

WOMEN'S INFORMATION SERVICE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Transcript of Interview with Sandra Dann

Interviewee: Sandra Dann

Interviewer: Caroline Pascoe

Date: 16th May, 2017

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PASCOE: This is an interview with Sandra Dann by Caroline Pascoe with Kati Murphy recording for the Women's Information Service History Project at the State Library for South Australia on the 16th May, 2017.

PASCOE: Can you tell me your name?

DANN: I'm Sandra Dann.

PASCOE: And where were you born, Sandra? Where did you grow up?

DANN: I was born in Timaru, in New Zealand, so I began life there. I moved to Christchurch with my parents and went to Primary School in Christchurch and then came to Australia and attended High School, University and I've lived here ever since. My father had a posting with the University of Canterbury at the University of Newcastle, very new university it was, and they returned to New Zealand and retired. In many ways it's still home, but Adelaide is very like Christchurch.

PASCOE: So you were about eleven or twelve when you came?

DANN: Twelve, I think.

PASCOE: Twelve, okay. And when did you start working at WIS?

DANN: I have had a look at my CV and I have recorded that I was there from 2000 to 2001, but I don't have specific dates.

PASCOE: No, that's fine. Where was WIS at the time?

DANN: It was in Station Arcade, so it was downstairs from the Office for Women. So we --- the Office for Women was in Roma Mitchell House and next to the then Minister, Di Laidlaw's office. So it was very close to the Minister and so I had an office up there, I think on the 12th floor and the shopfront, the WIS shopfront was down in Station Arcade, in a small shopfront there.

PASCOE: What caused you to come? Why did you want to work at WIS?

DANN: Okay. Linda Forrest who was the then Manager, took a posting with the Red Cross to Fiji and originally that posting was for six months, I think. So they rang and asked if I would back fill her position. I had a similar management position at the Working Women's Centre and so I sought permission from my Board and they agreed. As it turned out the time was extended, because when Linda was in Fiji there was a coup and that made her work there quite difficult, so she stayed on longer and so I stayed on longer at WIS.

PASCOE: And what was your first position? What was your job title?

DANN: I was Manager.

PASCOE: What was your brief? What were you meant to do in that position?

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DANN: Twofold. The Manager's position at WIS managed the staff in the shopfront, oversaw the people at WIS who were looking after the volunteer program, but also at that time the Manager's role at WIS had a Senior Policy Officer expectation attached to it, so any advice that was required by government, usually through the Minister's office, that WIS could comment on, then that was part of my role as well.

PASCOE: And how much time did you spend in WIS? You have said that your office was away from WIS, with the Office for Women on the 12th Floor of Roma Mitchell. How much time did you spend in the shopfront?

DANN: Hard to say. I made it my business to be in there every day. It's a fine line between being there to assist and observe and support and get the information I needed and interfering with the day to day business of WIS. But I did like to be there to have a presence. I've always found that in a management role it's really important to stay connected to the real business of the organisation and you do that by being available to staff, but also the women who used the service. It was really important for the Manager to have a good idea of what their needs and concerns were.

PASCOE: So were you called on to answer the phone or to speak to the clients?

DANN: Sometimes.

PASCOE: So you could actually do that?

DANN: Yeah. And there was also upstairs space - I made space available in my office for one to one interviews. Perhaps if the staff were interviewing prospective volunteers they would use my office and also if women needed more intensive support, there wasn't really a lot of space in the shopfront for women to have a private conversation with staff, so they would come upstairs for that and I'd just leave the office so they could do that.

PASCOE: So even though you were situated upstairs you were an integral part of the running of the Women's Information Service?

DANN: Yes.

PASCOE: When you went down there every day, what was the atmosphere like?

DANN: It was a fantastic place to work. The shopfront itself was a very beautiful space. I forget now, who came in and designed that space, but it

had a great big women's symbol set into the ceiling, which was very symbolic and set the tone, I think, of it being a special place for women.

The staff really were what made the shopfront a great place to be for women. So many of those staff had worked there for a long time. They totally understood how to greet women when they came in, how to provide the level of support that was appropriate. So for instance, some women in the morning rush of them getting off the train and getting to work would run in just to check their emails. We never knew whether that was because they had no access at home, back in those days that was quite possible, or whether they were using WIS to have some privacy around their email correspondence. But they didn't want any interaction. They knew what they wanted to come for, they knew exactly what they needed to do.

