

WOMEN'S INFORMATION SERVICE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Transcript of Interview with Jo Chesher

Interviewer: Allison Murchie

Interviewee: Jo Chesher

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[00:00:01]

MURCHIE: This is oral history eleven hundred and twenty the WIS 40th Anniversary Project today it's Allison Murchie interviewing Jo Chesher at the State Library it's the 4th April 2018.

First off Jo thank you very much coming along and agreeing to be part of our project we really do appreciate it.

CHESHER: Ah thank you, thanks for inviting me.

MURCHIE: So first, of I just need to get some, some technical details. So what's your full name?

CHESHER: Full name is Josephine Anne Chesher. Yep.

MURCHIE: And is that your --- what's your maiden name?

CHESHER: Goss, g,o, double ss.

MURCHIE: And your date and place of birth.

CHESHER: Port Lincoln, it was the twentieth of November nineteen-forty-five. It was actually on the stroke of midnight.

MURCHIE: So you can pick your birthday almost (Laugh).

CHESHER: Well, well yeah. It was a bit of confusion, my dad went up the next morning and thought well that must have been the day so I was registered on that day but mum decided she would have it the day before so my whole life I've had two birthdays.

MURCHIE: You've had two birthdays, so just enjoy it. (Laugh) Get double presents. So did you grow up in Port Lincoln.

CHESHER: I did, yeah my dad was one of the fishing pioneers over there, so I grew up around the water.

MURCHIE: What sort of fishing.

CHESHER: Ah, shark and cray he went out --- he was one of the pioneers and looked out the cray fishing grounds the sharking grounds. Yeah very, very basic old wooden boats, nothing like the high-tech vessels they have these days. Totally different world.

MURCHIE: So did you grow up on a strong seafood diet?

CHESHER: Oh, we did to the point that he'd come home with wheat-bags full of crayfish and I'd say to mum 'what's for dinner tonight' and she'd go 'crayfish' and I'd go 'oh no can I please go to the shop and get some fritz'. I'd be begging for fritz. But yes, so yes we had plenty, but.

MURCHIE: So you were quite spoiled we gather from today's perspective.

CHESHER: Oh yeah I was

MURCHIE: What about your mum.

CHESHER: Yeah my mum came from --- both of them came from the Adelaide Hills. Mum was of the Hahndorf Lutherans came out on one of the very early

ships, yeah, and then ended up living in a shack literally on the sand in Coffin Bay as a young mum so yeah her life was pretty hard.

MURCHIE: Sounds like it.

CHESHER: Yeah washing nappies in the sea and yeah. (Laugh)

MURCHIE: That's and that's only one generation away that's a very tough life isn't it.

CHESHER: It's crazy when you think to go into the hospital she went in a horse and cart on bush tracks and I went --- came home from hospital on a wooden fishing cutter round the coast from Port Lincoln. So yeah it was totally different world and yet only seventy and a bit years ago.

MURCHIE: Yeah, like I say one generation ago removed, yeah.

CHESHER: Yeah.

MURCHIE: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

CHESHER: One younger sister.

MURCHIE: So what were your early years like growing up over there?

CHESHER: Well it's funny the first word that came to mind was ragged and I guess ragged in that we were just completely like urchins and, and we played on the beach and we built cubby's in the scrub and we had our own names for the different wildflowers. Yeah it was a very basic happy simple childhood. Loved it.

[00:03:18]

MURCHIE: And that has really extended into your adulthood where you're still a really outdoors person, aren't you.

CHESHER: It has, yes and maybe because I'm now such a passionate bush-walker and that might be it. I just love going out in the bush.

MURCHIE: Cos that's the way you grew up, yeah.

CHESHER: Yeah, yeah.

MURCHIE: And how long did you stay at Lincoln.

CHESHER: Ah, first moved away at the age of eighteen, came to Adelaide to work and from then on it seems to be if you grew up on the West Coast around Lincoln you keep going back. So for years I lived there, here, there, here and lived a lot of my married life over there. But I've been back here now; Adelaide's my home with about maybe two trips to Lincoln every year.

MURCHIE: You still go every year ---

CHESHER: I still go every year, still have a Christmas ---

MURCHIE: Home calls ---

CHESHER: Yeah, yeah, yeah it's good to go home.

MURCHIE: You came to Adelaide at eighteen; did you have a job lined up?

CHESHER: Yes, I was working for Clarksons over there and they were the glass people in those days and then came and worked for them here. Yeah.

MURCHIE: What were you doing?

CHESHER: Doing Admin work, yeah.

MURCHIE: And I'm making a --- probably an educated guess there probably wasn't a lot of work for young women going up in the country, was there.

CHESHER: No ---

MURCHIE: Other than in a few set areas.

CHESHER: Yes it was very much when you went to school you did commercial or you did science and I did commercial so it was reception work, office work, yeah.

MURCHIE: And that set you up for a much wider range of employment too doesn't it.

CHESHER: Well it did, yeah.

MURCHIE: How did you feel about moving to Adelaide?

