

# WOMEN'S INFORMATION SERVICE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## Interview with Liz Ahern

**Interviewer:** Allison Murchie

**Interviewee:** Liz Ahern

**Date:** 25 September 2017

**[00:00:01]**

**MURCHIE:** This is oral history eleven twenty the WIS, Women's Information Switchboard [Service] project. This is Allison Murchie interviewing Liz Ahern at the State Library [of South Australia] on the 25th September 2017.

Thank you Liz for agreeing to do this project and with a resume like yours it going to be a real struggle to squeeze it into an hour but we will some how manage. First could I have your full name please?

**AHERN:** Elizabeth Carolyn Howard Ahern.

**MURCHIE:** And were and when were you born.

**AHERN:** I was born in Albury New South Wales in sixth of September nineteen forty nine.

**MURCHIE:** Now you have given me the courtesy of a interview, of a resume which is handy but just for the tape could we do the five minute potted version of your work, career before you got to WIS and then at the end we might just add on what you've been doing since WIS, because I know you spent a long time in the early day of WIS when the Switchboard was not far from where we are sitting at the moment. So perhaps you could give me just a little bit of your background.

**AHERN:** I started off as a --- I did a University New South Wales, I did an Arts Degree, I did teaching because I needed the Teacher's College

Scholarship money to get through University in those days and I became a teacher at Caringbah High School [NSW] where I taught for nearly three years. Then I went overseas and I was living in London for a year and I decided that really teaching was not what I wanted to do, I wanted to be a Librarian so I then worked in a library at a PolyTechnic which is a bit between a University and a TAFE [Technical and Further Education] in London and then when I came back to Australia I enrolled in the Library's Studies course down the end of North Terrace at the old SAIT [South Australian Institute of Technology] building where I studied under Tony Foskett, whatever, and that's what I was doing in nineteen, that was in nineteen seventy seven, I think, yeah seventy seven I did that course. [1976]

**MURCHIE:** So you became a Librarian.

**AHERN:** I turned myself into a Librarian by ---

**MURCHIE:** And that was the right decision for you?

**AHERN:** Oh yes, but one of the things I did was I also became pregnant that year so at the end of the year I finished my Library course and then I had a small baby and no family support basically in South Australia so for quite a while I, I stayed home with my baby, I guess for a year --- a couple --- about a year and then I eventually I started doing --- I was involved with Women's Electoral Lobby because I was going slightly demented not having any Intellectual stimulation ---

**MURCHIE:** And WEL would it have been at its peak in seventy-seven

**AHERN:** So I became the publicity officer for the Women's, officer for the Women's Electoral Lobby [WEL] and I was membership officer as well and worked with some amazing women who were involved with WEL in those days and it was a lot of fun and we were being very political and jumping up and down. And I got to know the women's movement in South Australia because I had gone to university in Sydney and we'd come back,

when we came back from London there was a job that we found in South Australia for my husband, Michael, and that's how we ended up here. And we thought well we'll come here for a year or so and forty-two years later we're still here.

**[00:03:36]**

**MURCHIE:** Still here. I found Adelaide does have that effect on people. Once we get them here we like to keep them.

**AHERN:** We had been here once for a week's holiday and thought that was a nice town and we're both country people so it's a nice blend of country town and city ---

**MURCHIE:** It's manageable isn't it.

**AHERN:** Which works for us cos we have the advantages of both. So that's really how we ended up being here.

**MURCHIE:** So what happened after WEL?

**AHERN:** Well while I was in WEL I was involved in making, we were planning a conference on rape, prostitution and pornography and it was part of the University of Adelaide had a community education program and I don't know, I wasn't there at the beginning of the program but I got involved because they wanted someone from WEL to do some planning and organising and they were some of my skills, so I used to go to these meetings and it was at one of those meetings we were discussing how we were formatting this conference and it was a conference aimed at all the women's organisations in South Australia which was quite a lot in those days ---

**MURCHIE:** Certainly was.

**AHERN:** And it included the very conservative women from the Catholic Women's Welfare League plus the Liberal Party and all the different ---

Labor Party, Women's Liberation, the whole gambit of women's organisations were all involved in this conference and I said to them 'how can we have a conference on prostitution where we don't ask the Prostitutes their point of view'. We can't have all these middle class women sitting around discussing prostitution from a tut tut model we needed to find out what was the reality, the experience of prostitutes. So my baby and I, I was told Andi Sebastian was the person to talk to who was the Information Officer at the Women's Unit working with Deborah McCulloch in those days, so Andi and I met and we arranged for me to go round to some brothels and ask some prostitutes if they would be willing to come to this conference. We, it was quite an interesting experience because obviously I had never been to a brothel, I wasn't even quite sure how to find them, but I ended up going to sex shops and saying 'where's the nearest brothel'. And eventually people would look at me and think why has this woman want to know where the brothel is. Anyway ---