Other women were learning how to use the internet so they were very cautious, they were anxious. They --- it might have been their first introduction to even using a keyboard, so the staff off course, staff were allocated to teach the internet program and work with women to make sure they gained confidence in using email basically.

PASCOE: So you've more or less gone through it, but what were the aims and objectives of the Women's Information Service at that time?

DANN: I always described WIS as the one-stop shop. So if --- when I talked to stakeholders or women out in the community I would say, "If you've got a question but you're not quite sure who to ask and it's about women, ring WIS and their role is to gather more information and point you in the right direction." So there will be questions that WIS could answer straight up, like, "Where do I go to get financial support?" or " I need legal advice, where do I go for that?" But if you had general questions and you weren't sure of which government agency or non-government organisation was the best place to go, then they could point you in the right direction. So I saw

WIS as providing frontline services, but also being a really important holder of knowledge and a connector between organisations for women. And part of that was recognising that when women need specific information about their situation, one of the worst things we can do is point them to seven different organisations and go "they'll help you". I always saw WIS as taking that run-around factor away and reducing women's frustration with not being able to talk to someone that they needed to talk to.

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PASCOE: What memories have you got of the times you shared with the volunteers or the workers there? Anything special that comes to mind?

DANN: Yes, Fantastic memories of WIS. The women who worked there worked in very collaborative ways. We were very proud of saying we were a feminist service and we worked hard at talking about what that meant for us as workers and what it meant in terms of providing services to women. So that old empowerment model, you know, that information is power, was important. That sort of sat at the centre of our practice, but also as workers, given that WIS really was seen as a community organisation, but it sat in government. It always had a difficult tussle about hierarchies and who you reported to and who was up the line and you know, who funded this place and how did all that happen.

So that sort of exciting, in many ways, the sort of tail end of the old women's movement stuff was still there, where we were still actively grappling with a lot of that --- you know, stuff about women's lives and what did women need and the needs of women in regional and remote areas and how we'd better service them given we were a state-wide service. But I think some of my fondest memories were the trips that we did out to the regions. We tried to attend the rural women's gathering every year and every year it was held in a different regional area of South Australia. The same women attended each year, so we built up really

strong relationships with those women. And we had great fun. A lot of it was serious business. I mean, when you go to a very, very small country town there's very few services specific to women. It's very hard for women to obtain information without being seen by the whole town, so if she's experiencing domestic violence, for instance, we got to understand the difficulties for women outside of the metropolitan area. But the warmth and the friendships and the activities that we did on those trips, I don't think I will ever forget those.

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PASCOE: Sandra, who did you take with you? Did you take volunteers or ---

DANN: It was usually because of cost constraints. What we did was --- when I became Manager of WIS --- or actually before that, when I was Director of the Working Women's Centre, I realised that managing a small organisation can be quite a lonely experience and that if we saw ourselves as specialist women's services we would do well to join up in some way to support each other's efforts, but also as support for ourselves, professional support, and sometimes dealing with those issues that you needed to debrief, but you didn't need to debrief in a managerial sense So while I was at WIS for instance --- so we set up this network of the Women's Services Network and we made it a fairly structured thing, so it had funding support and support from the Minister. We got her to own this initiative and really it was a way of sharing information, but providing professional and personal support to the managers of a whole range of services.

So an example was that Women's Legal Service came under attack at some stage from the Men's Rights groups. So it began with sort of threatening phone calls. We received those also at WIS, then threatening visits, so we could alert each other to this is happening, you might expect this to happen too. For Women's Legal Service the attacks escalated. They had a lot of damage done to the windows in their service. At that stage they were in Market Street in the city, and I think, on two or three or four occasions,

they had the whole front windows smashed and that was very troubling. That was a time when there was a lot of resistance to women's organisations continuing to be funded and men saying you know what about us? We have needs too. Where's the centre for men? So that was an important time to collaborate, not just within our own department, government wise, but across the whole spectrum of women's service.

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PASCOE: Can you remember - you said the Women's Legal Services - what other services you were combined with? Any of them?