CHESHER: Well I was pretty excited. I remember I came to live with my Aunt and Uncle at Tranmere and I remember the first day coming into the City, that I had never been in the City that I could remember, and the Bus was heading down and I saw tall buildings and I said 'is this the City' to the bus driver and he said 'well dear this is Hackney, I'll tell you when it's time to get off'. So, that was my first day at work thinking that Hackney must have been the City cos it didn't get much bigger than that.

MURCHIE: Oh how lovely. (Both Laugh).

CHESHER: Yeah.

MURCHIE: And your job was clerical work or ---

CHESHER: Yes, yes.

MURCHIE: You settled in okay to Adelaide life.

CHESHER: Yeah I did. I was pretty excited by the whole thing it was back in the days of you know dancing in the sand down on the beach and being a surfer and yeah it was all very beachy so ---

MURCHIE: It was a good time to grow up wasn't it.

CHESHER: It was brilliant yeah I loved it.

MURCHIE: Now the reason we've got you here is because somehow or other you got to WIS and I'm not defining what WIS is because everyone that's listening to this will know about the project. What led you to leaving Clarksons?

CHESHER: I went from there to Thompson and Harvey and I was the PA [Personal Assistant] to one of the Directors there, who was just a gorgeous man and from there I went --- I ended up going back to Lincoln. So from there I came and went, came and went. Ended up coming back to Adelaide and going to Uni as a mature aged student with three of my ----

MURCHIE: Adelaide Uni.

CHESHER: Adelaide Uni and Flinders went to a bit of both. And --- yeah three of my own kids and one of their friends who wanted to come as well, so it was you know four country kids and me and we all headed over and yeah I went back --- I went to Uni which was amazing.

[00:06:41]

MURCHIE: What made you decide to go to Uni because you could have gone at eighteen but you probably hadn't thought about it as a country kid. In those days not a lot of country kids necessarily had the aim of a University education did they.

CHESHER: Would never had occurred to me no --- I guess it was a progression from realizing that I loved writing and starting to get a bit creative with my writing and then doing a creative writing course through TAFE [Technical and Further Education] and I think through that, that made me sort of link into 'ahh maybe I can do a bit more' and then decided that I'd go to Uni and did an English / History Double Major Degree and a year as English Honours. Yeah.

MURCHIE: What did you major in?

CHESHER: Ah I majored in --- well my thesis was on the novels --- the father figure in the novels of Janette Turner Hospital for some reason I picked her so, yeah I found that was really interesting because I had a bit of an interest in psychology too --- might have done that except you had to do Maths and Stats so (laugh) I didn't. But I really enjoyed that.

MURCHIE: So your creativity was finding an avenue now.

CHESHER: Yes, yeah, yeah.

MURCHIE: So you've got your Uni, got your degree, got your honours ---

[00:08:02]

CHESHER: Yeah.

MURCHIE: What next?

CHESHER: Did --- well that's exact --- well that what I thought what next. I was maybe had better get a grown up kind of job and then someone said if you went and did Library Information management in a fast track twelve month post grad degree you'd get a job. So I thought maybe I'd better do that so I started doing it discovered that I perhaps I wasn't meant for the Dewey System, we just didn't click. One of the --- I remember one of the tutorials was I had to go and interview someone from a community information place and by this time I was very jaded by the whole thing and so went along and it happened I went to WIS and I remember that Stella Hellander was the person that interviewed me and she was just so wonderful. So we chatted away and I asked her I said 'look what's your staffing set up here, how does that work' and she said 'well we have volunteers and we have paid staff and blah, blah, blah. And I went 'oh okay how does your volunteer program work, how do you

become a volunteer' and she went 'well you fill in a form' and I said 'well do you have a form' and she said 'well yes this is the form' and I said 'fantastic' ---

MURCHIE: So you filled it out there (Laugh)

CHESHER: So I filled it out and I thought my god I'm now going to be a Uni dropout and I'm going to go volunteering at WIS. And that's what I did. I was out of my Library Information Management course ---

MURCHIE: But you found something you liked.

CHESHER: And I loved it. I just fell into WIS like I was going home. I absolutely loved it, yep.

MURCHIE: What year now --- can you remember?

CHESHER: Gosh now I should have thought of this before I came in because I don't remember. At a stab in the dark I'd say it would be maybe 1990, a bit before. I could work that out, somewhere around there.

MURCHIE: Well look at the ballpark so around there --- you would have started when it was next door to where we are sitting now.

CHESHER: Yeah.

MURCHIE: And it was called the Switchboard.

CHESHER: Exactly, yeah.

MURCHIE: What was it that attracted you? Okay I can understand that your degree didn't work for you and you were looking for something creative.

CHESHER: Maybe it was the warmth I felt when I walked in there, it was, it just had a lovely feeling. Stella Hellander is just, she's like a walking smile and warmth and she was just, she was just so lovely and ---

MURCHIE: What was her role?

CHESHER: She was one of the paid staff there, so she would have been an Information Officer, and she just made it sound like yeah this is a welcoming place, this is a helpful place, this is place where you can be actually doing something that you, you, I imagined you would love but that was really necessary and that would be really helping other people. So just seemed to tick all the boxes for me as a place where it would be good to be. And much better than trying to handle the Dewey System and sit in a big lecture theatre thinking I don't even know enough to ask the question let along get the answer you know, so but there I did.