**MURCHIE:** Is she looking for a job?

(Both Laugh)

**[00:06:12]**

**AHERN:** They didn't know because I had a baby on my hip. I had my six month or nine [fourteen] month old baby on my hip and anyway she and I went off and interviewed women and told them about the project and what we were trying to do. And as a result of that we did manage to have a small group of prostitutes did come to the conference and we kept them in a very safe space within the conference so that they were able to put their point of view because it was all, everyone worked in small groups and everyone got opportunities to have their say but it was really important that the prostitutes got to say what they wanted to say about prostitution and we are still all these years later unable ---

**MURCHIE:** Still at the same battle.

**AHERN:** We have still got the same battle and we have still not managed all those --- Steph Key has tried over and over again to get that legislation through and it still hasn't happened.

**MURCHIE:** And there's a long history before Steph as well, Carolyn Pickles, Anne Levy, there's ---

**AHERN:** Well that was all after this conference.

**MURCHIE:** So many have tried.

**AHERN:** So that was way back in, this was all as a result of this conference back in seventy-eight, that this all happened. That after that was the first bill and I think Millhouse might have even ---

**MURCHIE:** That's right Robin Millhouse [South Australian Politician] but the first one up.

**AHERN:** He put the first bills up and so those --- and it was my first experience of knowing anything about pornography too and that was a bit of an eye opener for a middle class girl like me. So that was quite interesting, challenging in a few ways.

**MURCHIE:** This sounds very much like you're leading up to your position at WIS isn't it.

**AHERN:** Well at --- Andi because ---

**MURCHIE:** Because of the contact you'd made.

**AHERN:** She [Andi Sebastian] was, she was setting up the Women's Information Service at that time and she said to me 'you're just the sort of person we're looking for, you've got library skills, so information organising skills, you're a feminist, you're interested women's stuff and would you like to be a volunteer' and yes I said I would. So I am an original volunteer. One of the first group that were invited.

**[00:08:32]**

**MURCHIE:** Did you have to think very hard about taking this?

**AHERN:** Nah. And by then I was pregnant with my second child, she was in utero around, I think its around June or July the anniversary. I think that's when we started. I remember it sort of being mid winter and I use to go off to meetings sometimes I'd take my baby with me.

**MURCHIE:** And that's really what WIS was all about too, wasn't it.

**AHERN:** Yeah, yeah and so my babies who are now forty and thirty eight were some of WIS's original first babies because we used to bring our babies too when we were volunteering and they used to crawl around on the floor and be entertained.

**MURCHIE:** You clearly had a fairly substantial background already from the work that you'd been doing but did you really have a set brief as to what was expected of you as a volunteer?

**AHERN:** Well there were, there was training available and we had all sorts of training camps and we had some hilarious experiences and some of training camps.

**MURCHIE:** Where were they held?

**AHERN:** Ah they were held at sort of Scout Camp type places and it was very funny. I remember Deborah McCulloch was the cook one year for one camp and a lot of women back in those days were vegetarian and I don't know whether some of us were more sensitive to beans than other but I remember that Deborah had prepared this huge bean stew, dahl type thing and we were cooking in large numbers because there probably would have been thirty women staying at this camp this particular weekend and some of us who didn't eat legumes everyday really blew up and bloated (laugh) and the sound effects were quite spectacular later and I know, because I

was six months pregnant, I had real trouble doing up my jeans because I just bloated ---

**MURCHIE:** Oh that is funny.

**AHERN:** Astronomically it was hilarious and we just teased Deborah for years later about the bean episode.

**MURCHIE:** That's definitely a Deb story that should go down in history.

**AHERN:** Yeah, oh it was very funny.

**MURCHIE:** So what, what sort of things did you do at those training camps? Obviously a lot of fun.

**AHERN:** Yeah but to have the Women's Adviser being the cook, I mean she was the most foremost public servant in South Australia in the woman's area and she was the cook for the camp so it show you how egalitarian I guess the whole process was and those were the days of collectives and working responsibly joint, and there was paid staff, there was six paid ---

**MURCHIE:** How many volunteers were there when you started.

**AHERN:** Ah well it grew you know because I was one ---

**MURCHIE:** You were in the very first intake.

**AHERN:** I was one of the first intake and I can't tell you now. But I still see some of them around town. I saw one of them at a concert yesterday. There was a woman sitting in front of me, Margaret King, who use teach German at Adelaide University and she was sitting in a row in front of me at a classical music concert yesterday, so she and I always catch up and have a little chat.

