

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

## **Transcript of interview with Jo Willmot**

**Interviewee: Jo Willmot**

**Interviewer: Caroline Pascoe**

**Date: September 26<sup>TH</sup>, 2017**

**[00:00:01]**

**PASCOE:** This is an interview with Jo Willmot by Caroline Pascoe, with Kati Murphy recording for the Women's Information Service History Project at the State Library for South Australia on Tuesday the 26th September 2017. Welcome Jo.

**WILLMOT:** Thank you

**PASCOE:** Can you tell us a brief overview of when and where you were born and grew up?

**WILLMOT:** Okay, first I want to acknowledge that we are on the land of the Kurna people and, I give thanks and honour their ancestors and the people of today who live with the same aspirations as their ancestors and the future generations and I hope that my journey on their country actually is a respectful one and is built on trust and love and support for the Kurna historical engagement and belonging to this country.

**PASCOE:** Thank you Jo.

**WILLMOT:** I am a Wakka Wakka woman and Wakka Wakka country is south east Queensland. I was raised in a mission, Cherbourg Aboriginal Mission. Member of the stolen

generations, my mother and my father were, my mother worked for the government under the indentured slave labour of the Aboriginal Protection Act and my father was banned from the mission, so I never got to meet my father until he was 80 and he died at 84. So, there's a whole a lot of history there in respect to my coming to terms with and reconnecting around what's important. And also having a strong identity as an Aboriginal woman.

**PASCOE:** How did you come to be working at Women's Information Switchboard, it was then, I think?

**WILLMOT:** I had my third child and I was feeling a bit itchy in the feet after the third child and thought I needed to spread my wings a bit and get a bit more involved and, maybe apply for a job that was a little bit different to what I'd done previously. Mostly I'd worked in Aboriginal organisations, politically being connected to the national framework politically for Aboriginal people and I saw the position at the Women's Information Switchboard wasn't really aware, but information is always what I'm really interested in, wanting to know more, wanting to need to know more, and I applied. And Suzie, who I can't remember her surname, was the Manager there at the time, and her senior colleague was Bronwyn Webster, and I went in for the interview, felt a bit afraid because I hadn't done anything like that, like go into a white space and work and go through this process. So it was daunting, it was terrifying, challenging, but God I was up to it, up for it because I needed to know, and to know that I could fit in a mainstream service.

**PASCOE:** When was this, what year?

**WILLMOT:** 1983

**PASCOE:** Okay --- and how long did you stay with WIS [Women's Information Switchboard]?

**[00:03:46]**

**WILLMOT:** I'm kind of thinking that off and on, I think until 1990, I think it was, 1990. Could be a bit longer. Just not really sure because I went from WIS [Women's Information Switchboard], I went to do some work with the Premier's Department, did a bit of work up on the APY Lands [Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands] with the NPY Women's Council [Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council], I did a bit of filming with a National Aboriginal Film Corporation, doing some work on Aboriginal cultural awareness, a film for ... at that time, employment, education and training. And also in 1985 organised the first national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Festival. And the auspicing body was black women in focus who were supported by the UN [United Nations] Status of Women, and, sorry, it wasn't it was actually the Fringe Festival, who on our behalf accepted some funding to employ Aboriginal women but also to put on a two week event of Aboriginal women artists, the people didn't know existed before then. Everybody just assumed men were the artisans in the Aboriginal community.

**PASCOE:** While you were at WIS what was your job title and what did you do in the role?

**[00:05:34]**

**WILLMOT:** Basically to support Aboriginal women, to provide information to them and to ensure that they were aware of what their rights were, if they had a fear of going to authority because let's face it, it was 1967 when we were free to make some choices about being available in, in white mainstream services and when I came on board in the eighties, Aboriginal people didn't have a lot of trust of government agencies and authority. Cause that was all part of a deficit in regards to their access of service and whether they felt comfortable or confident about getting the right sort delivery of service. So, my, my place was to either translate or interpret those services, to walk with women through the process of utilising legal services, the courts, Centrelink, all of the government services that, that are available today, as well as housing, education, training, talking at schools, universities, helping women to navigate throughout all of those services and opportunities in a mainstream system so that they can feel more confident and getting better outcomes for their needs.

