

WOMEN'S INFORMATION SERVICE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Transcript of Interview with Georgia Heath

Interviewee: Georgia Heath

Interviewer: Liz Ahern

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[00:00:06]

AHERN: This is an interview with Georgia Heath on the 11th December, 2017 in Bowden, South Australia. This recording is part of the Women's History Project.

Now Georgia, would you please give me your full name and a brief overview of when and where you were born and grew up?

HEATH: Sure. I am Georgia Annie Heath and I was born in 1982 and I grew up in the northern suburbs of Adelaide. I was born in Gawler, but then grew up primarily in Salisbury and went to Salisbury Primary School and Gepps Cross Girls High School.

AHERN: OK. So when did you start? How did you get involved with the Women's Information Service as it probably was by the time you got there?

HEATH: It was. I remember going to the, I think it was still the Switchboard actually, when I went at High School.

AHERN: So you went when you were at Gepps Cross High?

HEATH: Yes. So with Gepps Cross Girls High School we had some phenomenal teachers who made sure that we were really well connected to women's services and the Women's Resource Centre.

AHERN: Where I also worked.

HEATH: Yes. Yes.

AHERN: I was there in 1990 I think.

HEATH: Oh, fabulous. So all of those services, the teachers at Gepps Cross were fantastic to get us really well connected. Incidentally, when I was Manager at the Women's Information Service, Fiona Mort, who is now the Director of the Office for Women, she also went to Gepps Cross Girls.

AHERN: Oh right. I didn't know that.

HEATH: Yes, two of the three of us that were managers at the time that I was there had gone to Gepps Cross Girls High School, so I think there might be something in the waters there.

AHERN: I think so.

HEATH: Yes. So I came across the Switchboard whilst I was at school. Then I went on to Uni. And at Uni I got very involved in activism and student politics and I came across the Women's Information Service, as it was then, through the work that we were doing through the Students' Association.

So when an opportunity came up when I was then working in State Government, so I'd left Uni. And left my student politics days behind me and I'd gone on to work in the State Government, first for the History Trust and then for the Office of the Chief Information Officer. I was looking for something that was short term, because I wanted a new role, but I was thinking about going overseas to work for a few years and this opportunity came up to do a six month place at the Women's Information Service as the Manager. I thought that sounds great. Six months, that will work nicely for me to go overseas. I really, really wanted to work for the Office for Women. That was something that was on my list of dream jobs and I had that opportunity to apply for the role, not thinking at all that I would get it. But I sent off my application and I included a lot of the information from my student politics and activist days at Uni. I got an interview and I was absolutely chuffed and I went off to the interview and I brought along a package of things that I'd done at Uni. Things, we'd had some bookmarks

that we'd made about education rights and welfare rights and we had some brochures about employment opportunities for students and all sorts of things like that. I took it along to the interview. I remember the interview was ---.

AHERN: Who was on the panel?

HEATH: It was Vanessa Swan, who was the Acting Director then for the Office for Women, Fiona Mort who was the Manager of Policy at that time and Fliss Lord, who was the Chair of the WIS Support Group at that point in time.

AHERN: I know Fliss.

HEATH: And so off I went and it was fantastic. It felt, the interview felt a bit like coming home. It was people who were clearly my kind of people. I'd gone off and worked in ICT areas of government for a while and it was really lovely to go back into an area of work, and particularly an area of government, that was fundamentally feminist and fundamentally about improving people's lives and improving outcomes for women. And it felt wonderful to have that interview and it felt even more wonderful when Vanessa rang me to say that I'd been offered the job. And I remember, when Vanessa called me to say I'd been offered the job, I was in Las Vegas and I was standing out the front of the Cher concert, because I was with my cousins on a holiday overseas and we were just about to go in to see Cher's concert and Vanessa called me to say, "You've been successful." I said, "That's fabulous, but I have to go now. I've got to go to Cher." And so I hung up the phone and went in and I was so excited and I got back from that holiday and started not long afterwards.

[00:05:25]

AHERN: So, what year was this?

HEATH: That would have been 2010.

AHERN: Who would have been the coordinator just before you?

HEATH: When I started WIS had been going through a period of upheaval. It was around the time of the Sustainable Budget Commission cuts and I didn't know it when I applied for the job. I arrived for my first day of work and Vanessa took me aside and she said, "Um, Georgia. There's something that I haven't told you and that is that this role is actually to figure out what's going to happen with the future of the Women's Information Service. We need to pretty quickly figure out whether or not there's going to continue to be a Women's Information Service." I said, "Thanks, Vanessa. It's not quite the job that I thought that I'd applied for, but I tell you what, that sounds like a really interesting job and I'm really happy to do that." But it wasn't until my first day that I found that out.

So the Women's Information Service had really gone through a tough time in the period before I started and in the period whilst I was there. It had had a number of managers in the years before I'd started. Carla, I can't remember Carla's last name, but Carla [Granozio] had been the Manager not long before I'd been there and she had taken over from somebody else who'd been there for a couple of, I think she'd taken over from Sophie Allouache actually.

AHERN: Oh, OK. Yes, I know Sophie.

HEATH: After Sophie had left that role it really had a lot of temporary contracts, a lot of uncertainty and it wasn't just the Women's Information Service, it was the Office for Women. So, Vanessa was the Acting Director at that point in time as well, and she had been appointed after other Acting Directors too, so it was really in a time of real question that whether or not - I think not just the Women's Information Service but was the Office for Women going to continue to exist? That was a really hard time. The staff that had been there at the time that I started, there were some staff who had been there for a long time, actually most of the staff had been there for a long time.

AHERN: Who was on the paid staff in those days?

HEATH: Lies [Zuidland] was a paid staff member. Shannon Peake was a paid staff member. Petrice, I can't remember Petrice's last name, but she was a paid staff member and she'd been acting as the Manager just before me starting and she then moved into a new role not long after I started. She went over to a housing provider. Maddy Pattingale had only just started when I started at WIS. Annika Levai was there as well. Annika had been there for several years, probably about ten years, and Mel Heap, although she wasn't working in the WIS team at that time, was still in the Office for Women and very much around. I am just trying to remember, they were the core ---.