[00:11:25]

MURCHIE: So what you're telling me is you felt you were going to be useful in this organisation as well as loving that workplace.

CHESHER: Yeah I did I felt like it was a place I could really --- I had something to offer that would be worthwhile, but I was going to get a lot of enjoyment and satisfaction and, and warmth back from it.

MURCHIE: Remember those early weeks there, what sort of training you were given and advice on what you were expected to do as a volunteer.

CHESHER: I guess the first thing was to look at the breadth of what they did. They had so many and would still have even more now so many different community services that could be linked into to, to help women. I was also quickly aware of the wide range of needs and wants and expressions that women had that there was, there was such a need for that place. So I guess that's it. It was that this is learning on one hand of everything there is out

there to help women on the other hand learning that there is so much that women needed.

MURCHIE: And in your own life being totally unaware of that need. Because most of us unless we need one of those services are totally oblivious to how hard it is for some women and the --- and that's the role that WIS plays and has continued and has continued to grow. But you were there in those very early years, I'm just trying to --- let me check my notes as to when it started. It was very, very, very early, wasn't it?

CHESHER: Yes I was there when; I remember Carmel O'Loughlin was the Director.

MURCHIE: I'm actually; I'm actually interviewing Carmel.

CHESHER: Oh and she's marvellous.

MURCHIE: And she does send her best wishes.

CHESHER: Oh well give her my love, yeah.

MURCHIE: Nineteen-seventy-eight it became, it started here. So, and Carmel would have been there. So Carmel was running it at that stage?

CHESHER: Carmel was the Director for the Status of Women, it used to be called then, I think that's changed now that's been dropped a bit.

MURCHIE: That was the correct title then.

CHESHER: Yeah, yeah. Vaia Proios was the Manager when I started, she ---

MURCHIE: How do you spell ---

CHESHER: Vaia, I think and Proios I think is Prious or s.

MURCHIE: I know the name but I sure, we've got that written somewhere.

[00:13:58]

CHESHER: Yeah.

MURCHIE: Who, yep and what was her role?

CHESHER: She was Managing WIS at the time. Another warm, funny, friendly I don't know supportive, the women there were just marvellous, marvellous women.

MURCHIE: How many paid staff were there at that time.

CHESHER: Well there would have been Vaia, Stella, I think there was another one. Not many maybe three or four.

MURCHIE: Maybe three or four.

CHESHER: Not many.

MURCHIE: And there was a substantial number of volunteers because obviously you were working different days.

CHESHER: Yes, yeah.

MURCHIE: Did you work on the same day, work with the same volunteer people or did you work with a range of people?

CHESHER: I worked with a range of people, there are a few that come to mind, so obviously I must have spent more time with them than others. But I remember there was quite a range of women. It's interesting that I can't really remember the volunteers as well as I can remember the paid staff which makes me think obviously I was working with them all the time, and ---

MURCHIE: How often did you work?

CHESHER: When I started I was volunteering I would imagine it was probably one afternoon a week. But that's just a guess I you know.

MURCHIE: And did that increase or your role change?

CHESHER: My role changed. I --- it's one of those things where I was --- I followed Joseph Campbell a bit who was a devotee of Carl Jung and in one of his books he had ' follow your bliss' you know you might want to go off and what I was doing was going off to Uni to do you know the Library Studies course because it would get me a job and that would get me money and blah, blah. But then the day that I decided I'm going to become a University dropout I'm going to do what I want and became a volunteer at WIS that was when the day I decided I'm just going to follow my bliss I'm gonna do what feels good for me and it was really interesting that a lot of people I --- well I know who did the Library Studies course trying to get into the State Library right at the end of it all still never got in. But I actually went and worked at WIS and from then went across sideways and ended up in the Library through ---

MURCHIE: We will get to that because that is quite an interesting story, but it's not how most people ---

CHESHER: No.

MURCHIE: came into the Library. What would you say was the main core of what WIS was about?

CHESHER: I feel it was being there and being available and having information and support for women and for --- another thing I think that was important was letting people know that that support was there. And I guess that would have meant working with Community Services too. So if a woman ended up with one Community Service that Service could then say maybe have a chat with somebody at WIS and find out where else you can get help. So I just see

it as being a catalyst, a jumping off point and also an extension of so many things for women who needed help.

[00:17:16]

MURCHIE: It's often said it, it was for women run by women and it had a very strong feminist ethos, did you feel that?

CHESHER: I would never have said that I was a strong feminist I just believed that everybody had a right to a fair go and to be given the help that they could. Yes I felt that there were feminists and a feminist I guess can be seen to be different things to different people and there was a time when a feminist was seen as a very strong, forthright kind of not even perhaps demanding kind of person. Whereas I can be perhaps introverted but in the best sense of the word you know as opposed to extrovert. So I was much more --- my approach was much perhaps quieter --- I don't know whether it reminds me of perhaps treads, what is it 'walk softly and carry a big stick', so I was sort of one of those who was very quietly and gently working towards a fair go for everyone, no matter who they were, rather than being out marching out on the street. And I guess we needed both.

