



Radical Dream – transcript – OH 669/1

Jenny Cooke 2003

This is Vicki Lachlan from The Women’s Housing Association. We’re doing an interview this morning with Jenny Cooke. It’s the 1st September 2003 and it’s – goodness me! – ten-fifty. Good morning, Jenny.

Good morning, Vicki.

So this morning we’re going to talk about The Women’s Shelters Housing Association. How did you first hear about The Women’s Shelters Housing Association, or where did it come about?

Well, I worked for the Women’s Shelters from the beginning, and what we did initially was try and get priority housing for a lot of our women who stayed with us, and over time it got to be that housing wasn’t really the only issue for them, that we would get priority housing and a woman would then be sort of sent off somewhere by herself without the supports that she’d had when she was in the house. Plus we were competing with all the other organizations for Housing Trust stock. So we were looking for a next stage on from the women’s shelters, so that it was really more like a halfway house that the women could go to, they could still keep in touch with the shelter, they still had the services that were available – Mothers and Babies, the doctor, budget advice, all those kinds of things – and the support for each other rather than particularly talking to us. And I guess eventually the Housing Association came out of that.

Right. And you say ‘we’ – we being – – –?

The initial workers were Dawn McMahon and myself.

Right. And what role did each of you play in getting The Women’s Shelters Housing Association off the ground?

Mostly it was Dawn lobbying and haranguing (laughter) everybody in sight! I – I’m trying to think – I was still with the Shelters when we got the first stage of the halfway houses, and they gradually grew. Each shelter started to get their own little lot of houses. But I think by the time that the Housing Association got incorporated I’d probably gone to work for Emergency Housing. Because Emergency Housing really came out of the Women’s Shelters and the other homeless persons bodies, lobbying again for the next stage, so that it wasn’t always Housing



Trust but it was a need for other kinds of support or just financial support to get into the private market.

Right. And so you say it was mostly Dawn haranguing people – what role did you play?

I was notionally the Welfare Officer and the bookkeeper and the clerical person.

So you held the fort together while she banged on doors?

Yes. And we both would scavenge for furniture and floor coverings, and all the kinds of things that the women needed. We both got pretty good at ringing up or sending out (laughs) letters, or just blatantly asking for what we wanted.

How did you get involved with the shelter in the first place?

I was in England and Erin Pizzey there had just started working with, they were called ‘battered women’ or ‘battered wives’ – I think ‘battered wives’ – at that stage, and the local housing authorities in each borough provided some overnight or emergency housing. And I was involved with the local group there, just at the beginning of that, when I was overseas. Then, when I came back, I was one of the volunteers in at Bloor Court for Women’s Liberation, and the WEL¹ women got a grant to be able to start the women’s shelter that became Childers Street, and they advertised there and I went and interviewed. Well, there was a grant for one salary, and so it got split between Dawn and myself.

Right. And was Dawn involved with the WEL women as well?

Yes. Yes. Dawn and the women who were on the committee were the WEL women.

What was your impression of Dawn at that time?

She was wonderful. She was fierce, so she was wonderful. I mean, she would storm in and sort of ask for what she wanted. It was a constant battle that we used to both go to Homeless Persons [Committee] meetings or into the Housing Trust or anywhere, and always have to be saying, ‘And the women, and the women.’ It was a vague ‘homeless people’ or ‘break-up of families’ kind of discussions around, but there was no recognition that there was something specific that women and children needed. It was still a culture that families were private. Perhaps a man, if he’d been drinking, might hit his wife, but if he was sorry afterwards and did something about his drinking, well, then things would be all right. So it wasn’t acknowledged that violence against

¹ WEL – Women’s Electoral Lobby.



women and children was more than – that it was a cultural attitude. And in the Bloor Court days we used to take women home. It was like one of the first places where women could actually go and say, you know, ‘This is happening to me.’ And we used to take women home. Sometimes they would sleep in at Bloor Court. And it got to be that Community Welfare, as it was in those days, became one of our biggest clients – without any funding (laughs) or any support or anything else.

And then Elsie, in Sydney, got a house in Leichart, and they were the first of the women’s shelters there. And a place in Melbourne developed about the same time as we did.