DANN: There was Women's Health Statewide, Women's Information Service, Women's Community Centre at Stepney, the DV services, Working Women's Centre. There was also the Women's Resource Centre - that was still operating as a library. So they were probably the main groups and it was important to share information about our activities with each other so we were better at referring women to appropriate places, we had a better understanding of what we all did. But it provided that --- I always called it cone of silence, where you could contact other managers and say, you know, can we have a talk about this. It might have been a staffing issue that was particularly difficult, but didn't need to be escalated to a Board level or a higher management level. It was just you know- have you ever dealt with this? What did you do? So that was important. So when we did the trips to the regional and rural areas we shared the costs, so it was usually Women's Health Statewide, Women's Information Service and Working Women's Centre that did those trips and representation at the rural women's gatherings. We would take a whole lot of information. We'd take resources. We developed little wallet cards with contact numbers and so on, for women out in regional areas.

PASCOE: Is that the first time they'd been used?

DANN: I think they had been around and then they stopped being produced, so we got those going again. We had little fridge magnets with the three services and the contact numbers and so on to encourage women to phone in.

PASCOE: So that the number would be at hand?

DANN: Yes.

PASCOE: It's interesting those groups or organisations that you brought up. We are still using most of those today.

DANN: Yes.

PASCOE: So it's very interesting to hear about how they first went out, but of course we don't anymore go out on field days or those sorts of things.

DANN: Yes.

PASCOE: Talking about the people who used the service. What do you remember about the clients? Was there a general client or was it ---?

[00:18:06]

DANN: Look, women could come from anywhere and that was one of the things I loved about WIS, so we would be providing services to homeless women. I remember times when women came in and they were looking for somewhere in the city that they could go and have a shower. And then we would have women who were grandmothers, who had grandchildren living overseas, studying or working and wanting to learn how to use emails, so that they could correspond with them. So the internet services were known up until a certain age group and beyond that women felt they'd missed that opportunity, so WIS provided an important role as a safe place to come and learn without feeling silly or stupid or having to compete in a classroom situation.

So we had women from all sorts of different cultural backgrounds. We had women that I would say were weekly attenders at WIS. For some women it was a safe place to come and spend some time accessing the internet or talking to someone. We had women with mental health issues. We also at that time ran, I think, two legal advice clinics. One was after hours and one was on a Saturday. So WIS was open at the weekend as well. So then you got a whole different group of people. Being positioned right there at the Railway Station meant that it was easy for women to drop in and out and stay as long as they needed to.

The other thing that I did when I was managing WIS was to get the staff--- we divided the state up --- I think we had six full time staff members. I divided the state into six areas and staff elected which area they would focus on in terms of having some ownership around keeping the relationships that we made when we went out to visit going . One of the things that women in the country always said, "It's great that you come to visit, but are you going to come back? Don't just come once and give us stuff." This is about building relationships. I learnt how important that was. And the staff really enjoyed that sort of ownership of their region and they would make sure that we got WIS information out to country health areas, women's health areas, community centres in the areas that they were looking after. So that they began to build relationships with you know the women's health nurse and it was easier then to - you weren't ringing someone new all the time. If you lived in Port Lincoln, you'd ring WIS and you'd ask for whoever was looking after your area. That was a great initiative. We tried it as a trial. It seemed like a good idea and I think it was a good idea.

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PASCOE: Do you think the issues of the day have changed? What your issues were then to what it is now?

DANN: Look. I don't believe so. I believe what has changed is that we've all developed a deeper understanding of certain issues and we've got better at language around certain issues. So, I know that when I was managing WIS back in 2000 domestic violence, for instance, was a major concern. That hasn't changed. What I think has changed is that, thanks to people like Rosie Batty and so on, we've probably got a deeper understanding of some of the complexities of issues like domestic violence. And what I'm seeing in my work now is women feeling able to disclose domestic violence more easily - it's not easy by any means yet, but up until recently women never contacted the Working Women's Centre to say I've got a workplace problem, they always say that, and it's because of my partner or my ex-partner, but women are now saying that. And feel -- so I sense that women have a language to describe the issues in their life, whereas before women would quite often say "this is my life". I don't have a dialogue around domestic violence for what's happening to me because I've never known any different. So, small changes but I always felt that at WIS there was a deep understanding of the lives of women and the training that women received there, both as staff, paid staff and volunteers, encouraged women to have those deep conversations, so it wasn't just the woman ringing up to find out where she could get a particular service, there was the opportunity for a deep conversation. In many ways that's what women were looking for - the connectedness that was missing. So that was, that part of the work was deeply satisfying.

PASCOE: There have been lots of phone-ins over the years - domestic violence. Were there any phone-ins when you were managing?