MURCHIE: But you were still clearly still a feminist.

CHESHER: Yes in my sense of the word.

MURCHIE: You understood that there was a much wider definition of feminism ---

CHESHER: Absolutely.

MURCHIE: and you clearly were because it'd be a bit boring if we all did it the same way.

CHESHER: Absolutely.

MURCHIE: So you --- and that reflects on your type of client because they're coming from all cross sections of society. What were some of the --- it probably hasn't changed a lot --- but what were some of the major issues confronting women then?

CHESHER: Back then, I think it was domestic violence, comes to mind and getting themselves in or being put in situations I should say where --- and I think that was something I very soon learned was people say 'oh there in a bad situation why didn't they leave' and learning that it's not that simple it's a very complex thing and it can be sometime equally dangerous to leave as it can be to stay. So I, I learned a lot of you know those kind of things I think. So yes domestic violence, helping women to be aware that, that's what the name of it was and it wasn't their fault. You know those kinds of things and I guess stemming from that women not having money being in situations where they needed help financially and how to get themselves out of bad situations there. I don't know that was, that was the thing that came to mind.

[00:19:58]

MURCHIE: How did you help?

CHESHER: Firstly, I think listening and unpacking what it was. Letting them tell their story and then picking the threads and getting them to think about different areas, different lines that they could follow-up and helping them to know that they could get --- have strength and power through themselves through going and getting these different avenues. It was never --- always believed that it was never my role to be a saviour and that the person was a victim, it was always going to be that I would give, I would provide knowledge on perhaps avenues they could follow, now whether they followed those was very much their decision.

MURCHIE: What you just said well and truly summarises what I think the role of an Information Officer was. Were you trained that that was what you should be doing with people or did that come quite naturally to you to --- the words that you used was listen and unpack.

CHESHER: Oh okay. I think really that's how, that's my inner core of what I believe and so that came very naturally and very easily to me.

MURCHIE: Now there must have been cases where you felt a bit lost and didn't really know what to do, is that, would you have gone to one of the paid staff for help in those situations.

CHESHER: Oh definitely. Yes.

MURCHIE: I mean --- I'm sure you're quite capable of doing most of it. But there must have been cases that like that, that you need to talk out and say well what do I say to this women that sort of thing. Did you have any like that that were just a little bit too hard?

CHESHER: I can't remember ever like putting the phone on hold and going to anyone.

MURCHIE: So you always had enough confidence to be able to get through.

[00:22:02]

CHESHER: Yes I think I did, I think I did. But there would have been, definitely would have been times when I would have gone and debriefed with somebody because I think that's really important to go and say this is how it was and I think when I was working there too as a paid staff member and when I was training [volunteers] and I always made it really clear that, and there always was a paid staff person sitting with the volunteers, that the minute something becomes a little bit uncomfortable just pass that call on. Don't continue if

you're starting to feel like your spiralling down and you're getting a little bit lost.

MURCHIE: What percentages of your call --- your enquiries were by phone compared to coming in, people coming in personally.

CHESHER: Gosh, I would say maybe eighty-five, ninety percent. It was a lot more people on the phone. And thinking, wondering why and I guess because of that anonymity of it. I guess it takes, I think it takes more courage to come in rather than just call from a place that is a bit more familiar to you and I guess the other thing is - god I do a lot of guessing don't I ---

MURCHIE: No, no but that's what you're doing, isn't it.

CHESHER: Yeah, yeah and I guess too that it also means they feel safer because if they're coming from a position where they are a bit afraid of being found out or something like that then to come in especially where, when WIS left the Institute Building and went to down to the Railway Station, it was a very public little fishbowl really, anybody ---

MURCHIE: What anyone walking past that office would see them.

CHESHER: Anyone walking past could see them.

MURCHIE: It was the first thing you go when you came into the Arcade wasn't it.

CHESHER: Yeah, so obviously worked around that by having you know we could take someone out of the public view. But they still had to come in there so I guess why there are a lot of reasons why a phone call is easier.

MURCHIE: Can you describe the actual set up of the room. I can remember going in there. But what memories spring to your mind when you describe it.

CHESHER: In the Institute Building?

MURCHIE: Yes.

CHESHER: I remember that we use to come through that front door so we had those big doors that we went through that you pushed the button and they opened then you'd come in and you went in. Yeah I remember, I can --- it's interesting it's so many years ago and yet I can ---

MURCHIE: You can still --- I thought you could

CHESHER: now visualise it the Manager's office was there like immediately opposite the front door and then there were the volunteer desks around and the paid staff. Yeah, I remember it.

MURCHIE: What were your -- - what am I looking for --- resources the brochures, the information what was that like then?

CHESHER: Ah probably the printed brochures would have had more of a role than these days there might be more on-line stuff whereas back then I think we depended on paper - the paper brochures so there would have been a lot more of those I'm I imagine there would have been more brochure racks and that kind of thing that we would show people.

