

Project: YWCA Centennial: *100 Years of Challenge and Change: Whatcom Women and the YWCA*

Interviewee: Dorothy Culjat, former YWCA executive director, and Pat Hite, former YWCA board member

Interviewer: Dr. Lynne Masland, YWCA Centennial history chair

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Editor: Lynne Masland

Lynne: *This is Pat Hite. She also served on the Board for many years. Pat, can you tell me when that was?*

Pat: Yes, Dorothy can you tell me the years I served on the board?

Dorothy: Well, you were on the Board when I came. Had you been on it for a while?

Pat: And I was on it for a while, oh yes. And I was on it before Roseanna; yes, I was on the Board when Mary Robinson came to town.

Lynne: *So you were in the 60s?*

Pat: Must have been, well, let's see, yes, because we came... What I would like to say is I think that you have both touched on this time when the government money [government funding] disappeared. It was a potentially disastrous time. The Y could have disappeared. Dorothy happened to be the right person at the right time; she came with a father who was a systems analyst and had that kind of look at things and realized that there was no way the Y was going to survive with the structure and staffing that it had. And so you really completely restructured the Y and saved it at that time.

Dorothy: It just wasn't feasible to have a Deputy Director as you recall, and we took that position and really focused on the business manager because we knew that we had to have our house in order financially. Alice Richard continued briefly with Residence Director position, and then I think she made the decision it was time to resign. We were able to reorganize it that way, and I have to say there were a few lucky opportunities -- one of our swim programs, the director for our swim programs just had a baby and wanted to spend more time [with the baby] and to cut back on her hours. But we realized that in terms of some of our programming we didn't need a full-time person that the CETA program offered, we just didn't need it. We had to find ways to really reduce staff, and that goes back to why we had a couple work at night for security and ...

Pat: A very creative solution

Dorothy: But even our housekeeper and maintenance person, ultimately, we cut their hours. We had to. We were done with cleaning the rooms at one, and that's how long we needed, and that was hard for a lot of the women to understand because many came from a real point of view -- and it's a valid one -- that you help people, and that to do something like this, to make these kinds of changes, was not, uh, not nice. You know. I mean we had a couple of people from other organizations calling to say is the rumor true that you're not going to have a Deputy Director anymore? But I have to say that all of the staff that were affected handled it very well, they really did. Everybody ultimately had to look at the big picture. But I was telling Lynne on the phone the other day, I'll never forget coming to work, and the work release program had leased the house and there were still six months on the lease and we had to pay it off. There was an attorney, and he had not one ounce of care for any of the problems. It was strictly business, so I think we all learned from that how to write a lease that has an escape clause. You know another thing we did during that time was when we established the Katie Murphy Award, and that again helped in that transition period because we certainly wanted to recognize the work that she and so many others did during those times and that was for helping women in need.

Pat: The first person...

Dorothy: I'm trying... I'm not sure if it was a person, we might have, Women Care Shelter might have been one of the first recipients but I think, uh, I don't know...

That's a lot of details to try and remember

Dorothy: But I am trying to.... but that was a nice event. One time we had our annual meeting -- I've never forgotten this -- we had it at the Bellingham YWCA, a light dinner in the evening, and very few people showed up. It was the last night of the MASH show.

Pat: (laughing) Oh, I remember that!

Dorothy: We laughed about that one, but there were a lot of ups and downs. It seemed like you were putting your finger in the dike, fixed it, turned around, the Fire Department drops in, the fire escape needs to be fixed, and it just it got to the point where I have to say your own faith gets sorely tested because when you see a contribution, it's not going to building the Y and it's not even going necessarily to maintain it, you're really just two steps behind, and that I think contributed to people saying, "Well, what is my contribution going to?" And it took a long time to get it back on track.

Pat: We had to very carefully consider what is YWCA? Is it a building, or is it an idea?

Dorothy: And that's when we started talking about do we need this building, and we didn't get too far for so many Board members thought that...

Pat: The Y was the building

Dorothy: Was the building.

It certainly was included in the package that by that time the building had become the idea...

Both: Yes, yes

Dorothy: Another...I meant to say, too, is that we did try to sort out the residence challenges. We were able to have the third floor, the top floor -- the alcoves they called it--[have] some renovation. I believe a small kitchen was put in, and, again, the Gannett Foundation helped us with that. You know, I don't think we're talking more than -- if memory serves me right -- maybe \$5,000 which was a lot for us. But, you know, I used to see the buildings up at Western getting the renovation, the historic buildings, and I used to think if we go to the Legislature, gut the building, and, you know, I'm not even sure I'd do much differently concerning the program offices but that was certainly a challenge.