Right. Elsie was the first refuge, wasn’t it?

Yes. Yes.

But it wasn’t very long after that South Australia got – – –.

No, no. I don’t know quite what the Housing Trust thought, or how big it might grow, but they gave us a really nice house in Childers Street, and that was kind of going to be –

It.

– you know, a couple of days out and then everything will be all right, or the really difficult ones would get priority housing.

Was priority housing easy to get at that stage?

No. No. It wasn’t. And one was competing, you know. It was appalling, really, that you’d have to say, ‘Is a battered wife and children more desperate than somebody in a wheelchair or somebody whose house has burned down?’, or what have you. And then there was the priority review, where we would go through all the outstanding cases –

That happened fairly late –

– yes –

– or a bit later, didn’t it?

– yes. It used to be more lobbying. Plus we needed, at that stage, housing for women that was either close to the shelters or close to the city, or some kind of supports, because a lot of these women had never been on their own. It was one of the really important stages through the women’s shelters for them to feel comfortable and feel strong enough to get out and go somewhere. I don’t remember the numbers now, but significant numbers would go back home several times, because starting up again on your own was really hard, and particularly if you’d



had years of being told how worthless you were and that you couldn't manage and you couldn't do things. So it was kind of like the gradual stages are women's shelters and some priority, and then our – we didn't really call them 'halfway houses' – and then it led out into the housing associations.

So you said that you went into the Emergency Housing office – were you involved on the Women's Shelters Housing Association board at any time?

No, not on the Housing Association board, no.

You just were the support person behind Dawn.

Yes. Yes.

I say 'just' – that's a big role to play, considering the fact that she was very busy lobbying and meeting people and so forth.

And Dawn did a lot of public speaking, Dawn was one of the first ones to start talking, for instance, to the police and to the young police cadets about domestic violence. Talking about it out loud.

So *she* initiated that.

Yes. Well, one of the major occurrences was when a policeman got shot up at Elizabeth by a husband that we knew was dangerous and we had been saying for a long time was going to do something. And we didn't get any support for that until the policeman got shot, and so then they were much more interested. (laughs)

Yes. And that training still happens today –

Yes.

– so that's really – – –.

Well, it was difficult for the police as well, in that culturally they were interfering in a marriage and things, plus there wasn't really anything much that they could charge a husband with. Hitting people wasn't really much of an offence, they used to quite often only be able to take an offender a certain distance from the home, or from the shelter, and let him out.

And that was it.

And that was it.

So it wouldn't take him long to find his way back again.



No, no.

Goodness me. So, in terms of Dawn doing all of those things, that must have taken a lot of her energy, so therefore you were managing the shelter to a large extent, then.

Yes. We tended to do everything. We kind of shared things up and we did everything which was – you know, the lobbying, the administration, doing the books – we’d learn the bookwork as we (laughs) went along – the public speaking, the helping out the women, even sort of down to the day-to-day cleaning and organising of what was happening there. Although we tried to set it up so that it was the women’s house, that they would do the shopping, they would do all that kind of organising, that we were an information resource as much as anything, just to give them that opportunity from a safe base to be able to go out and explore and do what they wanted to do.

Can we switch it off for a second.

Yes. (break in recording)

So some of my memories about Dawn were the constant cigarette holder in the mouth and her not suffering fools gladly kind of stuff. Do you have that kind of recollection?

That’s right, yes, we both smoked, didn’t we, yes. Yes, she used to smoke a lot. Yes, she would certainly speak up, and she used to – quite often she’d take me to a Homeless Persons meeting so that I could ask (laughs) the questions rather than her, or so that I could nominate her and make sure that she was on the board. But she was wonderful with some of the husbands who would turn up at the shelter. If I had to deal with them I was more sort of like, ‘No, no, she’s not here, no, never heard of her,’ and tell lies and sort of ‘Go away.’ But Dawn would shout at them. (laughter) And we had, before we got the back fence, we did have one husband who sort of broke in and he was very drunk and very sort of threatening, and Dawn just stormed through the house going, ‘Out! Out! Get out of my house! Get out of my house!’ and frightened him off, out and back around the lane.