AHERN: They were the paid staff, and what about the long term volunteers? Did you have some of them still there then?

HEATH: Absolutely! Pat [Ellis] of course and Anna [Lynch]. We had beautiful Marie [Tyerman], who unfortunately has passed away. We had some younger volunteers as well. Gemma [Beale] and Laura [Button], who I think both became paid staff members, were some of the more recent volunteers to come into that group. Caroline [Pascoe], of course, who was fantastic in her role as the volunteer liaison officer. She would come to our staff meetings and do all of that. She was fabulous! I am trying to remember who else. There was, I'm struggling to remember the name of this---. Oh, Jenny [Andrews]. Jenny, I don't know if Jenny is still volunteering there now, but Jenny would come in every Wednesday and do our Media Board and she'd clip out articles and Jenny was fantastic because she'd actually been, I think the National Training Coordinator for the ATO [Australian Taxation Office] and had actually been my Mum's boss about ---.

AHERN: Oh, really!

HEATH: Yes, about twenty years beforehand, and she had all of this knowledge and she would casually mentor me with things, so every now and then she would just throw in something about change management or something in those spaces. She was fabulous. The other person whose, another fabulous woman, whose name is escaping me right now, but it starts with a "W". It will come back to me. [Willimina]

[00:10:29]

AHERN: We can fill it in later. Hopefully I will transcribe this interview later.

HEATH: Oh, fabulous!

AHERN: So, if you come up with the name you can let me know and I can put it in.

HEATH: I can picture her face.

AHERN: The woman whose name starts with a "W". I'll put it in.

HEATH: Starts with a "W". And she used to live down the street here on Street or on Hawker Street.

AHERN: Well, we can fill that in. Don't worry.

HEATH: It's going to bother me. So at the time that I started it had gone through this real sense of upheaval.

AHERN: Where were you located by then?

HEATH: We were located ---.

AHERN: In the Railway Arcade?

HEATH: No. This was after the Railway Arcade.

AHERN: OK. This was when you were on Grenfell Street?

HEATH: On Grenfell Street. The Women's Information Service was located next door to the Office for Women and that had been creating some tension I think, at that point in time. So it was really, really had gone

through a bit of upheaval and numbers had been dropping, in terms of the number of women coming to use the service. There hadn't been a strong sense of direction going forward. The volunteer program hadn't been really adequately resourced for a while. it wasn't intentional, it was just, it was a period of time where there were just lots of little cuts so, you know, a point two of an FTE [full-time equivalent] here and a point four of an FTE there and eventually you get to the point where you go, oh hang on, how many people have we got left? Have we got enough people to open the doors?

AHERN: That's right. And how do you provide services and how do you provide cover with that many people?

HEATH: That's exactly right.

AHERN: That's tricky, because you always need to have the paid staff as well as the volunteers.

HEATH: Absolutely! And I remember my first day walking in and there'd been an issue in the Shopfront and the volunteers were doing a huge amount of work that, I think in the past, would have potentially been done by paid workers or should have been resourced to have been done by paid workers, but that hadn't necessarily stayed in, resourced in a way that it needed to be.

So there were some big questions at that point in time about what was going to happen in the future and I think probably behind the scenes there'd already been a lot of work done by people in the Office for Women, by the WIS Support Group, by the Minister to try and make sure we were going to keep the Women's Information Service going. But it had got to a point where we really needed to take stock and reflect and to make some choices about, if we were going to keep going, what was that going to look like and answering that question of was the Women's Information Service going to continue? That was the job that I ended up having.

AHERN: Yes, well that's a challenging time.

HEATH: Yes. But it was fantastic. So before I'd even started, there'd come in, Vanessa had arranged for the group that does the safety standards for healthcare to come in and do an audit, find out where we were up to and one of the beautiful things that came out of that audit was to really talk about the strengths of the Women's Information Service and one of the real strengths there was the volunteers. And we really quickly understood that we needed to properly resource the volunteers going forward to be able to really utilise such a wonderful group of people that were wanting to put up their hand and volunteer and often for, we had people who'd been volunteering for more than twenty years by that stage and really seeing that as a strength of the Service.

So the audit had been done and then we needed to go on a bit of a journey together with other women's organisations, with the WIS Support Group, with staff and with volunteers to decide where the future was going to go. So we ended up having a bit of a strategy day, a bit of a policy day, where we went to, we closed the Shopfront and I think it was the first time that we closed the Shopfront. We kept the telephone line going, but the actual Shopfront was closed. We did it because we knew it was so serious that we needed to have everyone there.

AHERN: Needed to regroup.

HEATH: Yes. So we went over and we held it in the chapel at the Migration Museum. We had a really tough day, but a really positive day and by the end of that day we'd made some decisions about what needed to happen into the future. And those decisions included we were going to move to a model where the Shopfront wasn't going to be open every day and it was going to be open for shorter hours on the days that it was open. That was because we just didn't have the resources to continue. But we'd also decided that we were going to have a stronger focus on technology and a stronger focus on community engagement and understanding that women

coming to us was almost a last resort, and that what we wanted to do was move into a space where we were proactively putting information out into the community and utilising this, at the time new technology, called Facebook. We were one of the very first government departments to utilise Facebook as service delivery and that was probably one of the biggest changes that happened whilst I was there.

[00:16:10]

AHERN: I was involved in getting the first ever computers at WIS. (Both laugh) At the very beginning of that technology development.

HEATH: Absolutely. And I think WIS has always been at the forefront of technology development. We talked a lot at that time about ---.

AHERN: That was in the nineties, we got our first computers.

HEATH: Yes. Absolutely.

AHERN: We had a network and we were very pleased with ourselves. We had this little network.

HEATH: Absolutely! I think WIS was at the forefront of being the Switchboard, but being able to transfer calls and having the technology to be able to transfer calls and the whole philosophy that sat behind why that was important.