**PASCOE:** Was it, you mostly working on the phone, or was there a shopfront then that women came in to see you?

**WILLMOT:** Well, I was a little bit radical because I didn't like sitting on the phone. And guess what? Aboriginal people didn't have telephones darling. Middle class white women and white families did, Aboriginal people didn't. So I had to go out and make myself available and let Aboriginal people know that there was this service and that we could provide them with whatever supports they required. And it took a lot, as I said earlier, there's a history around Aboriginal peoples reticence about utilising government services and the distrust because of the stolen generations, and Aboriginal people being put into

indentured labour and stolen wages. Aboriginal people working, and being removed from their families to work in pastoral properties, in private homes, in doctor's surgeries, and all sorts of different places and government setting up a trust, taking parts of that income and also not being able to buy homes and set up their children up in private education, having the opportunities most Australians took for granted. So, in a sense, Aboriginal people were very limited by the mere fact that their history kept them back in the sense of not being able to access what's available to them.

**PASCOE:** So a lot of your work was done out in the field so to speak, talking, talking to women and, and showing them how you could help them and that sort of thing, rather than the women actually approaching WIS. Would that be fair?

**[00:09:09]**

**WILLMOT:** I don't believe I helped them, I worked with them and I always work with people. I don't do for people and it was about giving them an opportunity to realise that they had the capacity and capability; it's about finding the confidence to be able to do and to access whatever they needed to. And not be ashamed or afraid because they had a right along with anybody else to access whatever there was that was available. It was their basic human right to access all these services and to get the right sort of service for their needs.

**PASCOE:** Can you remember other workers or volunteers that you worked with at the time? Remember any names?

**WILLMOT:** Yes I do. As I said Bronwyn and Suzie (Riggs) were there, Margie Caust, Sophia Rose, Niki Dimotopoulos, Luisa

Sheehan, Helga Lemon, did I say Margie Caust?, Carmel O'Loughlin.

**PASCOE:** Who was the Manager when you were there?

**WILLMOT:** First it was Suzie, and then it went to, Suzie, then I think it was Gudrun (Boessler), and she's passed away, and then Carmel O'Loughlin.

**PASCOE:** Did --- was the internet part of the service then, when you were there?

**WILLMOT:** They, I remember when we first got the computers and Luisa was going, 'Oh My God, they're not expecting us to do that are they?' I go, 'Yes, we do'. But actually we found it a lot easier to access information very quickly on those computers, than we would of if we were ringing around or having a paper trail because what we did realise was with the information that it changes so rapidly, so keeping up to date with that meant that someone had to be responsible and that was when Helga, I think, Helga Lemon, took over and started to develop the information logo and then working on advertising and marketing the Switchboard and but also our services and how we can access different information.

**[00:11:51]**

**PASCOE:** So did you do anything to help the women use the technology or was it just used for you two so that you could give correct information out in that time.

**WILLMOT:** No, it was just a --- the computers belong to the government and we used them for our information. There was no ability for us to get women to come in and use

that. Cause we're on the phones, the computers were at the desk with the phones and because it was a phone service, that's how we could access the information. If we had clients using the computers then we wouldn't be able to use the phones, with the computers, so, yeah it was very much tied to the telephone service. But it, you know, like I'd take people to see lawyers or I'd take them to Centrelink or I'd take them to the housing department or go to the courts with them or, sit with various people around supporting them, family court, you know? When they're afraid to go in because partner was there and they had their children and they had family case conferences and stuff like that so there are all of those little things that we did to ensure that they weren't afraid mostly. It was very the much basic services around being with them because a lot of them were either single parents on their own or single parents who didn't have family around them in a sense when they separated from their partners etc.

**[00:13:34]**

**PASCOE:** You mentioned that apart from, aside from WIS [Women's Information Switchboard] that you were involved in setting up a lot of, what would you say, festivals or get together, or field days or something or other. Did you do anything when you were at WIS that involved Women's Information Switchboard or Women's Information Service to involve the community, were you involved in any outreach sorts of programs at all, can you remember?

**WILLMOT:** Carmel (O'Loughlin) and I did travel to the country a couple of times and had meetings with Aboriginal women and I can't remember whether there were a couple of workshops with Non-Aboriginal women to talk about the

services of Women's Information. And that happened around the 1800 number, when we got the, is it, a local telephone?