Of course, I mean, really she just looked like an ordinary Australian housewife.

Yes.

But what she was able to do, and her presence, was –

Was, yes –

– totally different –

– yes –



– to her image.

– yes. But she had a strong political background. She and Jack were originally with the Communist Party and got disillusioned about the '50s, when most did, with the invasion of Hungary, but was always socially active.

And politically astute – – –.

Yes, yes.

So in terms of the fact that you were there more for the shelter, do you recall any of the early stuff for the Women's Shelters Housing Association in terms of when they got their houses and how people felt about that?

Yes. When we got the first lot of houses the women from our shelters who went there we thought would be more in touch with the women's shelter, that there would be more of this next stage support and so we would go and visit fairly regularly, too, but got to realise that, for a lot of the women, they didn't really want anything more to do with the shelter, that it was the next stage in their lives, they were feeling comfortable – they may quite often have visited each other, but that they didn't really want any further acknowledgment from us. And that was good. It was part of the learning lessons, the same way as in the shelter that when we first realised a lot of them didn't really know how to cook, that it was hamburgers and chickens and things, that we got somebody in – a lovely woman called Liz – who was teaching them nutrition and, you know, cheap ways to make good food and things. But what the women wanted to make was cake and lollies and things, which Dawn and I thought was ideologically not really sound until we had to realise that this is what they wanted to do. They'd never really had an opportunity to do this. Let them do that so that they know how to do that, rather than us telling them, you know, 'A hundred and one ways with cabbage and mince is good for you.' (laughter) The same with spending days doing each other's hair and make-up and things. As good feminists we thought, 'You should be out doing something else.' Again, have to acknowledge this is the way these women can support each other and get to trust each other and get to know what's happening.

So the same really with the Housing Association – that it wasn't like expanding a women-strong empire; it was more a stage back into the common world that hopefully – I'm sure – with the knowledge that it was women who set this up, and it was women who worked really hard to do this. We always made sure that we would talk around the kitchen table about funding hassles or where Dawn was speaking or what was happening, so that they knew that it was a women supporting women kind of an endeavour. So with the Housing Association it was kind of like



needing to build up the numbers and provide the furniture and ongoing support if it was needed, but that it was a time for us to back out of it. In the same way that it was difficult to have women on the various committees, like within the shelter and the same with the Housing Association, that if women wanted to that's good, but it shouldn't be a condition of getting the services, shouldn't be something that the women felt they had to do.

I think you just encapsulated it all in a few sentences, really.

I mean, I guess I could also say what a shame that this is the twenty-fifth anniversary. Now, wouldn't it be better –

If there was no need for it?

– if domestic violence wasn't there, or if attitudes had changed. I'm concerned when I hear some of the young kids, the relationships they're in, that they're not good. And I guess, too, when I was working in the shelters and then in Emergency Housing I got to see the next generation of some of the kids, and you think, 'It's slow work.' We were certainly more vocal, Dawn particularly, in speaking up against crappy advertising or television shows or the soap operas, all these demeaning attitudes towards women, towards children, the acceptance of violence, whereas nowadays it seems to be two steps forward, one back, that tough women – this attitude of tough women still involves an awful lot of male violence, or involves violence *per se*. So we need sort of more Dawn McMahons around to be able to keep speaking up about these things.

I would agree with that. Absolutely.

Because she didn't stop. (laughter) I mean, she was, she was wonderful. She kept at it. She had cultivated a couple of people on the radio, too, so that she could speak up about things, but later on we had to be a bit more careful, that before we could speak up about things we had to check back with the Housing Trust or with the various government departments that we belonged to. Funding was always an issue, that if you stepped too far out of line there would be more questions about your funding. And some of it becomes ends justifying means. I mean, it was the WEL women initially who got the shelter grant, and they were women who would dress up and go and take a politician to lunch, which we at Bloor Court would never have done. (laughs)

Yes. But it's how you play the game.