AHERN: A (?warm?) transfer.

HEATH: Yes. It was phenomenal. That's a piece of technology that's taken for granted now but it's such an important piece of technology. And then going into the nineties with computers as well as going into - I'm not sure if you were there Liz when the ATM was at WIS?

AHERN: No. Oh, the ATO?

HEATH: No, the ATM. So there was a banking program when ATMs were new.

AHERN: Oh yes, I remember that there was financial advice and things. I didn't know there was an ATM.

HEATH: Oh no. This was having ---. When ATMs were new technology, there was an ATM at WIS so that women could go in and practice using the ATM. They didn't have to do it on the street.

AHERN: In public.

HEATH: Which was phenomenal.

AHERN: That was a really good idea.

HEATH: Yes. So I think WIS has always been at the forefront of technology, and definitely when it comes to government service provision. WIS was absolutely at the forefront when it came to technology, when it came to social media and was one of the first organisations that really embraced that.

So, we didn't close WIS. We very much decided that WIS was an incredibly important service, that because we needed to explore new ways of doing things and make sure we were relevant and look at the way we could be much more cost effective with how we structured our services we went into this world of social media. I think WIS continued to do some fantastic stuff in that space.

AHERN: What about services to - one of the things about Switchboard, for me, that was unique when it started, was that we had a Greek women's worker, an Italian worker and when we had Aboriginal workers then Aboriginal women came. By the time you were there those roles had evaporated, more or less, hadn't they?

HEATH: Yes. By the time I was there they'd well and truly gone. We didn't have those kind of ---.

AHERN: So how were services provided to those groups of women who always on the edge of disadvantage?

HEATH: That's where the community engagement strategy came in. As well as the technology strategy we had the community engagement strategy. That was about taking our services out to women who wouldn't ordinarily get to us. At the time that I was there we still had outreach that we did to Magill Youth Training Centre, for women there - Annika did that.

We started the Outreach Service with the Ombudsman when I was there, which I think, I hope, still goes. It was a fantastic program and really acknowledging that the women who come to see the Ombudsman - that there were very few women coming to the Ombudsman and those women that were coming were quite middle class women. Some of the issues that started to get resolved through our Ombudsman partnership were things like decisions about disability support, things that wouldn't necessarily have made it to the Ombudsman otherwise, but resulted in sometimes thousands of dollars of benefit for individual women, or changes to policy and process that made things easier, for instance for women experiencing homelessness and women who were finding other types of hardship and disadvantage.

We also, at that time had Women's Information stalls or displays in a number of libraries and community centres around the state. We had dedicated spaces in those libraries and community centres to get information out. We also had partnerships that we continued to run with different providers, so, for instance, with a lot of the migrant women's services, with services for Aboriginal women with many of the DV services and so on. So it was about partnership and really understanding that we couldn't do it all. That we needed to be working with those people who were set up and equipped to be able to do it. Much more that we had

been. I know in the past WIS had done stuff that I thought was fabulous, like having, going on different language radio shows and really engaging in a range of different ways around diversity and getting out to, in a range of different ways, to women who needed the services. I think we tried as best as we could when I was there but that was one of things that I think sadly, through the changes in resourcing we just weren't able to continue to maintain.

[00:21:53]

AHERN: Those diverse background workers?

HEATH: Yes.

AHERN: It's tricky. It's definitely tricky to have people from a range of backgrounds. But I noticed at the time I was there, because I was there at the beginning and then I was there again in the middle eighties and then I was working there by the end, up until about 1990, I guess. And I could see every time we had workers with a particular language who were doing radio programs and in touch with their communities, the women from those communities would just pour in. When we had a Vietnamese worker, for instance, or when we had Aboriginal workers it made a huge difference to the number of women who would come in or who would ring up, compared to when they weren't there. But, you know, you can't always do that, but at its time I think it was fairly innovative when it started. Those sorts of programs were really innovative when they started and that's when all the radio programs and things were happening. And then that "Everywoman Survival Guide". Did you ever see that little book?

HEATH: Yes, I did.

AHERN: Well, I was part of the project. They put that together. I was the project leader. I went to a meeting and ended up being involved in producing that and we ended up doing that in Vietnamese and Spanish and Greek and Italian, so we tried to get, even though some of those languages,

literacy is an issue, we tried to get that information out to those communities that way as well.

HEATH: Absolutely.

AHERN: It's interesting how things change over time.

HEATH: Definitely. I was reflecting, as you were talking about that, on where some of our decision making was around how to broaden our scope in the budgetary realities that we had. And so one of the things that we did whilst I was there, because we looked at that community engagement, getting out and having partnerships and getting out to other organisations and out to women in community settings. But the other thing that we did was again looking at the technology aspect of it and acknowledging that, so Facebook was pretty new still then and Twitter and Pinterest, but starting to get into those spaces. But then talking much more broadly about the role of technology and, because one of the things that we discovered whilst I was there was that Wikipedia at that point in time only had fifteen percent, actually, no, it was less than that, it was thirteen percent of contributors to Wikipedia were women in 2010. So what that meant was that as we got more and more - we as a society got more and more of our information online and more and more of our information from Wikipedia, less of that information was being produced by women than---

AHERN: By women for women.

[00:25:03]

HEATH: By women for women. And so it wasn't just that. The content on Wikipedia was primarily being written by men but it was also that the content on Wikipedia was about men's issues. So at that point in time, not that "Star Wars" is a men's thing - I'm going to see the movie when it comes out at midnight next week, but "Star Wars" had pages and pages and pages on Wikipedia and "Sex in the City" had almost nothing. And it was a big issue. Who was creating content online was an issue as well as

trying to tap into the opportunities that technology created to enable a much more diverse range of women to access the information that they needed.

AHERN: That's right, because there's a bit of a class divide too, really.

HEATH: Absolutely!

AHERN: And educational levels affect how people access the internet.