**PASCOE:** Local telephone call for the country, country women...

**WILLMOT:** --- local call for the country women, yeah so, yeah, I did that, but, mostly people did know where I came from, and what services were available in the place that I worked. So, whatever I did in the Aboriginal community, it, it, positioned me in the organisation that I worked for. So, I didn't have to go far out of that, and, particularly supporting women in abusive relationships and finding, we had a, a really good connection with, women's shelters, the rape crisis centre, other women's groups, we certainly did build our capacity around having some sort of respectful relationship around how we all worked together to be able to get the best possible outcomes for women in crisis, but also in need of the services we were all providing. And trying to be on the same page. Sometimes it was --- there was some political volatility and other times there weren't. I used to attend --- there was also that, at that time a whole lot of the start of women creating their own conferences, so I used to attend a whole lot of the women's conferences to ensure that Aboriginal women's issues were also on the table, and part of what it is that we did and what was relevant for us around health, housing, welfare, social justice, you name it anything that any other woman needs, has to contend with in the community, we had the same issues, and we had the same aspirations to live freely of all of those things that bound us in chains and kept us oppressed. We wanted to break free from that and also have our own voice. So yep, Women's Switchboard was



also a part of a springboard in giving that voice to Aboriginal women. In the arts, and in all of those other avenues.

**[00:17:02]**

**PASCOE:** Do you know much about the Women's Information Service support group? And the role it played? Did you have much to do with them? The WIS Support Group. Group of women who specifically supported Women's Information Service and...

**WILLMOT:** Are they the same as the volunteers?

**PASCOE:** --- no, no this was a group of women who just looked after various administration aspects of, of Women's Information Service and did work behind the scenes. Ok

**WILLMOT:** Probably not, I was too busy

**PASCOE:** You were too busy

**WILLMOT:** working with Aboriginal women around the state and also reconnecting to women nationally and internationally. And also, I was also privileged to get a, a, award scholarship, whatever to attend the International Women's Conference in Nairobi, in Kenya. Carol Treloar was the Women's Advisor then and I attended that event as a person who came from the Women's Information Switchboard. And when we were there a group of Aboriginal women and I, who we didn't really know one another, we decided --- of the --- because there was 22,000 women there, that there was so many different groups that were speaking and the workshops, there was about 100 a day, or whatever, or over 100 a day, we just decided we should have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workshop to talk about

our concerns and our issues. And it was well attended, mostly by a lot of Australian, Non-Aboriginal Australian women, who were really quite shocked at the plight of Aboriginal people in this country. Had no idea what it is that Aboriginal women had to contend with and what the history was in this country in deliberately marginalising the first nations people and their opportunities to get ahead and being a part of the greater economic wealth in this country and access to that.

**PASCOE:** You've obviously did a huge amount of really good work for the Women's Information Switchboard, was there anything that sort of stood out in your mind apart from the things that you've already told me that you've managed to do while you were there?

**WILLMOT:** When I came back from Nairobi, I was very determined, we'd had the Aboriginal Women's Art Festival. I was then determined that we would work towards that group of women, a, International Indigenous Women's Conference. It took quite a long time, it happened in 1989, in Adelaide, and we had no funding --- and we just kept meeting, and sort of building on what it is we could do and in 1989, it was in July, in May we got some people from overseas who'd said they wanted to register and then it kept building and all of a sudden we go, ' Ooh god what happens if 100 people turn up, were gonna be, we've got no money and we're gonna put on this conference and we don't have any, anything available.' A group of non-aboriginal women came together and said, 'What is it that we can do? We're happy to be the, the support around what it is that you need to achieve.' We needed billets, we needed interpreters, we needed all these things that you couldn't otherwise get, unless you had a lot of

money. And then a month before the conference we actually got the money for Aboriginal women around the county to attend. We finally, on the day of, the first day we had a International Festival for the first couple of days and then we had the four day, five day conference, and there was 2,000 people who were registered for it. And it all happened around the Adelaide Festival Theatre. They offered that building for us to have our conference. So there was a lot of generosity of spirit. There were people willing to support and come on board and encourage and feel connected to what it is that would give us a platform and a voice.

**[00:21:37]**

And the other international women, there was wonderful seeing and feeling and hearing their stories that were similar to ours. So for me, it was then that opportunity for Aboriginal women around the country from remote and rural areas in Australia to now connect with other Indigenous women from around the globe and share their experiences and their stories. It was just magical. There was a lot of pain, there were times when we'd all argue about which, which case was more important than others. It was fantastic. It was vibrant, it was alive, it was challenging. At the end of it, I think I ended up in hospital. I was absolutely knackered and exhausted. But it was something that was worthwhile, and gave, I guess, a platform for all Indigenous women to have some value and to actually think about we can make it possible if we work together in unity. And the next year I then went to, New Zealand, Auroa, and then I travelled to Norway to the land of the rising sun, midnight sun to Sami Land and the Sami held the 3rd international Indigenous Women's Conference. And

from then on, I just moved away from that and moved into education. So, yeah, exciting times.