Well I have to tell you that, let me stop [tape stops and then picks up again] but the residence halls were not funded by the Legislature, none of the residence halls were. They were all funded through bonds like general obligation bonds, and so you'd have to do a careful study, a feasibility study, before you did one of these because you wanted to be sure that the needs were great enough, and you would not have trouble keeping them filled and paying on the bond. The hall had to earn an income, so that you know the bonds get paid off through the income generated. So they weren't funded by the Legislature. I thought I'd explain it to you...

Pat: I'm glad you did...

Correct the record on that.

Dorothy: I think I'd probably go to Barney Goltz...right, the Legislature of Western Washington...we were historic preservation.

But you occupy the niche of a non-profit, you do occupy a niche that's extremely valuable to the community, and it's extremely hard to keep it going. Precarious. It's really up and down.

Well, you know I was telling Pat I was back in Washington, D.C. in June, and I thought I'm going to see about the YWCA there because I had visited it when they had just opened up the branch there in Washington DC: a beautiful facility, athletic center with a swimming pool, and they had closed it just a month before. They had closed the pool. They said they just could not financially keep it going with so many private health clubs, too, and, again, people don't necessarily -- they have their separate focus. You go to your

health club here, your friends here, your nightlife here, your service organizations there, it's not necessarily all in one place. And they didn't have a residence, though, at that Y. And then by virtue of the commitment to always charge low fees to make it accessible to women of all income levels, you really can't charge enough to cover the costs.

Pat: Jim McKeller, who was director of the YWCA pool, told me one time no swimming pool can be self-sustaining; it's absolutely impossible unless you have to have something to go with it or something to subsidize it.

Do we have anything more that we...

Dorothy: Well, the only thing I was going add – [to Pat] Do you remember some of the women on the luncheon committee? I know we had Kitty Stimson and her daughter Susan Trimmingham. Sue Cole came, you [Pat], Barbara Unger...try to think of someone ...Kathy Bennett of Visiting Nurses joined us. I know Charlotte Kipfer, she brought in...I just remember all of them; I'm looking in your house in the living room and thinking sitting there...Oh, Carol Radke, I don't think she was on the committee, I know she was there several times.

Pat: I don't remember.

Dorothy: But it was, I mean, we even had a couple people upset that they weren't invited, of course it's such a...to be part of our next planning committee but it really was a nice...

As I said the luncheon series in the past two years has taken a hiatus but they had one in 2006, they had programs like [one on] pay day loans -- perhaps we shouldn't use the word 'scam' but pay day loans and the difficulty with them; they do provide a service but at the same time they do help people get in even deeper, and there was a speaker about that, so there have been some. But I think, maybe, the focus now is strictly on the residence programs.

Pat: And it seems to be doing...seems to be appropriate and seems to be what people will support and believe in.

Dorothy: Do they still do the golf tournaments do you know?

Pat: I don't believe they do.

I don't think so. I'm not exactly sure. I think that kind of petered out.

Things really became pared down in that mid-80's restructuring. I think at that point there were 10 staff members. An article in the Herald and...well anyway, Sharon

Eberhart was [the new] the Executive Director, had come in and looked at the financials, and they were by then \$100,000 in debt.

Pat: Wow!

Dorothy: Yikes!

And so she said [in the Herald article] “that was the hardest thing I ever did in my life, that I had 10 staff, and I had to pare it down to 3, just essentials.” I think at one point there was probably the only person was someone at the desk, it was just... and that really did force the complete retake, and I think it took a couple of years to get through that, and in 1998, again, a kind of assessment in talking about communities and needs and so forth. I’ve done an interview with [current Executive Director] Julie Foster, and you know how they emerged from it, and she’s been very very careful not to let it get over-extended and keep right on mission as it stands now.

Pat: That has been so difficult historically at the Y since the CETA money disappeared.

Dorothy: ...the CETA and the special programs. Yes, that was a wonderful time, and a wonderful program but when the money disappeared, there we were left with a wonderful staff and we were about to be...

And it was a reflection, too, of the time, women’s needs in terms of non-traditional trades being recognized. Then again, the whole Reagan [program] put them [mental health patients] out in the community, that whole thing, but it really, as I said to Lynne over the phone, no one would have not acknowledged the need for those [programs] but they’re incompatible {if you} have a building with other programs. I told her [Lynne] over the phone...and when I had my interview, a resident in the Mental Health program came down, came right through in her pajamas, and I thought maybe it was a test. Nobody said anything to her [laughter], she sat down, and she started talking to me.