[00:25:31]

MURCHIE: So I've got, I've got a list of questions I should actually make sure I do ask you some of these. We've done a lot of that. What was your interaction like with the rest of the staff, like it's clear you've got paid staff and you've got volunteers and you're all women and I'm looking at my own experience here I find an all female environment one of the best to work in.

CHESHER: Yes, yes.

MURCHIE: But it can create problems as well. So overall, what was the work environment like?

CHESHER: The work environment --- so there's, there's different pockets --- there's the Switchboard when it was here and I think then it was a little bit different because we were --- I wouldn't use the word cloistered but it was closer to being cloistered because it was a much more private area. Where as then, we did go to the Railway Arcade and of course that was much more open. So I --- for me I feel like I really liked being here --- or being in the Institute Building, it just felt like it was a very --- it was quite a haven for women really. Where as the other one was all a little bit more, I hesitate to say glitzy and glamorous but it actually did win design awards or something for the architect that designed it even though it was half as comfortable as the you know --- like the desk, the front reception desk was designed in a way that I used to continually kept bumping the security button under there with my knees cos it was too low but it looked amazing but it used to gosh back in those days I used to wear those black sort of legging things and I was always sort of you know getting pulls and tags and I'd be looking up and there'd be the security guard saying 'hi how are you?' and he'd go 'you in trouble?' and I'd go 'no'.

MURCHIE: Didn't even know you'd knocked it.

CHESHER: He'd go 'you've done it again' you know so.

MURCHIE: A quick response though.

CHESHER: Yes, oh yes, yeah they were always there very, very fast. But I did love it here at WIS.

MURCHIE: I do remember, going back to Carmel. She said one of the first things that she did when she was there she got a coffee pot and put it on the counter so that women came in they had that lovely smell of coffee.

CHESHER: Yes, that would be Carmel, Carmel was just, she was wonderful. You know we would be needing to send out brochures and she would say right everybody in the office and I'll --- we'll all get stuck into this and so we'd all sit around and we'd laugh and chat and stuff the letters --- the envelopes. And there was one thing that Carmel gave me which she wouldn't know, but one thing I never forgot and I always used from then on was she would sometimes need to interview people and then after she said to me once, you know there's a trick to interviewing that makes it very simple, I learnt it many years ago and she said 'when people come in I'm not interested in asking them anything about their CVs or resumes because I can read that, I've seen all that and they can rehearse themselves and they can come and tell me all this and she said I'll find out all I need to know from reading the information they've given me', she said the one thing that breaks through all of that and tells me whether they're the kind of person I want to be working with is the question 'okay now would you like to share something from your life that you found particularly challenging or particularly rewarding'. And she said suddenly that person the --- everything just fell away and they picked the challenge or they picked a rewarding satisfying experience and they became themselves, they weren't person anymore they were themselves and that saved me afterwards on a number of occasions picking someone, selecting someone who was really good for the job over someone that you'd think oh I'm glad I asked that question because it's now all poured out. So that's ---

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MURCHIE: I've just added that to my list of questions, that's absolutely brilliant advice isn't it?

CHESHER: It's brilliant. So yeah, thank you Carmel. (Laugh) It was brilliant.

MURCHIE: That's something you've carried with you for the rest of your life.

CHESHER: I have, yeah. Right through to the Library to, always used that. Yeah it was a saving grace.

MURCHIE: You just sitting here smiling. I can tell how much you obviously loved working there.

CHESHER: I did.

MURCHIE: There were lots of highs and lows in organisations like that. But also it was an organisation that was new and having lots of successes. What sort of things did you do as a team or as a group of people to celebrate those successes? Did you do anything?

CHESHER: Yeah, we seemed to and this is now probably up when we were in the, in the Railway Arcade and up on the, is it 6th floor? ---

MURCHIE: Yeah where to office was.

CHESHER: Yeah, yeah so I remember there was a lot of, a lot of celebrations in Carmel's office, you know something would go well or we'd need to commiserate something and we'd all troop into Carmel's office and yeah she would have, she'd sort of have some afternoon tea or something would appear out of nowhere and she was always smiling and, and we'd get in there and would --- it was just a really nice place to be. So that, that when I think of celebrating, I think Carmel's office comes to mind the most. Parlamento's we used to duck down to Parlamento's [restaurant on North Terrace, Adelaide] every now and again there were a few luncheons there that went on a little. And so that was always pretty good.

MURCHIE: There were also very good at parties where they would invite the right people, politicians, movers and shakers and I remember going through, it might have even been the 30th anniversary looking through a lot of those photos albums ---

CHESHER: Oh yes, yeah.

MURCHIE: And one of the mistakes that we made we forgot to record all who all of those people were and so that's still an ongoing issue that the number of people that provided that support, maybe not in money but provided the support for the organisation.

CHESHER: Oh, absolutely.

MURCHIE: Because it was set up by Don Dunstan and it was continuing that. Which leads me to ask you what were they type of clients you had, we know what their needs were. Domestic violence probably still one of the biggest out there, lots of it --- home crisis issues and things like that. So where were these people coming from, what sort of people were they?