**MURCHIE:** You were just about to say that the paid staff so who ---

**AHERN:** The paid staff let me think who there was at the beginning. The first coordinator was Ros Johnson, then there was Pamela Verrall, lovely

red haired woman, Luisa Sheenan was the Italian worker and she was also the, she spoke German fluently as well, Nicky Dimitropoulos was the Greek worker ---

**MURCHIE:** Sorry Nicky?

**AHERN:** Nicky Dimitropoulos

**[00:12:24]**

**MURCHIE:** I'll write it as it sounds.

**AHERN:** Dimitropoulos. Dimitropoulos. Just trying to think who else. Oh Carmel O'Loughlin, oh Carmel O'Reilly she was in those days.

**MURCHIE:** I've interviewed

**AHERN:** Carmel.

**MURCHIE:** Carmel yes.

**AHERN:** Carmel O' --- cos she ---

**MURCHIE:** And what was it Reilly, was her maiden ---

**AHERN:** She was O'Reilly then but later became ---

**MURCHIE:** I'm actually catching up with her next week I think.

**AHERN:** So how many have I said there now.

**MURCHIE:** That's quite a few actually because you've got one, two, three, four, five paid staff which would be ---

**AHERN:** I think there were six, there's somebody who I ---

**MURCHIE:** Another one will come to you.

**AHERN:** I'll have to think who the other person was. There's one more person I think who was there at the beginning. Obviously over the years paid staff changed.



**MURCHIE:** Clearly there were lots of changes. What from the start was it clear that it was a feminist organisation?

**AHERN:** Oh absolutely.

**MURCHIE:** And all of the women --- I remember talking to Carmel, she didn't actually consider herself a feminist when she started.

**AHERN:** Now well we use ---

**MURCHIE:** And others would have been perhaps in the same view.

**AHERN:** Well most ---

**MURCHIE:** And you grew into it.

**AHERN:** Mostly well some of us were ---

**MURCHIE:** Already.

**AHERN:** Feminists because some --- a lot of women came from Women's Liberation and those of us who came from WEL we considered ourselves to be feminists and we were politically active anyway. But there were others who had not had that experience I don't know that Luisa or Nicky would have used the feminist word when they first started but certainly would have over time and were wonderful, feisty impressive women as were they all --- I mean it was a very educational experience being part of WIS. I learnt a huge amount from all of them.

**MURCHIE:** That's one of the things I can remember from those early days was the access to information that was provided. I mean I just use to wander in off the street and come out with a bag of brochures and information, not even particularly looking for something; it was a great source and a great gathering place.

**AHERN:** It was a very welcoming, women friendly environment and you could just wander in after your shopping have a chat to someone it might

be --- start of being very casual and then gradually as people felt they could trust us they'd open up to a whole range of information. We had this hilarious information system, which I was interested in with my library background so it was a pink Rolodex on pink cardboard cards ---

**MURCHIE:** Some people listening to this wouldn't even know what a Rolodex is.

**AHERN:** No well it was ---

[Rolodex - a type of desktop card index]

**[00:15:19]**

**MURCHIE:** Don't bother explaining but that's it.

**AHERN:** No I won't but it was really quite hilarious because these pink cards were in this flip availability and there was no, no [suitable standardised] subject headings in those days, there was no organisation, people would put things under --- sometimes under the title of the organisation but there was no --- and sometimes they would put it under the acronym for the organisation, there was no coherent subject approach so you couldn't look up women's shelters. If you knew the name of the women's shelters you might be able to find information about it but there wasn't necessarily a card saying women's shelters blank, blank, blank see all these other places there --- or another name like women's refuges you know see women's shelters you know there wasn't that referral possibility so finding information in this very eclectic information system ---

**MURCHIE:** And I can imagine as a Librarian you would be horrified.

**AHERN:** Well it was pretty hilarious --- well it was pretty funny. But you know there wasn't a feminist --- there was no feminist type and Dewy didn't really cut it you know it wasn't appropriate to use a proper library system because these were non-librarians who need to be able to find information in a clear way. So we started off typing up --- they were hand written these pink cards originally and then gradually we got very efficient

at printing them up and we eventually got a printer that we could from the computer we could actually print them up. We thought we were very flash when we could do that. So the information system was --- it was a constant battle and that's where I put a lot of my energy ---

**MURCHIE:** As a volunteer were you doing that?

**AHERN:** As a volunteer because they knew I had library skills and I had brought in some other women with library skills who were my friends who'd done my library course and they came along and we used to often all collect in one little room and try and some --- work out a system and try and have some coherent headings and try and put cross referencing things into the Rolodex so we could actually --- people could find things because you have to be a bit intuitive as to how people search for information and we trying to gradually systematise it over time so it made more sense. And we did --- I'm just trying to think back in the early days --- there was a volunteer coordinator but I'm just trying to remember who that person ---

**MURCHIE:** That was a paid position.

**AHERN:** It was a paid position back then, because later on I became --- we had a half time volunteer coordinator and this is about let me think --- I went over --- I basically worked as a volunteer from nineteen seventy eight to nineteen eighty I reckon and then in nineteen eighty I lived overseas for three years so I stopped being a volunteer.