HEATH: Absolutely! Absolutely! But some of the tools that are available - things like being able to translate things into any language and new tools that just didn't exist before. Whereas in the past, if you wanted to translate information into Italian or Spanish or Greek or whatever language it might be, you would have to find a translator and do that. We were starting to get to the point where you could enter it in and Google would do that work for you.

AHERN: Not very good, though, according to all the translators and interpreters that I know. It's very basic level, but it's better than no---. It's not very good in terms of grammar and literary quality, apparently, according to my friends who are bi- or tri- lingual.

HEATH: Not necessarily.

AHERN: But some of it is very useful to get through a lot of basic information.

HEATH: Well, what it does, is that it means that if you are, say you are a woman who speaks very little English, your ability to access information---

AHERN: Is limited, yes.

HEATH: With these translators online, becomes much bigger, because you don't have to find someone. Your computer can do it for you. But what's really important then is that you've got people making the kinds of products and services that you need. If only ten percent or if only thirteen percent of the people making products and services online are women,

then there's not very many people who are making products and services for women who really need them.

So part of what we did whilst I was there, was start to look at what role can technology have to become a much bigger, I don't want to use the word equaliser, but it's the one that's coming to mind - but how can technology help? So we had a summit called "Powerful users or digital losers: re-imagining women online". We invited not just women, but primarily women from all around the globe actually. We had Genevieve Bell who came over from Portland. She's Adelaide born but she came over from Portland to talk about this issue. We had women from Sydney and Melbourne to come and talk about how can we use technology to help to better empower all women to live better, happier healthier, safer lives? I'd like to say we figured it all out there but we didn't. We didn't.

AHERN: Oh, well. It's an ongoing issue, isn't it?

HEATH: It is an ongoing issue. And what happened for me then, coming out of that - so we had these great conversations at WIS about how can we do that - what happened for me personally then, was after I left the Women's Information Service I went on to do some other work and this question of how can technology help to better empower women's lives kind of stuck around. So I eventually, in my personal life, was so interested by this question that had started at WIS that I quit my full time job and now that's what I do. I make technology that helps to empower women to live happier, healthier, safer lives.

AHERN: Oh, good. And you are getting funding for it, are you?

HEATH: Sometimes, yes.

AHERN: Sometimes. Sometimes.

HEATH: We actually got funding from the Office for the Ageing to create a site called "Spare Time", which was primarily based on my observations at

the Women's Information Service of the volunteers. We would have these very capable women who were highly educated, highly capable people, just like yourself, Liz, who had these phenomenal skill sets. But often volunteering opportunities, including at the Office for Women, would be really boring, really mundane roles that wouldn't necessarily use a women's full suite of skills and to use their brain in a way that we could be. And Pat's was really one of the key people who influenced my thinking around this. So we pitched this idea to the Office for the Ageing that we'd create this thing called "Spare Time" to help connect skilled volunteers with organisations that needed them most. They did end up giving us funding to develop this and it all came from looking at the strength of the Women's Information Service and the things that they, that the women there fundamentally do and try to figure out how to do that at a sense of scale. Yes, we do sometimes get funding, but the Women's Information Service is absolutely a strong influence in doing that and continues to be one of the biggest influences on the work that I do now.

[00:31:01]

AHERN: Yes, it's interesting. I was talking to Liana Buchanan. Do you know her?

HEATH: No.

AHERN: She used to be at the Women's Legal Service and she was at WIS as a volunteer and she's now the Commissioner for Young People in Victoria. She was saying how she still reflects on her time at WIS and how that influences when she's thinking about policy for women and young girls, that when she's thinking about those sorts of things she reflects on the kinds of calls and the visits that she had with people and how that influences what she's doing now. So it's interesting. Once you've been at WIS it sort of permeates your life, sort of, in some ways.

HEATH: Oh, it really does. It really does.

AHERN: Because you remember those really critical calls that you had with people, don't you?

HEATH: Absolutely! One of the other projects I'm working on is called "Spare B". The idea is it's looking at Airbnb, but for emergency accommodation and particularly around domestic violence. It's still very much in its conceptual stages, but when I talk about that, I talk about knowing what it feels like to tell someone they don't have somewhere to sleep that night. I fundamentally base that story on a conversation I had with a regular client who would come in every day to use the computers and she was an incredibly smart woman who'd had a very, very bad run at life. She had overcome several different types of addiction. At the time that I knew her she was struggling with Pokie addiction, but she would come in every day and she was so lovely and she would get on to her email and check out her email and her addiction caused her to --- she was living at a hostel and she ended up being in a space where she needed to, she'd been evicted from that hostel and she needed to find emergency accommodation that night. She had wanted to go home with one of our volunteers, but things had changed in the period of time up until I got there to recognise more around boundaries, recognise more around risk and to recognise more around how we structure professional relationships. We had a very clear rule that volunteers and paid staff could not, for instance, take a woman home. This rule had been broken in that space and so one of our volunteers had said, "You can come home with me." I'd found out about it and, as the Manager it was horrible - it was a dark and rainy night. It was, you know, something like you'd read in a book. It was 10 to 5 and I went to see her and I said, "I'm really sorry, but you can't go home with this person tonight." I said, "I know that this means you might have nowhere to sleep tonight and I'm really sorry, but this is our rule and this is why we have the rule and you can't do that."

I went home and I felt like crap the entire weekend. I was so worried. I thought where is this woman sleeping? This is someone I saw on a daily basis and where was she sleeping and what was happening? When I saw her again the following Monday, it was interesting, she actually apologised to me for putting me in that position. I felt awful that I'd had to say to her this is, you know, we can't do this. Now, she had ended up with somewhere to stay that weekend, which relieved me, but it didn't take away the fundamental problem. Part of the problem that I started to see when I was at WIS, was that there wasn't the tools to help put people in accommodation as quickly as it needed to be, so at 10 to 5 on a Friday night, when we knew that this woman had nowhere to sleep, it was too late to call the Homelessness Services, there wasn't an online calendar where we could see where vacancies were, because information at that point in time, and I think it still is ---.

AHERN: Still pretty tight.