CHESHER: Probably a lot of the people --- look from all ranges, areas, everywhere. People came from everywhere. But I think maybe some people from particular areas didn't look for help because they may have been aware of their position and didn't want to be seen to be needing help, so they may not have. Where people from other areas may have been more from a culture where they had called for help and would call for help and so that was, that was it was good that they able to do that where perhaps some women who would have really needed the help but felt they couldn't do it.

[00:32:57]

MURCHIE: Yeah I'm thinking the same thing particularly with domestic violence. If you're from a let's say inverted commas 'proper family' or a higher part of society not too good to admit that.

CHESHER: Exactly, exactly and the, the fear of --- you know there's always fear no matter what which part of the echelons of society you're in. But sometimes it can be a different kind of fear of maybe even having them feeling they may have more to lose on different levels than someone who didn't have a lot in the first place. So there were a whole lot of different fears and yeah.

MURCHIE: And again I think it probably not changed a lot.

CHESHER: It probably --- no I'm sure it probably hasn't.

MURCHIE: The internet came in to being in the early nineties. Now that certainly changed your role. How did that impact on WIS. Were you there for that change over?

CHESHER: Yeah that was a huge change and I remember there was a place and I can't remember the name of it but it was where they had different databases or something that had lists of all the community services and that kind of thing. With the change over to the Internet that changed so that, that was more freely available to all but a lot of people didn't know exactly how to get into it or access it. So that's where we had to still be there, it was still important to be there and to know how to decipher and to get through to that.

MURCHIE: And I remember, lost track of when but again sometime in the early nineties that WIS actually did training session for women on how to use the computer.

CHESHER: Oh yes, yeah, yeah.

MURCHIE: And the freedom that that gave people to have that resource, yeah.

CHESHER: Yes. I can remember that, and I remember we had I think four or five computers in a circular desk setup that was down in the Railway Arcade and I remember there were some women who wanted to always sit at the back so people wouldn't see them learning the Internet and it was marvellous

because they could have one on one and, and it was coming from women who weren't IT specialists, we weren't IT specialists ---

MURCHIE: Ordinary women.

CHESHER: They were ordinary women who could say 'oh well this works for me how about we try that' and that was, it was sort of sometimes it was working together.

MURCHIE: Both learning

CHESHER: Both learning together and that was good.

MURCHIE: And that must have been such a strength because women are often intimidated by new technology and lot of these women weren't in the workplace so not even having that opportunity to be taught by a fellow learner to a degree would be quite confidence building in them. Yeah.

CHESHER: Yeah, yeah.

MURCHIE: One of the things I remember about WIS is they all seemed to be having constant project or big phone ins on particular issues. Were you involved in any of those sorts of things?

[00:35:55]

CHESHER: I was but not to a huge degree. That's not one thing that really sticks in my mind.

MURCHIE: Maybe that ---

CHESHER: Yeah. It was there but and maybe it doesn't stick in my mind because maybe I was, I more enjoyed the one on one, the you know the working the phones, the helping, the training, all that kind of thing, yeah.

MURCHIE: So what time period were you there, so you started maybe around '90, how long did you work. Because you were here for the move down to Station Arcade.

CHESHER: Yes.

MURCHIE: So how many years were you there?

CHESHER: I might have been, I reckon I must have moved to the Library around nine, around ninety, so maybe for five or six years before that perhaps.

MURCHIE: So it was a substantial period wasn't it.

CHESHER: Yeah, yeah, I

MURCHIE: Now your role changed within that from a volunteer

CHESHER: Yeah, yeah

MURCHIE: Talk through that process.

CHESHER: Okay. It, it's really wonderful, like I say it's just such a classic example of follow your bliss don't do what you think is going to get you money or standing or anything like that just do what you want.

MURCHIE: I should've asked a question, as a volunteer how were you surviving to live because you had a couple of kids.

CHESHER: Yeah I had, I had kids and I was, I was ---

MURCHIE: What was the age ranges between the kids, were they --- by the time you were working there.

CHESHER: Well when I --- oh gosh when I was working there they must have been from about nine to fourteen-ish may be somewhere in there.

MURCHIE: That's a full-time mum job isn't it?

CHESHER: Well it was, yeah, when I look back and I can think how did I do that, because I was renovating an old late eighteen hundreds cottage down at Hove as well so you know it was, yeah it was, it was a busy time but you know.

MURCHIE: If you want something done ask a busy person.

CHESHER: Well exactly, exactly. But yes, so I, yeah became a volunteer there that was wonderful and then ---

MURCHIE: So it's still a bit of a juggling act, but you managed to get to complement the family life, the renovation and working all quite well.

CHESHER: Yes, yes and then some casual work came up and I was lucky enough to get the casual work and I was pretty excited about that

MURCHIE: Information Officer

CHESHER: Yes, yeah and then from that a contract position became available, so I got a contract position which I think was renewed maybe three times and I think after that there was something where you couldn't go for it again they had to call the position or there was you know some government thing. And then of course I was over the moon because I actually won the position so ---

[00:38:45]

MURCHIE: Do you remember who interviewed you? I'm always curious.