**[00:18:52]**

**MURCHIE:** Where did you go to?

**AHERN:** We lived in Bath in the west country of the UK ---

**MURCHIE:** Very pretty.

**AHERN:** With our two children and had a lovely time and I was really miserable until I found a group of socialist feminist women via the columns of Spare Rib.

[Spare Rib – Feminist magazine in UK 1972- 1993]

**MURCHIE:** Ah I remember Spare Rib.

**AHERN:** I made some wonderful friends once I found other feminists in town I was happy as Larry. Had a great time. In the end I probably could have not come back. I had enjoyed myself so much.

**MURCHIE:** So what lead you to coming back?

**AHERN:** Oh well Michael's job had finished we'd gone for his brilliant career.

**MURCHIE:** What was your husband doing?

**AHERN:** He --- he's was medical and he needed to do some ---we'd done some --- he'd done a course the first time we went to the UK he'd done his membership of the Royal College of Physicians and we went back for him to do sub specialise in Rheumatology and he was at a Royal Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases in Bath which is why we were in Bath because that was all relevant to what he was doing. So then we came back to Adelaide once he'd finished his qualifications there. So that brought us back and by nineteen --- so we would have got back by eight two and I became a tutor in Librarianship once I sort of got settled and I got involved on a part-time basis as a volunteer at WIS just one morning a week I think it was --- by then I had my children in childcare or maybe two half days a week or something because they were still under school age. And then in --- so I was basically doing something dewy in library history and whatever.

**MURCHIE:** Before we move -- we move back a little bit to those, those early year when you were first a volunteer was most of the work phone work or drop ins.

**AHERN:** Both. There was a lot of drop ins and we spent a lot of time on the radio. Luisa and Nicky ran radio programs in Greek and Italian, so that

attracted a lot of women in because they got to hear their voices so that attracted them to come in. It was always a bit problematic if they weren't on roster because the paid staff were on rosters because we were open seven days a week, nine to nine back in those days.

**MURCHIE:** And could you explain that a bit more because for those who know it is now the Museum of Democracy where the Switchboard used to be and at night that can be quite, what's the word I am looking for, isolated quite desolate part of the city.

**[00:21:52]**

**AHERN:** Well we use to back in the beginning we did --- there was usually someone who worked from nine to five then someone who worked from one to nine was roughly the division of labour and so there was a sort of in the afternoon when it was likely to be busier there was sort of a hand over and there were some volunteers who came after work and --- but it was quite isolating in some ways and later on when I was a paid member of staff and working nights and weekends I did have one hairy experience on a Sunday I think and it was a Sunday afternoon and obviously it was after one o'clock because on this particular day we'd decided it was very quiet and the person I was overlapping with had gone home cos she'd had --- she wasn't well or something and so in this afternoon there was no other person there it was just me and this man came in and he was saying 'where's my wife, what's happened to my wife, what have you done with her' and I couldn't tell him what had happened to his wife or tell him where she was but I had --- I was quite clear she had rung up earlier in the day and we had given her information about how to go to the women's shelter and whatever and it was all --- I wasn't able to tell him any of that. So it was quite threatening because is this is about three or four o'clock in the afternoon by WIS and you know.

**MURCHIE:** And in those days Adelaide was quiet.

**AHERN:** And it was quiet and he was really very cross 'you women you've hidden her, you've taken her away' and I was there by myself. So I --- I still to this day can not explain what inspired me but I just talked really calmly to him and say that you must be feeling very upset about your situation and I kept invading his space and I kept taking a step towards him and another step towards him and in the end I backed him --- he didn't even know, I was being really calm and really nice and really helpful and I gradually walked him backwards out the door and said to him 'farewell goodbye I'm sorry I wasn't able to help you I hope everything turns out for the best' and went back in side and shut all the doors and flipped the lock because I realised that I was really at risk but because I managed to talk him down and talk him out but in those days we hadn't thought about occupational health and safety, we---

**[00:24:52]**

**MURCHIE:** So what did you do as a result of that did you change your procedures at all how was that addressed for future .... ....