[00:35:35]

HEATH: Really tight. But it's done on whiteboards. It's done with people knowing where the vacancies are. It's done with really basic kind of tools. It just shouldn't be, you know---

AHERN: There are more technologically sensible ways of doing these things, but it's difficult to get people to agree to share that information and make it available when you have to go through the Housing Trust and negotiate this and that and whatever.

HEATH: But even just to get the resources to do it. I think I realised that I was never going to get the resources to do it whilst I was working in the women's sector, as I had to get out of the women's sector in order to work out how to fix that problem. But it's still the problem that drives me and that particular conversation and that weekend of worry.

AHERN: Well that's a critical issue, isn't it?

HEATH: Very much so.

AHERN: It's when you learn from people's experiences that you haven't had yourself and you can learn so much from other people's ---. And it inspires you to do other things. So that's great that it inspired you to try and change things and it certainly needs changing because that DV area, accommodation is still a huge issue..

HEATH: Absolutely! Absolutely! It's a huge issue.

AHERN: I was on the Board of the DV Crisis Service before they merged into this latest Women's Safety Service that they have and it was always a performance to try and get accommodation for people.

HEATH: Absolutely! Absolutely! And even, you know I was watching something on the news this morning and they were talking about the Zero Project here in Adelaide, and every picture that they used when they talked about homelessness was a picture of a man sleeping rough. I just thought that's actually not the whole picture of homelessness.

AHERN: No it isn't. There's young people and women, especially single women. That's really problematic isn't it?

HEATH: Absolutely! So, yes there's still a lot of work to be done, but it did get to the point where I thought, in order to solve some of the problems that I saw at WIS, and not the problems within WIS, what I mean is more the social problems.

AHERN: Societal problems, yes.

HEATH: That I needed to move into a space where I had access to greater resources and where I had access to, the freedom to not have to worry about day to day so much, in order to be able to concentrate and then go back and solve some of those problems. But, you know, some of the things

that I learnt about the strengths of WIS and how to do things was just a phenomenal amount of work that they do with such small resourcing. It doesn't matter how often you come along and say, "Look we are going to cut your resourcing again and we are going to cut your resourcing again." I don't think it should be cut again, but there was just this resilience and bouncing back of, we'll figure out how to do that and we'll figure out how to change that. Really punching above its weight in terms of the contribution that it makes and the way it is really innovative. We talk now, there are all these buzz words around, community engagement and about co-design and WIS has been doing this since the 1970s. It's not new.

AHERN: I know, exactly!

HEATH: It's absolute It was just before its time.

AHERN: I know. Before we had the terminology, we were doing that. That's true.

HEATH: I think the Women's Information Service, for me personally, has influenced everything I've done since. Very much so, and I hope to continue to have a working relationship with the Women's Information Service for the rest of my working life. I think that most people who have worked for the Women's Information Service have that relationship with it, where if I think back to Wendy [Thompson], who was the Manager, I think in the 90s or the early 2000s, and Sandra Dann, who was one of the Managers as well and Sophie Allouache and there were all these fantastic women who you kind of, you leave, but you never really leave. It's a bit like Hotel California and I think that's one of the real strengths of it.

[00:40:12]

AHERN: Yes, that's true. I think it is true. So what else were we going to ask? I have so many questions I can talk about. So we've talked about the internet, and we've talked about non-English speaking background and Aboriginal women and we've talked about ---. What about country

women? We haven't talked about country women. So how did WIS manage country women at the time when you were there?

HEATH: That was through our community engagement program, so that was where we had the Information stalls at a number of libraries and community centres. We had them throughout different parts of regional South Australia. We also had a worker, Shannon [Peake], who would go and visit into those communities. Rather than being based in the Shopfront, she would go and spend time in various parts of rural South Australia, which was fabulous. I went with her for a number of those trips and she had some great projects that she did with, for instance Roxby Downs, looking at collaboration with Roxby Downs. All over South Australia. We had, it had originally---

AHERN: Is that when they were going to rural shows and things?

HEATH: Yes. It had been started up through Drought Reach, so that was just before I had come, but acknowledging again that during the drought period that rural women needed some additional support. So that had happened through that program initially. But we thought it was a real strength of the work that we were doing and continued to do that work, but probably better resourced and someone has expanded that work too and really identified that as an important part of the community. Because if you are based in Adelaide and you walk along the street you might accidentally come across Grenfell Street and go in. If you are not based in Adelaide you are not going to accidentally come across it. And the majority of South Australian women are not based in Adelaide.

AHERN: And they don't necessarily go to Public Libraries or places where they might fall over the information.

HEATH: Absolutely! Whenever Shannon would go out to a community, she would try and get out to as many other services as she could so that that network of service providers knew where we were and how we could help.

She also would communicate with them pretty regularly. She had a fantastic, much like you had at the Legal Services Commission, Shannon would have a list of people that she would send information to on a regular basis. The Ombudsman Service was particularly useful for women in rural area. But there were many others as well.

The other project that we did whilst I was there, that I'm just thinking was a great one, was the Pap smear - we did a collaboration about Pap smears.

AHERN: Alright. Yes.

HEATH: Because we didn't have much money, we looked for partners that did have money. Through the Women's Services Committee or the Women's Services Network, which was supported and managed by WIS at the time, we started talking about some of the things we were doing there and the SA Cervix Screening Program with Megan van Zanten. We said, "We'd like to come and play with you." Because they had a problem that they weren't allowed to use technology and social media, but they had money. We were allowed to use technology and social media, but we didn't have money. So we worked together and we did a beautiful project. We went out to two different groups of young women, one that was an inner city group of young women from a University, the other one was the young mums group from The Parks Community Centre. We took a GP out with us and she worked with the two groups of young women to give them lots of really good information about why it was important to have Pap smears. Then we took a young film maker out with us and using flip cameras, which is kind of like the camera you have in a mobile phone, she made little videos with them for YouTube to tell other young women about why they should have Pap smears.

AHERN: Pap smears.