And another thing we went through during that time, again, it’s not only sociologically with women’s issues, but it was technologically. It was fascinating, because we didn’t have a printer and so you had to go down to the Opportunity Council. They charged you a minimum per page and so that wasn’t very efficient. And so I was quite naïve; Gail Haines and I...Gail Haines was on our board...and we just decided that we were going to buy a copier, and then we started renting out printing to other groups but I wasn’t aware at that point, and Gail never said anything, but maybe the board needed to approve the purchase of a copier. Most of them actually were quite pleased, but several felt that they had never...and you learn as you go along. But also we were just, we got a fellow by another name, he’s well known in town, John S, it starts with an “S.” He’s a sailor, I think he does a lot with the maritime heritage, he’s often at council meetings to present his views --

Oh I know, Servais.

Dorothy: John Servais. He helped us and he got us into word processing, helped us develop actual labels of our membership so that we didn't have to hand-write or type labels. But that was just really the first, and you know all that that entails. I remember a board member saying, 'You sent two of these to my home, one to me and one to my child,' and there was no way that we would have known that but it's that transition to... you know more modern. I'm trying to think what else, but yes, those were things we were struggling with like every other organization, we didn't have a corner on it, but board minutes certainly reflect that technological struggle but it added stress.

In fact, Julie commented on that, saying that the technology curve added its own level of stress which also added more stress. It wasn't only the technological curve as far as learning the programs, getting people to help write programs, all of that, and buying equipment, but it's simply the stress of all of that was a big factor in the 90s -- as it was for many of us, but most of us weren't keeping an organization with a large ancient building going.

So let's see -- Well, I want to thank you, it's really helpful...

Dorothy: Thank you, it's really helpful to me to to just have the opportunity to think about it. It was a very very exciting time, it was not an easy time and I think it, I always think, things are right at a particular time; and I think change in leadership over time as people came on with new ideas and new resources -- and again, I think that women -- more and more women in the community -- who became engaged in careers, who had the financial wherewithal to start supporting the Y, that only men had been, or wives through their men...

Pat: Right.

Dorothy: But it didn't happen overnight...

That's interesting, Pat, what you said, because I didn't think about that -- while they wouldn't have had the time and they also didn't have the programmatic needs anymore that had fueled the Y since certainly after WWII, the classes, but they did have discretionary money -- as you say, many women for the first time. So they could support it better financially (Pat: Yes.) even though they didn't have the same needs for the community that ...

Pat: Or the time that they gave as volunteers was really strategically missing, but they didn't have time...

Dorothy: It would be fascinating to look at the composition on boards of the YWCA because I think I was early. I mean, some of the older women in those days who'd been

on the board, they were wives of doctors, so and so, wife of an attorney; and we didn't have, we didn't recruit that way because those people were in the Medical Assistance League, or the Children's Orthopedic League or the Bellingham Yacht Club -- they were out sailing with their husbands...

Pat: When I first came to Bellingham, Dorothy Reed became a close friend of mine, and Dorothy had been President of the Y before at one time, and I had said to her, 'Who were the other women of the board? How were they picked?' and she said, 'Oh, dear, it doesn't matter who they were, it mattered who their husbands were.'

Oh

Pat: Dorothy Reed, wonderful, R E E D

And she was a board member?

Pat: She was board President at one time.

OK, and that would have been in the 60s?

Dorothy: Before I came to town. And I know who another person was, Catherine May, for the luncheon series.

Pat: Of course.

Dorothy: Catherine May, and I say that because Catherine headed the Senior Centers

Pat: Well, Catherine was the management of the Y.

Dorothy: At the Y, but I'm talking about organizing our luncheons. She [Catherine] brought in the tables, but Dorothy Reed worked with Catherine at the Senior Center, she taught bridge for many, many years, and so that's that connection to Catherine.

Going back, now this is a really interesting thing that you brought up, Dorothy, because the board during the 90s became noticeably filled with women that I know were, many from Western, but all of them working women; as I said, many from Western or all of them working or almost all.

Dorothy: And I think we had a bit of a blend. I'm just trying...I can't think of too many women who were on the board at the time because of their husbands.

Pat: Oh no.

Dorothy: Sue Cole, but not really.

Pat: Oh, no. Not at all.

Dorothy: Even if they were, they didn't get there that way, but you could tap into...

Pat: Well sure, sure. Well, Gail Haines, Marty was insurance; and Tina Berg, Don Berg was at Whatcom Counseling...

Dorothy: At Whatcom Counseling. It would be very interesting to look at that, and I would be very interested in comparing it to the Seattle Y where you still see the Nordstrom name, or some of the women are in that position where I'm not sure they have a career except to be as a civic volunteer -- which is an important one. I'm sure it's a mixed bag in Seattle, but I think it would be very interesting thing to explore.