**AHERN:** I'm not sure, I'm sure we all had experiences of that kind. Occupational health and safety wasn't in the workplace really wasn't discussed in those days. I would have told people what happened and you know they probably were a bit more careful to try and get somebody to come on the weekends but you know volunteers are volunteers and you know if a volunteer can't come on a Saturday afternoon or Sunday afternoon because something else is happening in their life then the paid member of staff was sort of on their own and there were --- and usually after that we would have the door locked if you were there by yourself and you would choose to open the door if someone knocked on the door and you'd make an assessment about whether or not you were going to open the door or leave it locked. And say sorry it's a telephone service only tonight there's only for some reason you could ---

**MURCHIE:** And I guess ---

**AHERN:** You could always say “you’re welcome to ring up but we haven't got facilities for anyone to come in”.

**MURCHIE:** What were the ---

**AHERN:** I mean but you'd use your judgement and then if it was a woman with little children you'd bring her in ---

**MURCHIE:** You'd use to be sensible ---

**AHERN:** And then if it was a stropky looking bloke then you probably wouldn't invite him in. They didn't come too often. The men that rang up and the men who came in were mostly ringing for their mothers, their sisters or their daughters. They knew that they wanted some help for their, for their family members or their girlfriends or whatever, mostly in my experience of being at WIS all those years, really didn't --- it wasn't a major drama, we didn't have too many difficult men coming in and causing problems I mean we could have but it didn't really happen so much and really when the men rang up they, they wanted help for their family members mostly.

**MURCHIE:** Oh well that, that is positive. Was domestic violence one of your biggest issues if not the biggest?

**AHERN:** It was always a huge issue, it still is a huge issue and I learnt a lot.

**MURCHIE:** I guess the difference now is we talk about it

**AHERN:** Yeah well we were talking about it then too.

**[00:27:19]**

**MURCHIE:** No I mean as a, as a society.

**AHERN:** Society, yeah.

**MURCHIE:** But then it ordinary people we didn't know about it, did we.

**AHERN:** Well a lot of people didn't know about it but if you were working at Switchboard you certainly knew all about it because they were ---

**MURCHIE:** And you would have had training in how to handle that.

**AHERN:** We had, we had, there was lots of training particularly at the very first information camps and we used to use the Carkhuff Method did you remember the Carkhuff.

[Carkhuff – client centred counselling]

**MURCHIE:** No I don't know, how did -- what's that?

**AHERN:** Well there was ---

**MURCHIE:** How do you spell that?

**AHERN:** I'm not sure Karkof or something or double f.

**MURCHIE:** Okay no I've not, I've never heard of it.

**AHERN:** There was this Carkhuff thing where you say “you feel... because...” and you'd be reflecting back to people now what they said so you weren't you were trying to encourage them to speak and for them to come to the solution rather than you telling them what they should do. So there was always this very proactive attitude that it was not your job to tell them what they should do it was your job to give them the options so they could decide what it is that was the best thing you know in their circumstances.

**MURCHIE:** So they make the decision

**AHERN:** So that they --- to empower them to make the decision so that it wasn't --- and that way --- I mean its a really sensible reason for doing that too and we used to do that with legal advice at the Commission later on in my career because if they make the decision then they can't blame you for the consequences and you know that's realistic and practical and people



have to take responsibility for you know --- you can give them information but its up to them what they decide to do about it.

**MURCHIE:** What other sort of issues were coming up.

**AHERN:** Well all the bush --- all the issues that are in Every Woman's Survival Guide.

**MURCHIE:** You've led nicely into that. Liz has brought along a couple of books two different versions of it called 'Every Woman's Survival Guide'. Now when we were talking prior to taping you were saying you were heavily involved in putting this together, a copy of this will be donated and available to anyone that comes into listen. But could you talk to me about the book please and how it came about.

**AHERN:** This book --- when I was a paid member of staff, which is after I happened --- when I came back ---

**MURCHIE:** So when did you start as a ---

**AHERN:** It would have been in eighty-four I reckon.

**MURCHIE:** And how long did you stay as a paid staff member?

**AHERN:** Eighty-four till ninety-one. [1990]

**MURCHIE:** Quite a while.

**AHERN:** Well it was part-time for a long time.

**MURCHIE:** Oh so that, so that worked well with two young children.

**AHERN:** Well I had no family support so while my ---

**MURCHIE:** You need to look after them.

**AHERN:** While my children were before school, before they went to school I use to work very part-time or have childcare two half days a week or whatever. So it wasn't until they both went to primary school then I took

on this half time role, I'd done quite a few different bits and pieces of projects and whatever, but because of Switchboards roster went over nights and weekends I could fit that in with family, childcare, Michael could take responsibility for looking after the children and we could work out his rosters and my rosters so that he could be in charge of the children when I was working and half time was manageable, full time would have been impossible.