HEATH: They were great. After that we had a launch with the Minister. We did a red carpet, and we had popcorn and we had competitions to get

them to share their videos as much as they could. Up until fairly recently, I haven't checked it recently, so this could be out of date, but up until fairly recently, those Pap smear videos were still the most viewed videos on the South Australian government YouTube Channel.

[00:45:25]

AHERN: Is that right?

HEATH: Yes, and they were great. It was this fabulous little project that really, it was about trying to find ways for young women to communicate in their own words and not having government material come across, being written by a bureaucrat. Doing it that way it was about them using their own words. It was just a beautiful project to be a part of and it was a, particularly working with the group at The Parks Community Centre. It was a fabulous example of outreach that we did. It was really good fun and effective.

AHERN: And when you can be having such fun while you're doing it. That's what kept me working so long too. I kept having ideas, kept getting funding for them and making them happen. That's very addictive really. It's a lot of fun.

HEATH: Absolutely! I think the other thing that was addictive was trying to figure out how to do things when we didn't have money. We just didn't have a budget.

AHERN: Using other people's money and other people's resources but showing them new ways of reaching out.

HEATH: Absolutely!

AHERN: That's what Switchboard has been good, well, Information Services has been good at over the years.

HEATH: Absolutely!

AHERN: Tell me about your relationship with the Support Group. You mentioned that Fliss [Lord] was the coordinator of the Support Group. How do you think the Support Group has been important with Switchboard in its various incarnations, so Women's Information Service, how it's been set up and how it's functioned over the years?

HEATH: The Women's Information Service would not continue to exist if it wasn't for the Support Group. I am absolutely sure of that. One of the things that I was already aware of when I started in the role was the power, the political power of the Support Group. So before I had started in the role, a couple of years beforehand, I can't remember what the issue was, but there was an issue that the Support Group had felt so passionately about that they ended up in the Minister's office and having conversations with the Minister and doing political lobbying about this particular issue. I think it actually might have been when they tried to change the hours before I started. It was, you know, we knew that they were really important.

But they were also a real strength. If you wanted to get out to women across rural South Australia, if you wanted to get out to women, particularly church women, the networks of that Support Group were phenomenal. I got to see them in action a few times about a couple of issues. The phone tree that they could activate at any point in time was really powerful and really, really useful. The WIS Support Group was probably a bit of a thorn in the side for the Minister, which is exactly why they exist, but really appreciated as well I think. I know that when I was there Members of Parliament would actively come along to the meetings. It wouldn't be uncommon to turn up to a WIS Support Group meeting with women from the Catholic Women's League, with Fliss, with women from different rural areas, YWCA.

AHERN: CWA.

HEATH: CWA and then to have three or four Members of Parliament as well. You don't see that in other organisations.

AHERN: That's right. I was one of the first coordinators. I set it up with Betty Fisher, the Support Group. Betty said to me, "We need this, and this is what we need to do and this is what you've got to do." She organised me and I went around and did it basically. That was my job, or it was one of my jobs when I was first a volunteer.

HEATH: Absolutely! I think it's really good.

AHERN: And that was the whole idea to make sure we had the Liberal women, the Labor women, the Democrats as they were in those days. We had women, all political persuasions. We had every religion was invited. We had every single group that we could find at the time, were part of this Support Group and encouraged, and even if they didn't come, they'd be sent ---. We used to get a lot of people coming in the early days. They really were quite big meetings, thirty, forty people. Whereas it did taper off over the years and from what I've seen over the years it has definitely tapered off. But just because people don't come to the meetings doesn't mean you can't stir them up if they need stirring up.

[00:50:17]

HEATH: That's exactly right. Just because they're not there doesn't mean they're not there. (Both laugh) And so we would have people coming along to the meetings, but we knew just how important they were. And so Fliss was on the interview panel when I was selected. Throughout the whole change process of, you know, we knew if we were going to have some conversations about changing the way we provided services and particularly if we were going to be looking at shutting the Women's Information Service, or reducing the hours of the Women's Information Service, we needed to have the support of the Support Group. I hope that we did that. I think that we did that. So when we had the planning day

about the future of the Women's Information Service the Support Group were there. The volunteers were there too, and they were part of that decision making. It wasn't something that happened in a management office having that decision---

AHERN: And that's one of the strengths of the organisation, really, isn't it?

HEATH: Absolutely! Absolutely! So when we did make that change, I remember someone from the Minister's office saying to me we haven't received one letter of complaint from the Support Group. I thought that was great. I wish we weren't in a situation where we had to make those choices, but we were in that situation and we made those choices together.

AHERN: In some states they don't have Women's Information Services any more. And look what's happened to Women's Health. It's evaporated into a puff of smoke. It's tragic! The Women's Studies Resource Centre - gone! Working Women's Centre's holding on by the skin of their teeth still. There's not much Women's Services left that are specific.

HEATH: No. I couldn't believe it. I'd come from, I had a bit of an odd past going into the Women's Information Service, because although I'd been an activist at Uni and I'd come from the women's sector I had gotten burnt out at Uni, so I went off to work in ICT and saw the way in which ICT was funded and how they got money. Then I went to the Women's Information Service and saw the duality of, you know, they were not funded at all well. I've never seen an organisation with such financial pressure, but the flip side was that they had all of these strengths that they didn't have in the ICT sector. But then once I left the Office for Women and WIS, I went into local government and I turned up on my first day and they said to me, "I hope it's OK. We've got this budget of something like \$50, 000 and you need to spend it before the end of the financial year. I'm really sorry. I hope that's OK." I just thought, "\$50,000. I don't know what to do with that."

AHERN: I could find some good things to do with that. I'll have some plans.

HEATH: Yes, absolutely. I thought "Wow!" But we really didn't have ---.

AHERN: That's right. It was just the different mindset in local government.

HEATH: The Women's Information Service really does ---.

AHERN: It has always run on the skin of an oily rag, really.

HEATH: Absolutely!

