. I know.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** So I can't really answer that.

**AHERN:** That's alright.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** We had no technology apart from the phone, really.

**AHERN:** Yes, that's right.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** And our own networks that developed and grew, we developed and grew.

**AHERN:** Oh well, that's right. And everyone shared information too. Someone knew something and someone else would help.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** That's something we were good at.

**AHERN:** And the relationships of monitoring and assisting volunteers, I found that to be really valuable. There was always someone around who you could talk to and who you could debrief with. That kind of collaborative working ethos was really important wasn't it?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I think, yes, between the paid staff and the volunteers that was really good.

**AHERN:** And I think we all learnt a lot from each other in that way, didn't we?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Absolutely. Like I said at the beginning, the amount of diversity in our volunteers and what they were able to offer was extraordinary. Absolutely extraordinary.

**AHERN:** Yes, it's still good. OK. So is there anything else that you would like to add to your reflections upon your time at the Women's Information Service and how it affected the rest of your career, because quite a few women have said to me it really formed a lot of my attitudes to my later work? Has that been something you would respond to?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Oh yes. Switchboard was the best training ground I could have imagined. I mean I went on to finish a Social Work Degree when I was in Victoria. The Government there sponsored me. I think they were embarrassed that their Assistant Director of a Government Department didn't have a Degree finished so they did that.

**AHERN:** Good.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I think it taught me resilience more than anything. It taught me to have faith in myself but also not to be egotistical about it. There are unfortunately areas where I specialize in now and unfortunately there aren't many people who do what I do. And especially in the areas of aged care and disability or the aging disability or looking at really big picture stuff and I think I learnt that, not at Switchboard, but when I moved on to Melbourne. I was headhunted basically for a position in Melbourne which was with me to be the Victorian Ethnic Affairs Commission Women's Adviser, Women's Policy Officer and learnt to develop and write policy in Victoria based on my experience and based on 1984 when Hanifa Dean Oswald watched me in action to deal with what I was dealing with at the Conference.

**AHERN:** So all that experience has informed your later practice?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Yes. I think for me Switchboard really gave me a band of ethics that are incredibly important to me even though a lot of feminists back then didn't think that I was a feminist.

**AHERN:** There are many feminisms I always say. There are as many feminisms as there are feminists. Don't you think?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** And it's about, I don't deny my self worth. I don't deny the self worth of any woman. I still prefer women to men. I still think that the majority of men are dickheads. That will never leave me. That's just how I am. Just because I know that there are two or three exceptions in my life doesn't mean that my opinion of men has changed much at all. I probably would have made a really good lesbian had I been that way inclined. It's just that I wasn't. There you go! All the cultural competency stuff, all the issues about equity and what that really means. All the stuff that Government touts about individualized services and what the individual means. I have a very clear perception of what that is for me, whereas a lot of people caught in systems don't. Individual for them is

what they are funded to do and not what the person is. So that's the difference for me. And I guess Switchboard provided me with a very profound and very deep understanding of Aboriginal issues and I don't mean that in a kind of the fashion sense. I get really upset with people calling them indigenous. They are not like that.

**AHERN:** Well some do, some don't. It depends on who you talk to.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** A lot of the younger people are liking that because that's what they are familiar with but if you talk to the Elders, no they don't. They want to be called Aboriginal people.

**AHERN:** Except the Torres Strait Islanders don't want to be. And there are fewer of them down here, so it's complicated isn't it?

**DIMITROPOULOS:** I know. But you call Torres Strait Islanders the Islander people. You find ways around language.

**AHERN:** Yes that's right. I know. There's ways of doing it. Of course there are.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** The other thing it taught me, Switchboard taught me, is the importance and power of language and how we categorize people very easily with the language that we use and that's something that I'm quite conscious of.

**AHERN:** OK. Well thank you Nicky Dimitropoulos for giving us your time so generously. It's been a pleasure to share our reflections upon your time at the Women's Information Switchboard and I think that concludes our interview, so thank you very much.

**DIMITROPOULOS:** Thank you.

**[01:21:19]**

**END OF INTERVIEW**