**MURCHIE:** Not with two young children.

**[00:30:52]**

**AHERN:** Yeah, with two young children and no family and as it was you know as soon as one of them got sick there was always a drama, but you know, somehow ---

**MURCHIE:** That's being a parent isn't it?

**AHERN:** Some how you manage, that's right. My daughters are quite grateful to me cos she said I don't know how you managed with us when you didn't have the support that you give now, so very interesting. Anyway so I became involved with the Every Women's Survival Guide that wasn't how it started to be called. It started off as a project for the Women's Services Working Party and this was a collective of women's services that -- - these days --- the nomenclature is really about women's services mostly talks about domestic violence services because tragically most women's services have disappeared or been "mainstreamed" but in those wonderful days there were women's health centres all over the city, there was a State-wide Women's Health phone service and the Working Women's Centre is still hanging on by its tentacles, fingernails probably ---

**MURCHIE:** Yes every year of it ---

**AHERN:** For it's funding, every year it's always a struggle about --- but in those days they were going great guns. So it was Women's Health, I'll just

have to have a look at the book for a minute and find out who the other organisations were (slight pause) Teresa Westcott --- oh and the Women's Studies Resource Centre how could I not ---

**MURCHIE:** Oh of course yes.

**AHERN:** How could I not think of that ---

**MURCHIE:** And at that ---

**AHERN:** Which was the feminist library.

**MURCHIE:** At time was --- yes I visited them many a time. What about from Legal Services did you have ---

**AHERN:** There were no women's services in those days. There were not Women's Legal Services it didn't exist. It grew out of Switchboard. We used to have --- part of the reason why I ended up at the Legal Service Commission is I had met all these lawyers on our Saturday afternoon Legal Services and that was part of my job is --- was to run the roster for all the lawyers and make sure that lawyers were going to turn up on Saturday afternoon and answer peoples' questions and I got to learn about family law and domestic violence and basic legal issues. That helped me later on in my career in because I'd had this bush lawyer training of listening to all these lawyers talking to women about their legal problems. So at that stage the Women's Legal Service didn't exist but we knew the issues that are covered in this book, you know there was housing, health, family stuff, violence in the family, rape, how to get legal advice, we talked about recreation, education, employment, social security and financial stuff where to get assistance.

**[00:34:21]**

And we --- the idea of this book was we actually got some Commonwealth Funding. I wrote --- it was a Commonwealth Employment Program and I wrote the funding application on behalf of this, this Women's Services Network and it was decided that WIS when we were successful this little

collective when we were successful in getting this funding we decided Switchboard was the most sensible place for it to be located because we covered everything and made referrals to every where else and it was the Switchboard's bread and butter really of all the issues that we used were what happens --- were the kind of advice that we provided. And the delightful thing about this project is we hired three women, Monica Clements, Helen Ray and Irene Hatsie, they were the clerical officers and then all the people who were involved in the, in the working party all took responsibility for roughing out what were the most important things for each chapter. It was a very collective process. The people who knew about health worked out what it was that people need to know about health and it was all about giving some information about health but then providing all the very relevant places for people to be referred.

**MURCHIE:** It's an absolutely outstanding reference for all of the organisations that were available; to pull that together in one book is a huge task.

**AHERN:** Oh and it was great fun.

**MURCHIE:** How long did it take from the idea ---

**AHERN:** Well I think ---

**MURCHIE:** To getting it done.

**AHERN:** I'm not sure, we --- when --- I know there was --- it was a one-year project we had to do it within a year because we only had funding for a year and we managed to pull it off at the last minute. We were working right till the deadline but the lovely thing about it is all the photographs are people who were either volunteers or workers at Switchboard in those years and ---

**MURCHIE:** And there's some cartoons in there.

**AHERN:** And there's some cartoons and they were all feminist women or friends of Monica Clements or --- who did the cartoons --- it was a real women's activity I guess and it was just ---

**MURCHIE:** One of the important things for things like that was how did you celebrate it.

**AHERN:** Well we had ---

**MURCHIE:** You worked hard for a year and did ---

**AHERN:** We had a launch and after the launch I spent a lot of time on radio and television promoting it. There were these women's programs back in those days a bit like the Today's stuff they do now where I use to have to dress up and go and be charming and try and explain why women need ---

**MURCHIE:** Did you enjoy doing that?

**AHERN:** and try and explain why women need information and it was fun. I did enjoy it but it's --- I end up being responsible because the project finished, Monica Clements and Helen and Irene, the three paid staff for this little project, their funding finished and that wasn't ongoing so I ended up with being responsible for future versions of it.