CHESHER: Look I reckon by that time it would have been Marg Porter, Margaret Porter who was just another magic woman. She came in I think after Vaia and absolutely loved working for Marg. She was warm and jolly. I think she was from Yorkshire and she had an amazing accent and yeah she was, she was, they were all wonderful. So worked with Marg very closely, got on really well with her, got on well with all of them. So yeah it was just, it was just a marvellous thing to go from ---

MURCHIE: Was that a full time position when ---

CHESHER: Yeah, that was full time, yeah.

MURCHIE: And within that, you took on another fairly substantial role in training, didn't you?

CHESHER: Yes. I guess ---

MURCHIE: How did that happen?

CHESHER: I realised that I loved, I loved the volunteer position and then I started sort of working with the volunteers and then through WIS they offered that I could go and do the Diploma of Volunteer Management through Volunteering SA and I actually went through with the very first inaugural

volunteer, Diploma in Volunteer Management which was run through Volunteering SA. Which was wonderful so I did that, they were just so supportive and kind enough to put me through that and came out with my Diploma and so then coordinated the program moved it, you know in new directions or --- whatever and I guess it was natural that in that then training would be part of that role and I absolutely loved that and then I did a series of handbooks which I'm sure have been superseded many years ago but that was, that was just a brilliant project that I did to look at how we train --- to rewrite the whole, or introduce a really structured training program where people came in with proper workbooks, information books, books that had trial scenarios that they could go away and do them themselves and write down what they would do and then we could discuss after what other options might have been and so by the time they actually became fully fledged volunteers they had a pretty good grounding in possibilities and options you could suggest to women.

[00:41:37]

MURCHIE: And most of those skills you got from that training course? Or was -
--

CHESHER: Yes, yes.

MURCHIE: But it would have also used your skills from your university degree, your life experience, I mean you don't just suddenly invent a training program without substantial life training as well as the dynamic of how to put it together.

CHESHER: Yeah, definitely and also having been a volunteer there and an Information Officer there for a while and knowing what women were coming, looking for, or maybe didn't even know what they were looking for until you started to unpack and talk with them, so yeah. And the training also involved people, professionals from outside. I remember we had somebody from Disability Action come in, or we went out there actually and one thing that

stuck in my mind was putting on the headphones and having an experience of what it's like to be schizophrenic and hear voices in your head - and so through the headphones, while somebody else in person was trying to have a, or attempting to have a conversation with you, you were hearing these voices putting you down and swearing at you and being terrible to you in your head and you were trying to cope with that and at the same time have a conversation with a real person in front of you - and now you know from then on it just gave me such a bit of an insight into how, what a struggle some people have in their lives, how difficult it is and I just respect people so much for that now with what they go through.

MURCHIE: It's a shame more people couldn't get access to that sort of training ---

CHESHER: Oh absolutely, it just ---

MURCHIE: You couldn't possibly imagine if you hadn't had that.

CHESHER: Yeah it just opened my eyes so much and we, I would organise like someone came in from Crisis Care and talked to us particularly about calls that might come through with someone who was talking about life becoming too much and not wanting to go on with it. What, how do you cope with that, that's probably the most you know confronting thing to have on the phone and just feeling that weight of responsibility what if I get this wrong what, what could be the outcome you know - and having that person coming in and talk to us that was just wonderful you know and people from domestic violence, Domestic Violence Unit those kinds of people. Just so many amazing people who came in and talked to us.

[00:44:19]

MURCHIE: And so you would get that training for all the staff?

CHESHER: Yeah, yep.

MURCHIE: And now I'm guessing it's probably expanded into lots of other areas too, things that you probably hadn't even thought of back then but, yeah

CHESHER: Yeah.

MURCHIE: That's one of the strengths of the organisation it still grows, it still provides services a lot more now for victims of international crimes and coming in as refugees and things like that ---

CHESHER: Oh gosh, yes

MURCHIE: Which wouldn't have happened in your time? But I mean I'm sure that's something that the current WIS are doing and also now they are doing a lot of country visits was that anything that happened in your time going out and providing information sessions to country.

CHESHER: It may have I can't remember.

MURCHIE: So not a large part of it was then.

CHESHER: Not, not for me it wasn't but you saying about the refugees just reminded me and her name escapes me at the moment, but she was another magic woman. She was South American and she, it was about the time when genital mutilation was just becoming known and she worked in that area with a lot of people, she, or I can't remember her name, that's terrible

MURCHIE: I've got lots of names here, I'm just looking to see --- it occurred to me someone did mention the South American woman but it's not coming quickly to my head either.

CHESHER: Yeah. She was just wonderful and she was such a treasure because she could understand whereas perhaps from our very safe secure Adelaide base we hadn't been confronted with something like that. Well I hadn't been anyway then suddenly that opened up a whole new area of like this really happens and people do suffer through this so yeah it was wonderful having

her and she did a lot of outreach and went out to a lot of women's groups and talked.

MURCHIE: We're quickly running out of time. I can't believe how quickly that has gone. What was --- oh the women's support group the WIS support group were you aware of that ---

CHESHER: Yes I was.