Yes. So money became available, and so from that you sort of make the best use you can of it. And I suspect it's why I got the job, the other half of the money, because I came from the Women's Liberation side of it, and Dawn could be the respectable one. (long laughter)



Goodness me. One of the things that has struck me, in looking back, is that in the early stages of WSHA [pron. 'Woosha'] there was quite a lot of men involved, and I've brought that up with previous interviewees. So do you think that was about their ideologies, or that they could see the arguments that you and Dawn were putting up?

The Housing Trust was full of men. Women were Tenancy Officers, and it was men who did all the administrating and all the important things. It was a strange culture, the Housing Trust. Very into the 'deserving poor', a benevolent place. Alex Ramsay was, well, a family friend and did wonderful things, but the 'deserving poor'. And women's shelters, the image that the Trust preferred was a poor woman and children who came from the lower classes and whose husband sort of drank and bashed her up and didn't work and didn't do the 'right thing' so we'll move in. And Tenancy Officers' role was to make sure that Trust tenants behaved themselves. They would go round and check that you were clean, or if you were on a reduced income they'd look in the laundry to see if there was a man's underpants. It was a strange culture there, so men had all the important roles and the Housing Trust was still a pretty large feature of where the houses came from. You know, like they looked after all the empty defence forces houses, for instance, or the abattoirs places – just about anything, really, was the Housing Trust houses. SACHA² had David Engelhardt[?] –

Yes. That was in the '90s.

– no, David was my boss [in the late '80s].

Yes, in the late '80s.

Yes. I don't really know why the Housing Association had so many men involved.

That's okay – it was just a question that came up for me.

There didn't seem to be a lot of women at that kind of lobbying level, either. When I think about the Homeless Persons Committee there was women from the Salvos³ and Dawn and me, I think. I wasn't on the Homeless Persons Board, I was Dawn's proxy, so I can't remember that there were other women around at that sort of pushing and shoving level.

Is there anything else you want to cover? (pause) I've covered everything I want to. That block of sentences you said in the middle just encapsulated everything, to me.

What, the stages on?

² South Australian Community Housing Authority.

³ Salvation Army.



Yes. For the women and the organization.

Oh, well, that's good. (laughter)

I think we should use that block of sentences on her poster.

I mean, that's the thing – what you can do is listen again and sort of ask me some other stuff, or whatever.

Well, I think we will –

Yes.

– but for this particular part of it I think that would be it.

Yes. I mean, I can have a bit more of a think, too.

Certainly about the early stuff, I think you really encapsulated why Dawn and you worked towards it, and – – –.

Oh, good, good. Yes, because – you know, like after, when you and I knew each other in SACHA, my sort of part with the Women's Shelters Housing Association was only part of *all* the associations around, wasn't it? I mean, it was still the days of 'What about the women?', wasn't it?

Absolutely.

And still it's hard to find women who can do all the maintenance and things.

It still is. I have to tell you that, as a woman in charge of a large organization, my ability to manage maintenance is questioned all the time –

Yes.

– by SACHA staff. Male SACHA staff.

Yes.

So – – –.

It was one of the things, like in the early days of the shelter, that it was how – sort of by example rather than what you say, that we could say 'Women do anything,' because if women couldn't do it we would find somebody who did, so that we could sort of dig up the lawn and get somebody else to provide free new turf, or we could shift and carry and do all sorts of stuff. So that was kind of the example rather than the ideology of it. I mean, when I first started, I suppose I thought, 'This is going to be more your Amazon Acres,' that we'd have strong women who'll be



out there fighting, but the women's lives have been so extraordinary, really, that you couldn't sort of say, (in authoritative voice) 'And now come along to a consciousness raising.' That kind of stuff happened much more around the table when we would sort of talk, or just be silly with each other.

It's much more about their surviving.

Yes. Yes. But they were busy doing that. And I'm pretty sure that they kept their connections up through the Housing Association in the way that they wanted to.

Yes, I think you're right. I do think you're right. And it's the same now.

Yes.

I don't think it's changed, it's just that there's more ---.

Whereas you kind of think wouldn't it be good if the women who were the tenants ran the Association. But if they don't want to, and if it's something that you're good at, well then, you know, that's there and so you just leave it as an opportunity if they wanted to.

Yes. Thank you very much, Jenny.

That's all right.

That was end of tape.

END OF INTERVIEW.