DANN: Yes, I think in conjunction with Working Women's Centre we ran a phone-in around the issue of domestic and family violence and work. So, we were interested in what the impact of DV was on women's work opportunities, their ability to get a job, to keep a job, to remain safe in the job, but also her access to training and promotion opportunities. So that's

one that I remember. I'm pretty sure that there were more. We seemed to have phone-ins on a fairly regular basis, and I can't remember whether we sort of had a rolling program of saying if you've got particular questions about legal issues, this is the week to ring. We would try and tie them to things like Law Week activities to make it relevant and accessible for women.

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PASCOE: What sort of use did you put to the information you gathered? Did you gather information or did you purely just talk --- ?

DANN: Yes, yes we did. We often did those phone-ins in conjunction with academic researchers. So knowing that organisations like the women's specialists services gathered all sorts of data and had you know fantastic stories to tell about the lives of women in South Australia, I've always had an interest in practice and research – so practice that is informed by evidence based research and the connection with researchers who are exploring areas of women's lives based through their experiences but also the practice with those women. I think that's really important to lift our understanding everywhere, so I had good connections with academic researchers and made WIS and Working Women's Centre and so on available to women doing research. I love research that looks at the gender components. I hate research that just assumes that everyone is a person, without exploring the particular areas of men's and women's lives.

PASCOE: I'd just like to talk to you a little about the volunteers. Was that a big part of the running of WIS ---

DANN: Yes, it was.

PASCOE: --- and how you related to them, perhaps, if they went to meetings or how they were involved in the service?

DANN: Yes. We ran a fairly big and well supported volunteer program. Volunteers, I think, undertook a six to eight week training program, under the supervision of the volunteer manager, person that organised the volunteers. So there was a very sound intake process. It was a very impressive program and had been added to and developed over years of experience. The volunteers of course --- I believe that any volunteering opportunity has to work for both parties, so volunteers have to get something out of volunteering. For some women who were retired it was the opportunity to continue to give back to the community and stay engaged and connected to the world. For the service, it was an opportunity to recruit perhaps a wider range of diversity and skills and experience and extend the amount of activities that we could do. So volunteers were well capable of taking phone calls if staff had other things that they were doing. The volunteers always worked under supervision and with support. But it allowed a service that perhaps couldn't afford more full time employees to offer a better mix of skills and activities.

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PASCOE: The rule at the moment is that if someone comes in the volunteer speaks to the client first, or picks up the phone first. Was that one of the rules when you were there or is that a new thing?

DANN: I think it was certainly encouraged.

PASCOE: Because you did say that they were trained enough and they could work, though under supervision, they were dealing with the same sorts of problems.

DANN: Yes.

PASCOE: Did you have regular meetings when you were there?

DANN: Yes, we did. Yes, we had WIS staff meetings and whichever volunteers were there on the day would be part of that, because we had the meetings down in the phone room. There'd be maybe one or two

people still answering calls during that but they were part of the meeting, and then we had specific meetings for volunteer staff as well.

PASCOE: A different question, now. On to a different tack. What do you know about the WIS Support Group and how it worked - how did it impact on what you were doing?

DANN: As manager, at that time, I prepared reports for the WIS Support Group. The Support Group was an eclectic bunch of women, many of them were older women, who had had a history with WIS well before I was manager there. So they were women, as I understood it, who had a stake in assisting the service, being part of the service, maybe had worked as a volunteer at WIS, or were connected in some way to WIS. So they might have been running a club or a --- groups like business and professional women, Zonta and so on. It provided another opportunity for women who were specifically focussing on the lives of women to feed information in to WIS and in turn get information, so that was my understanding and my experience of the Support Group. So some of those women were there because they'd been there, it seemed from the beginning of time, and they were very invested in the service. And a lot of them were, I guess, what we would call now as the old feminists - you know the wise ones that had fought a lot of those battles and had a lot of experience still. They were well connected and we used to use those women when there were things that we couldn't do as government employees, so lobbying activities and so on. We would say here's the thing - here's what needs to happen. They would take up the letter writing and approaching the ministers and so on and try and bring about, you know, political change. They would do the lobbying bit that as public sector employees we couldn't do.

[00:33:19]

PASCOE: So did --- that's interesting that they used you --- that you used them to help you. Did they need anything from you - did they make demands on you or requests? Can you tell us an example of that?