AHERN: So are there any other things about your time at Switchboard that you've reflected on, or any other issues that you think we need to record today, because this is your opportunity to sort of put down the historical context of when you were at WIS and what you did and who you knew and how you all operated and what you reflect about now. I mean you've talked about how it has influenced you current work and your future, and you think it always will, but where do you see the Switchboard going in the future? Have you got any ideas about ---?

HEATH: Yes. It's interesting. I was going through some, in preparation for this conversation, I was going through some of my old notebooks from when I was there and one of the things that I came across was an idea that we'd talked about what was there about being the women's network of all networks. What we meant by that was how do you have something like Wikipedia, or how do you have something like the website 'Mama Mia', but around the really important issues around domestic violence, sexual assault, homelessness and so on and how do you structure that and I really hoped that we could figure out how to answer that.

And I think that the Women's Information Service has a really important role in driving some of those conversations and the technology that's behind it. I think we'll see technology becoming more of an enabler into the future because it just, it gives us the capacity, like when we were talking about the WIS History Project with Pinterest, it gives us that ability

to collaborate in ways that we haven't seen before. So I think we'll see technology becoming more and more important, but I don't think we know how to use it yet.

The other side of it though, is that I think, the Women's Information Service fundamentally understands how to provide good service and I, so after I left the Women's Information Service I went into customer experience inside of government and this is a big question for, not just governments, but for organisations of all sorts. How do you provide good experience and how do you provide good support to your customers or to your citizens or whatever it might be? And there are things that I think we can learn from the Women's Information Service about how to do that well. Not just in terms of some of the technology that we were talking about before, like how to make a smooth phone call transition, but also about how to respect people, how to empower people to make their own decisions, how to provide good ---.

AHERN: Options.

[00:56:48]

HEATH: How to provide options. How to have really well trained staff and volunteers as well. The training programs for volunteers is one of the best training programs, I think, of any organisation. So I think there's lots that we can learn from the Women's Information Service about how to provide good service on a much broader scale and I'd really like to see the Women's Information Service influencing that in other spaces, like influencing how Centrelink provides their service, for example.

AHERN: That would be a fine thing, wouldn't it?

HEATH: Absolutely! Or Housing Services or you know, I'd love to see that and I think that the Women's Information Service can have a really strong role there.

AHERN: Yes, did you know that the Welfare Rights Centre here in Adelaide grew out of Switchboard?

HEATH: Oh! I didn't know that. I'm not surprised by that, but I didn't know that.

AHERN: It was. We had a worker who had a passion for helping people with Centrelink problems and Maggie Martinelli ended up working with some, you know, she got a group of people around to help her and they set up the Welfare Rights Centre. Sadly, they've just lost their funding, last year, the Welfare Rights Centre. I think it's gone to one of the charities, which I think was a great shame because they lost all the expertise of the staff.

HEATH: Yes.

AHERN: And, you know, that is a real problem, I think. Small organisations that are not very well funded are problematic and with the current politics there was no interest in the Commonwealth Government and funding people to get assistance to deal with Centrelink. But that's what they should be doing. Because until people get support and encouragement and help to deal with the labyrinth and complexities of Centrelink, I mean it's not a just and equitable society, is it?

HEATH: Absolutely not.

AHERN: And that infuriated me. I must admit I do have a little bit of a political stance that they shouldn't be giving all the money to the charities rather than funding organisations to work in the non-government sector. I don't think it's a good idea, because they then rely upon the good nature of the people who work there. The charities don't pay them as well, the terms and conditions aren't as fair. There is a whole lot of things that don't quite work once you get into that other space and I am really concerned about the political shift into that sort of non, the charitable sector of services. That does bother me, I must admit.

HEATH: Yes. Yes. There are some interesting conversations around. One of the buzz terms, there are lots of buzz terms, around at the moment is this social enterprise space. I think it's one that has the capacity to potentially be really interesting and do some really good things. But it also has the capacity to exploit people. So, for me, the jury is still out on what will happen into the future. As much as I am sad to see, and I'm genuinely sad to see, the former models of funding and support for things like the Women's Information Service and the Working Women's Centre and you know all those phenomenal organisations go, I mean the reality is it's just not there any more, the funding just isn't there.

[01:00:23]

AHERN: But that's choices people make to keep it from ---. I know services need to change and shift to deal with new demands, but I think, I was hoping that one day we wouldn't need a Women's Information Service, we wouldn't need Domestic Violence Crisis Services, Women's Safety Strategies. In an ideal world these would not be necessary, but sadly we haven't got to that ideal world.

HEATH: No we haven't got to that ideal world.

AHERN: And yet there's funding for bank, Managing Directors of banks get paid appalling amounts of money. You know, there's a very inequitable society we are living in, where people are paid ridiculous amounts of money for doing their jobs and other people aren't given enough to provide services to people who really need them.

HEATH: Absolutely! Absolutely! And I think maybe that's where needs to be a fundamental refocusing of what needs to happen into the future and, you know I was very happy last week when the marriage equality debate passed through ---.

AHERN: Finally!

HEATH: Finally! But the reality for me in my life at the moment is that I have a beautiful little girl who I'm, she calls me Mum and I'm her legal parent and she is Aboriginal and she has spent time in foster care and she faces so much disadvantage. She lives with me because her home was unsafe and because there was so much domestic violence in her home. Her Mum experienced generations of removal and I'm really glad that the marriage equality debate is behind us, because those are the issues that I think we need to start focusing on. I've got a very, very white little boy, who is four months old and who will probably grow up in a world where he is not really discriminated against for anything and I've got a little girl who's not much older and is not facing that reality.

AHERN: Already she's facing ---. That's right, we've got a long way to go. And that 120 million could have been better spent on that Uluru's Other things, couldn't it?

HEATH: Even just stuff like, you know. Trying to get the police clearances so that we could look after her. There wasn't even a process for us to be able to do that kind of stuff. Basic things that just need to be addressed and we would expect are addressed in every other part of life, if you can. I've got groceries being delivered to me later on today, that I ordered online last night at eleven o'clock at night and I expect that now. I should expect the same level of service when it comes to things like domestic violence, sexual assault, homelessness, foster care. There's no reason why we're not seeing that. And I think unless we start to refocus on those questions ---.