**MURCHIE:** What sort of print run did you do?

**[00:38:05]**

**AHERN:** Oh I can't remember probably whatever was the cheapest, ten thousand or something. And we took it round and we put it in hairdressers and we put it in all sorts of strange places. Women sent copies out to doctor's surgeries to put into their waiting rooms. We tried to distribute it as widely as we could to reach women who would never normally see it. And it was quite an attractive looking you know ---

**MURCHIE:** It's a great publication. It is the sort of thing a woman would think oh that looks interesting I'll pick that up isn't it. It's not at all threatening.

**AHERN:** Yeah and the title Every Women's Survival Guide you know it started off being some South Australian Information for Women or something --- it started off being something really boring but we came up with that title and every --- and then that was very successful and then it worked out being a --- translatable --- because later on we turned --- we managed to get some extra funding, small pockets of funding basically from the printing and what we did just for printing more copies because once we had run out of the original print run then we had the problems of how were we going to continue it and where were we going to get more money from cos it wasn't part of the core funding of Switchboard to provide a little booklet like this, then I can't remember the details now. But I know we got some one off funding and the Greek worker basically --- and by this stage Nicky Dimitropoulos had gone and Sofia Aslanidis was the Greek worker at the time and her mother Koula was very involved at the Working Women's Centre so there's Sofia talking to a social work placement student Jill Marks at the beginning of one of the chapters. So this book is full of photographs of people who ---

**MURCHIE:** People with WIS.

**AHERN:** We all knew who were involved in WIS in some way or other.

**MURCHIE:** So it was translated into Greek, Italian

**AHERN:** It was Greek, so Sofia I think did the Greek and then later on Sofia, Sophie, Sophie Alexious turned into Sophie Rose, she may have done an edition, may have been involved. We did Greek, Italian, Vietnamese because by then someone had left and Lien Nguyen-Navas was employed to do Vietnamese work with the Vietnamese community and she used to be on radio too and she, she translated, the Vietnamese version and then

we did do a Spanish version. I can't remember how, we didn't ever have a Spanish worker per say [then, later Rene Weal] but we did know some people who spoke fluent Spanish and for some reason they generously donated their time and ---

**MURCHIE:** So most of the translations were voluntary translations.

**[00:41:25]**

**AHERN:** Well they were done by paid staff members or this Spanish one I really can't --- I'd have to look at the Spanish translation booklet, it will tell me who it was, but that name has escaped. Its a long time ago. But that was you know it was great fun doing that and going off and promoting it and publicising it and trying to work out the best way to reach women across South Australia.

**MURCHIE:** Were you always confident in going out and speaking and doing promotion stuff.

**AHERN:** Well I'd been a teacher; I'd been a teacher.

**MURCHIE:** So it fairly --- comfort level for you --- with a lot of other women that's pretty scary.

**AHERN:** Yeah, well I'd been a lecturer at you know I'd done some lecturing at University, I'd been a teacher, I was fairly outgoing and confident and usually I know what I don't know I know I never give advice if I don't know something I say I'm not sure but I will find out and get back to that person because I think its --- you can't know everything but you just need to know where to find out, who to find out from and then make sure you follow up to provide that information back.

**MURCHIE:** You obviously gave an awful lot of yourself to WIS.

**AHERN:** Oh I was having a great time.

**MURCHIE:** But what did you get out of it.

**AHERN:** I got a huge amount out of it. Working with the Greek workers and Italian --- working with --- I hadn't had a lot experience of multi --- with working in a multicultural organisation. When I was teaching it was all very WASP [White Anglo-Saxon Protestant] orientated and living in the UK in those days pretty much the same. So for me I learnt a huge amount from -- - about the issues and the --- of migrant women in Australia, I learnt a lot. It was interesting because it made me realise that my parents had been most unusual because when I was living in Albury as a child my parents were very involved with the Bonegilla Migrant Camp and this is when I was tiny I was a baby and I've heard more about it since. But it turns out that my parents used to go and collect all the musicians out of the migrant camp and take them home to our house and have them for dinner and play music and play records and got involved in doing all those sorts of things. They also had the Aboriginal tenor, Harold Blair, come to our house when I was a baby and he was ---

**[00:44:04]**

**MURCHIE:** Sorry I missed; I missed the name there, Blair

**AHERN:** Harold Blair.

**MURCHIE:** Harold Blair.

**AHERN:** He's an Aboriginal tenor back in those days and its quite interesting because now I look back and think the things that my parents were doing was sort of socialist/communist back in the forties. Then later on --- they would be quite interested in what I got up to in my socialist feminist type activities I think because ---