MURCHIE: I know you wouldn't have necessarily attended it, but did you know what their role was or who was involved in that?

[00:46:44]

CHESHER: Yes, there was a woman and I can't remember her name [Glenys Beckwith] but she used to wear her hair pulled back in a very small bun and she was, she was very committed to the support group and yeah I can't remember her name. But I do remember that support group and one thing I have remembered that I would like to say was that I always felt we were there very much of course for women, but we were also there to help men who needed to understand that women needed help and why things might be the way they were and I can remember once a chap coming in and he was quite heated and he was saying 'oh you, you women you're dividing women from their husbands and you're doing this and you're doing that' and I remember walking out from the phones area and starting to talk to him and can't remember exactly the conversation but he was so distressed and so upset and felt that we were dividing people and I just started talking to him and saying, just saying things like look and I can't remember exactly but something like 'look it sounds like you really care about your wife' and he was saying 'of course I care about my wife, I love my wife deeply' and I was saying 'yeah and that's we care about women deeply the way that you care about your wife' and we just had this conversation that I could see him starting to soften in front of me and it make me go a bit goosy right at this moment to remember

that how this person who came in with so much angst and so angry just ended up just we had this lovely conversation and then he said 'you know what' and I think it was something like at the end he said 'you know what he said you sheilas aren't half bad after all' or something like you know.

MURCHIE: The ultimate compliment.

CHESHER: and I wasn't, I wasn't going to go into well actually I'm sure that we're sheilas but ---

MURCHIE: But you knew what he was saying.

CHESHER: But I just thought 'win'. You know I just thought wow we've got through that he's gone out thinking we're okay he doesn't feel threatened by us now.

MURCHIE: And also he would talk to other men

CHESHER: Yes.

MURCHIE: So the message continues. Now we have already talked about who the Directors were in your time. Do you remember who the Ministers were or the Women's Advisers of those times.

CHESHER: Yeah it was, I remember Di Laidlaw was the Minister, I don't remember any other anything other than that.

MURCHIE: She would have been there for a while.

CHESHER: It was Di Laidlaw, I remember her.

MURCHIE: And we had Women's Advisers around.

[00:49:26]

CHESHER: Yeah look I remember, she had very dark hair and she's still, is it Vicki Chapman I think.

MURCHIE: No, she wouldn't have been Women's Adviser she would have ---

CHESHER: I think she was involved in some way.

MURCHIE: Oh okay I think she was actually on the Support Group as well.

CHESHER: That might have been what it was.

MURCHIE: She was very supportive of the organisation. Now the very last question you can answer the question that you were taught to ask about challenging yourself. The question you were taught to ask by Carmel.

CHESHER: Oh yes.

MURCHIE: Now you can answer it.

CHESHER: In what way?

MURCHIE: What's been your biggest challenge, biggest reward

CHESHER: Oh my biggest challenge. Isn't that interesting.

MURCHIE: Isn't it.

CHESHER: Isn't that interesting. My biggest challenge

MURCHIE: Because I couldn't answer it on the spot either.

CHESHER: Okay I guess my biggest challenge in my life, there's been a lot of challenges, probably my biggest challenge was packing up three kids and one of their kids who my son came home from high school and just said 'can we take so and so with us?'

I thought oh well if I've got three I might as well have four. So coming over with four country kids, going to Uni as quite a shy you know person from the country, renovating a cottage and then being a drop out from Uni you know --

MURCHIE: So that whole package is a big.

CHESHER: I mean all of that whole package was quite a challenge. But yeah.

MURCHIE: And what the things you take away from WIS in your time there that you've taken on to your future employment.

CHESHER: I think being aware of the worth of women that yeah it sounds a bit cliché to say that women have a voice and they should be able to speak that

voice and you can drop back into cliché but I think what I have taken away from there is a confidence in myself in being a woman and also a respect and knowing I think, when I was saying about that man explaining to him or talking to him saying it's not women, women aren't here to be against men we are here for understanding across all areas.

MURCHIE: That's something pretty good to take with you. And just finally why did you leave and how what were the circumstances that lead you to leave the job that you loved.

CHESHER: Oh okay that is a story in itself that would take about five hours but let's just say....

MURCHIE: Well give me the two-minute version.

CHESHER: The two-minute version I guess there was always something about books and the whole library and writing and English and everything, and maybe it was just because of a whole set of circumstances that happened. Sometimes life leads you in a, in another direction that you didn't even know was going to happen. Doors start closing they start opening there you just move on because the time's right.

MURCHIE: And I think it's inspiration that you ended up as a Volunteer Coordinator

CHESHER: Yes

MURCHIE: At the State Library, I think that just sums up your role in a beautiful way. And I have run out of time so thank you very much for today that was a fabulous interview.

CHESHER: Oh thank you.

MURCHIE: I really enjoyed hearing your stories.

CHESHER: Thank you I loved all the memories. Thank you (Laugh).

MURCHIE: Oh good I'm delighted, thank you.

CHESHER: Yes thanks.

[00:53:04]

END OF INTERVIEW