AHERN: We've got to push the, change the political conversation, haven't we?

HEATH: And it might look different to the way it looked in the seventies and the eighties and the nineties, but the issues are the same.

AHERN: Oh, yes. They haven't gone away. That for me was one of the blessings of WIS, is working with people like Joanne Wilmott and Tanya

Hosch and Dot Davy and some of the other Aboriginal women. I learnt so much from those women that I would never have learnt in my white middle class background. I had missed out those opportunities. I am eternally grateful for those opportunities that I had at WIS that I wouldn't have had otherwise.

HEATH: Absolutely! Absolutely!

AHERN: So that me. When I went to the Commission it meant that when I was finding students for my law courses I looked for Aboriginal students first, then I looked for students from new and emerging communities next, then I looked for students who worked in domestic violence or women's services or disability services. They were my next priority. And if there were any places left over I'd let a few government people sneak in. I totally discriminated in favour of the sort of people who I thought needed the information. That was one of the bits of fun I had in my job, being able to do that. But it would never have occurred to me to do that if I hadn't had the same experience of seeing what empowering people can be like and learning from these other people who shared their lives so generously.

[01:05:16]

HEATH: Absolutely! And so I hope that the Women's Information Service continues to exist and I think it will continue to exist. I think it's going to start to look different because I think that the way we interact in terms of community, in terms of society is different than the way it was ten years ago, the way it was twenty years ago. It is different. But I hope it does continue to exist. And regardless of whether it continues to exist or not, I know that using myself as an example, I've come through the Women's Information Service, I've learnt a lot. I'm now going and doing other things, but I'm doing those other things with the full information and experience that has come from WIS. I really hope that I can continue to do some work that is good, but I'm really clear of just how much the Women's

Information Service influences all of the work that I do now and all of the things that I want to achieve.

AHERN: I just worry, I must say, I do worry about how we make sure that the people who are at the lower rungs of society, who are much more disadvantaged than us, how we make sure that they get access to all the services that we have access to. I think there is still, technology is a wondrous thing but it's not equitably distributed still.

HEATH: It's not equitably distributed, but it, what it does, so my daughter has Aboriginal grandparents who live in Cape York. Her grandparents have experienced generations of removal.

AHERN: And disadvantage.

HEATH: And disadvantage. Have children who have experienced huge amounts of generational disadvantage - prison, homelessness, all sorts of problems. What technology does is enables my daughter to maintain that connection with her Aboriginal family. Even though she can't live with them

AHERN: So she can Skype them and ---?

HEATH: She can Skype them, she can Google them. We watch on YouTube videos of all of the traditional language and songs with other kids in the community that she would be living in, had she ---.

AHERN: If she was there.

HEATH: If she was there. So I completely agree that it is not yet equitable, but what I think it does is provides us with tools that we wouldn't have otherwise.

AHERN: New ways of doing things. Yes, I agree. I'm really happy that we do that. I just want to make sure that it does happen. That's what worries me, that some people don't take that as a priority and that's what worries me.

HEATH: Oh, absolutely.

AHERN: Because you were saying about the internet being very male dominated in the early days. I still think it's very much education dominated and there's people who are more disadvantaged, don't have the same equitable access.

HEATH: That's what I thought too. But, I think I've changed my mind on that quite a lot.

AHERN: Oh, good! Oh well, I'll be really happy if it's, I hope it is changing, but ---.

HEATH: I think, I'm not saying there's not problems, there are problems, but, you know before when I was talking about the problems we were trying to figure out, where the accommodation was at night, so, on a different night we were desperately trying to find some accommodation for someone else, and we were ringing around and we were ringing around and we were ringing around and we couldn't get through to anyone, because it was late in the afternoon and all of the phone lines were busy and we couldn't get through to find out where to put someone. We said, "We are just really struggling to find accommodation for this woman tonight." And she said, "Oh, I know where it is." And she got out her phone and she called one of her friends and she said, "Hey, are you at Catherine House tonight?" She said, "Yes." "Can you just ask them, have they got a spare room at the moment." And she said, "Yes, I'm just here at the moment. I will just go and ask." And she said, "Yes, they've got a spare room. Send her over." So the technology, I'd assumed that technology wasn't being used, or wasn't as equitable and what I really missed there was that maybe it was just being used in ways that weren't the same as the way I was using it.

[01:09:33]

AHERN: Well you couldn't do it by official channels, but by unofficial channels it was still possible.

HEATH: That's right.

AHERN: Oh well, that's heartening. I do worry about that sometimes.

HEATH: Yes. I think there's a place for worry, but I think there's also, you know, it comes back to that question of who's creating things and if we can find ways to make sure that technology is being created by a diversity of people then I think we've got the opportunity to create some things that can change and can create opportunities.

The YouTube videos that we watch with Aboriginal community are of the kids doing raps in, so they had a hip hop artist who went out to the community and was doing rap about eating healthy food and so there's all this language, I mean she can see other kids in the community. You know there's all this sort of language that she gets access to because it's on YouTube. She can see different locations and things like that. But it was, you know, it wasn't the government coming in and doing their documentary. It was a local hip hop act.

AHERN: Well, that's great. That's the sort of stuff you need to have access to, and that's terrific that you are able to provide that access. Well, that's the sort of stuff that I hope happens but I wonder how often it does that.

HEATH: Absolutely! And there's definitely problems, but it is going to keep me busy for a while.

AHERN: The APY Lands, there is such issues up there still and it's such a beautiful place. It's just absolutely stunningly beautiful.

[Section of transcript deleted]

AHERN: We probably should conclude our interview. I'd like to thank you very much, Georgia.

HEATH: Thank you very much.

[01:13:02]

END OF INTERVIEW

NOTE: Throughout this transcript the acronym WIS for the Women's Information Service is used.