**MURCHIE:** Sounds like a bit of it was in the genes.

**AHERN:** Yeah well but I wasn't really, I wasn't really aware of it at the time.

**MURCHIE:** And you didn't know that at the time.



**AHERN:** But probably the person I learnt the most from at Switchboard was Joanne Willmot who is also being interviewed for this project. And Joanne is an amazing woman, feisty as, as most women at Switchboard were or are and she really educated me about the situation for Aboriginal people in Australia and one of her clearer statements to me was 'don't ever talk about Aboriginals as a noun, I do not wish to be an adjective, I'm an Aboriginal person or I'm Aborigine I am not an Aboriginal because I don't want to be an adjective, I am a noun, I am a' you know. And that really ---

**MURCHIE:** That hit home.

**AHERN:** Yeah it did because I'm --- I've got an English, History, Drama background as a teacher and I've always been interested in the power of words and for Joanne it was very clear about the situation for Aboriginal people and how badly they had been treated and that really opened my eyes.

**MURCHIE:** What was her position when you were working there?

**AHERN:** Well she was the first Aboriginal worker; she would have been there in the eighties when I came back from overseas. We didn't have --- it had been recognised that there were very few Aboriginal people coming into WIS and why would they. It was only when we had Aboriginal workers there and Joanne was first of quite a long series of women, there was Margaret Eaton was another Aboriginal worker, there was Dot Casey and then later Tanya Hosch, who is another amazingly feisty woman who I still have contact with. So I catch up with Joanne every now and then, well we have coffee or lunch or whatever just ---

**MURCHIE:** Lots of friendships have come out of that

**AHERN:** Oh yeah.

**MURCHIE:** and ongoing friendships

**AHERN:** Oh yes and but Joanne I think educated me more about Aboriginal people than I had experienced anywhere else in my life.

**MURCHIE:** Because as a white woman you don't, you don't have that interaction do you.

**[00:47:06]**

**AHERN:** Well not, not in --- the country town where I grew up in --- I mean there were Aboriginal people there but it was not ---

**MURCHIE:** Not part of your life.

**AHERN:** Although my parent had a sort of socialist views they weren't --- my mother had been involved with working with children with disabilities, although they had a terrible title in those days, I think the retarded children's home, because she was a very bright woman who was one of the first in her family to go to University but because of the war she had become a teacher and was teaching in Sydney and valued as a teacher during the war but once the fifties came it wasn't acceptable for a women to be in the workplace and here was this woman very bright woman with an interest in astronomy and archaeology and science and geology she was at home with four children and pretty bored I think so she got involved with the local services and work the whole time we were in primary school she was there working as a volunteer in this home for children with incurable ---

**MURCHIE:** Incurables is what they were called wasn't it yeah.

**AHERN:** Incurable disabilities

**MURCHIE:** We're very quickly running out of time and I know you had quite a substantial career afterwards. How was working at WIS influenced what you did later.

**AHERN:** Well I think because I worked at WIS I met and knew and learnt a lot about Aboriginal people, I met and working with Lien Nguyen-Navas and Vietnamese people and whatever I knew the importance of having specific staff who had training and education because that would, that would bring those members of the community in because we could clearly see in the times where there wasn't an Italian worker or there wasn't a Greek worker then suddenly those people didn't even bother coming or if there wasn't an Aboriginal worker for a month or so they just didn't come anywhere near but as soon you had a designated worker from the Vietnamese community or Spanish or whatever then in would flow all the people from those different communities and radio was a great way of reaching them. So I knew when I went to the Legal Services Commission I used my bush lawyer experience I was also using my education background and ended up running a TAFE course called 'Law for Community Workers' which was aimed at the sort of people who would have been using Every Woman's Survival Guide as their handbook on where to refer people, how to refer people and to a large extent although it was more legally focused I kept the services, there was always a great impact, great, what's the word, I always tried to make sure that people knew where were the specific services that you referred people to for particular areas of law. We didn't ever try and turn people into lawyers, we tried to alert them to what where the legal issues, how do I identify a legal issue and then how to make a good referral that would assist that person to resolve that problem and to be able to explain the difference between all the different legal options that people had and ---.

**MURCHIE:** And I'm afraid we are going to have to stop there.

**AHERN:** Yeah.

**MURCHIE:** I could listen to the rest of your story, which we might do personally some other time. But thank you very much for not just the interview today but for you massive contribution to WIS and for a

publication like Every Woman's Survival Guide really set WIS up for the sort of service its now providing and I think you can be very pleased that the involvement you had in that. So thank you very much Liz.

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

**[00:51:21]**

**END OF INTERVIEW**