DANN: Oh yes, (laugh) There were times that they were extremely demanding. We provided space for them to meet and I can't remember whether we provided tea and coffee and that sort of level of support. We provided a bit of a conduit for information to go --- come in and go out to where it was needed. A role that's still important and performed by WIS. But there would be issues like say abortion and you know, major, major issues for women that a lot of these women had been campaigning for for a long time, so they would alert us when there was, you know, rumblings perhaps in other states through their networks when campaigns were gearing up, so that we would be prepared for those, because often when a campaign ramps up there's an increase in calls from women because they start to hear about this stuff. So that's how those sorts of things worked.

PASCOE: Do you think that your time at WIS has influenced your life or your career? I mean you went back to Working Women's Centre and you came from there, so you didn't go on to another career, but did it influence you much?

DANN: Absolutely! Absolutely! It was for me a pinnacle, positive experience of women working together in a really feminist way. Whatever that means to everyone we, as I said before, we interrogated that, we were continually trying to question our own practice - is this a feminist organisation or not? That sort of stuff was happening around, I guess in the nineties, the eighties, the nineties. There was this rise of managerialism. Managerialism became a thing divorced from feminist practice. So there was a bit of a collision of --- what does it mean in a government hierarchy to say that you are a feminist organisation and how do you match accountability of management to true feminist practice. So that was really important in terms of being true to ourselves as women, as employees, but

true to women in South Australia as well. I think coming as I did from New South Wales, my time at WIS really exposed me to a lot of South Australia that I didn't know about. A lot of the issues for women in regional areas, particularly when times were tough, so during drought. Going out and hearing the stories of desperation, of women working on the land and so on. Amazing! I mean how could that not affect your life and your professional life. Those memories are really strong. At the moment I'm doing a lot of work out in regional places and I'm sure that I'm better at it because of my experiences when I was at WIS. So some of those connections are still there.

[00:37:34]

PASCOE: Your dialogue with the women that worked there would also have been important. I can tell from what you have said before. Can you remember any particular people that you worked with or talked to - during that time?

DANN: In the regions?

PASCOE: No, in WIS.

DANN: In WIS. Oh, yes! You mean staff?

PASCOE: That might have put you on the spot a bit, but I meant staff or volunteers or people ---.

DANN: Yes, people like Wendy Thompson I count still as a friend today. We've stayed in touch. Wendy and Lies Zuidland, Michelle Carroll. They taught me a lot about the sort of direct conversations that you can have with women. I think, before then I'd been a manager in TAFE and there, you know, it was a different environment and there were a lot of rules around that, so you tended to be perhaps a bit more careful. Whereas I think the team at WIS, the staff at WIS, were very good at cutting right to the chase. And that, I learnt that from them. They were never shy about

raising issues and they had really good techniques about how to do that in a non-confronting you know --- we had little moments of conflict or issues, but, I felt like we had really good tools in addressing them and solving them.

PASCOE: Excellent! Thank you very much for talking to me Sandra. Is there anything that you'd like to add that you can think of that you haven't covered?

DANN: No, not really. I have a favourite story that I tell about one of our trips out to, I think it was Cummins. It was a rural women's gathering there. And we had a whole lot of mouse pads with government logos and things that we took. We always took stuff and we had a table and we had it all spread out there. And a woman came along and she picked one of these up and she's looking at it, turning it over and looking at it sideways and looking at us and like what is this thing? One of us, I can't remember whether it was Wendy or Lisa Moody said, "It's a mouse pad". And she went, "Oh! How does it work?" and she's looking, trying to flick it and we said, "Well you put it next to your keyboard and you use it with your mouse". And she's going, " Well how does that work?" And then I said to her, "Do you have a computer?" She said, "No. I don't have a computer, but I've got a mouse plague". (laugh from Pascoe). She thought that this was some sort of device to catch the mice. I thought who would ever have thought of that? But it was about the times, you know. Computers were new, technology was new. Women were behind the eight-ball in terms of their use and for women in rural areas the capacity to run their businesses and connect through the internet was life changing. But I love that story because it takes us right back to you know if you've got a mouse plague and you live on a farm, that's all that you can focus on.

PASCOE: I think that's a beautiful spot to finish our interview. Thank you Sandra for taking the time for us today.

DANN: Thank you, Caroline and Kati.

PASCOE: Thank you very much for that.

DANN: Cheers.

[00:41:27]

END OF TRANSCRIPT

Note: Throughout the transcript the acronym **WIS** is used. **WIS** stands for the **Women's Information Service**.