**PASCOE:** Were you still at Women's Information Switchboard? When you went to Auroa?

**WILLMOT:** Yeah

**[00:23:24]**

**PASCOE:** So you went as almost a representative of Women's Information Switchboard?

**WILLMOT:** Of the women's, well it was the women's unit ---

**PASCOE:** Women's movement maybe ---

**WILLMOT:** The Women's Information Switchboard, never the women's movement because we were really clear, we wanted to be specific around, there were certain issues and concerns that we had as Aboriginal women that didn't fit with the broader western women's framework of what feminism and all of those dynamics meant. We just needed to get to the basics in regards to having homes, having some respect, having an ability to, to take care of ourselves, and know that we have some value in our lives and that we couldn't live off the welfare off government for ever. And now were fighting for all the reparations for what's been taken from us.

**PASCOE:** So, you were with Women's Information Switchboard for a number of years?

**WILLMOT:** I was

**PASCOE:** Did you, did you take anything from that? Did any of that effect your later working life, or your?

**WILLMOT:** Well, it was good, it was a good springboard into who I am, where I am and what I'm doing in the broader

context of if that hadn't been an opportunity, I don't know where I'd be. So, yes, I do look at it as an opportunity where, here I was with all these women and you know, my mother would not have been able to have sit with a group of women like that. But here I was sitting with them and we were sharing similar stories and, and doing the same kind of work, and I wasn't singled out as doing anything more or less than anybody else. That we all had our specialties and specialist skills and were all supportive of one another. And in fact sometimes if we were on the phone for 4 hours, 2 hours even, with client who were really quite distressed, particularly in rural communities, we could take one another off and sit down and have a coffee and have a chat and a little sing along and do some silly things, just to, to deflect from, you know the seriousness of what it is that we were giving. But valuing that work, and I felt like I was part of a great team of people who are absolutely loved. And, there were times that I'd walk out in a huff because someone hadn't listened to what I've said. But it was an opportunity to just be who you are and that is a woman working with women for women about women and ensuring that women were at front and centre of our service in regards to what is it we going to be delivering.

**[00:26:14]**

**PASCOE:** Jo, it's been marvellous talking to you today. You've bought a lot of different information, things that I didn't know and hadn't thought about, so thank you very much for coming. And just more thing, if, if you wanted to say anything else, any other thing you wanted to tell us about? Otherwise I think you've given us a lot of information and a lot of good history.

**WILLMOT:** Well part of my, my, my contribution I guess and because I must honour Val Power who actually started in the position before me. Val has since passed, and she was a wonderful person, a great singer and a performer and she started and she paved that way for me to be able to go into that position and go in with some confidence in regards to achieving what was on offer but recognising that I didn't have to sit back, I didn't have to be ashamed as a black woman, that I didn't have a right to these services but reconciling with the fact that I was amongst a group of women who were there to ensure that all women got their needs met. And were supported and there was no value judgement on who you were and where you came from. Oh and I loved all the older, older volunteers, I can't remember all their names now, but they were just absolutely gracious and I loved sitting and them telling me stories about their lives. Some of them who'd lived overseas and come to Australia and what it meant for them. So it got me to have a bit of an insight on, I knew my whole Aboriginal story and my whole Aboriginal life and, and here I am in Australia and that's all I know and what it meant in regards to being marginalised, and here I was sharing experiences of Non-Aboriginal women from various nationalities and a bit of their history so, it gave me an opportunity to sit and reflect and to be with them and to put it in the context of what we were doing. We were friends, we were women and we understood our role but also needed to improve our communities for our kids and our future generations really, and lots of laughter from those older women, great wisdom and some of them could tell you stories that make your hair stand on edge, but they were such real, dignified women and I really loved that about them because they made us feel that we were important, we did have a gift

and we could offer that. And that's something to pass on younger women, that don't be ashamed of who you are. You are who you are and you do have the dignity and the humility to carry out what it is that we're here for and to do.

**PASCOE:** Thank you very much Jo Willmot. It's been wonderful talking to you today. Thank you.

**WILLMOT:** Thanks Caroline.

**[00:29:37]**

**END OF INTERVIEW**