Again, I think that was true of most organizations, arts organizations of that time. Women would be on the board, but it would be because their husbands were prominent and influential, and the women acquired leadership skills and raising money and so forth, but that was because they worked with that network that they belonged to because of their husbands.

Pat: I know, I do recognize that. And there were some remarkable women who developed that way.

Dorothy: And you bring up women of Western. Mary Robinson may be the ultimate, but you have Margaret Aiken, Chappelle Arnett, Judy Bass, and they started out bringing their network to the Y; that was nice. Lynn Blackwell, she was at the community college and I think Ann Heaps was involved at one time.

Pat: Luckily Dorothy has a photographic memory.

Dorothy: Not any more.

Pat: But you said you could picture people, and where they were sitting.

Dorothy: What I can tell you is what we ate. (Laughter)

I have that kind of memory too. (Laughter)

Pat: But, Dorothy, you are a remarkable woman, but I've known that forever.

Dorothy: It was really nice to be thinking about all this. I'll send you a couple pictures; I don't have a lot of pictures, it was just really a difficult time.

And they say that you build relationships during time of need...

Dorothy: And mine with Pat came about by being interested not only in the Y but other things. But once we did the program luncheon program luncheon and it had such a sense of success -- and we don't have a lot of those -- and, you know, they say to build teamwork you have to have your eye on the prize. We didn't know that that was, now, and we had determined...so it was hard, but we all knew we had to work together. But the sense of accomplishment, it was fragmented. You would have some successes, you know that helped today a little, but you turn and there's another problem.

Pat: When you were hired as Director of the Y, I was the chairman of the Personnel Committee, and I think I had been for a while, so we were both quite careful at first because of the relationship and because of the situation the board was in, that the Y was in. At the time, the only possible supervisor of the director was the Personnel chairman so we were very cautious about becoming friends and it was some time before we felt free to...

Dorothy: But I want to say Pat probably saved me from being fired a couple of times. I just say that in general, but just because she was such a wonderful confidante and mentor and also pragmatic. It wasn't all, "Oh, just keep your chin up. It will all be OK" because we don't want to hear that; we want someone to say, "Yes, it is a challenge."

Pat: And we did figure out a lot of things...

Dorothy: Yes, how to handle certain things. How to reorganize with dignity for people, but, ah, I had not thought as much about those times until just now and it's a delight.

Well you kept a wonderful organization going in dark times

Both: Thank you.

And you also (tape stopped; restarts)

Dorothy: And you would have the time of the Equal Rights Amendment, and people were trying to pass that. We had the Northwest Women's Political Caucus. There was a lot of interest in that time in politics, Judith Wiseman... **(tape ends side A)**

Then Ann Rose was, of course, the pioneer for many of them at the Y at the Planning Commission; and then Lynn Carpenter ran for finance director; and then you started seeing people, for example, in city government, Katherine Hanowell, getting involved in the Y, so it sort of opened some doors to bring people in. And Mayor Hertz would sometimes come to us...

Pat: Well, he wasn't mayor then this was back before him.

Dorothy: Reggie

Pat: Yeah, Reg Williams. Yeah, and we read in the newspapers they were having trouble filling board positions, and Reg Williams, the mayor, said he had asked everybody he knew and he couldn't get anybody to take the positions. We know a whole lot of people, and they were all women because there were no women on boards positions back then. And so first we started, let's see, it was Earla Swift and Ann Allen and me, and who else?

Dorothy: That was before I came on board but I was aware of it.

Pat: Yeah, and it was the easiest thing we ever did and the most successful. We first started thinking we would have to have a representative from every organization involved, and nobody wanted to come, and we said, "My word, we're spinning our wheels, we'll just do it ourselves," and we did. And so we spent our time making telephone calls. It was the simplest thing we ever did. We started out with a list of as many women we could think of, and everyone we talked to we would ask for additional names; and we phoned all these people, explained what we were doing, offered to send an application, a biographical application. And all we asked was that their commitment was if they were invited to thing to serve that they would accept. But they also were asked to express their fields of interest, too, and so they sent those in. We also went and talked to all the appointing commissions we could, the county commissioners who loved it, and the mayor loved it, and I don't remember who else we talked to but they loved it... the idea that this maybe would work which it absolutely did. And we got together lists, and our big job was putting these files [together], and keeping track of what openings were coming up, and notifying the people, and invite them to apply and to get the applications sent in. All kinds of people. Ann Rose got her start really that way there.

And there were many other women who became part of city and county government, boards and commissions that way, and you don't start by running for Mayor of Bellingham, you start by getting some experience in boards and commissions. We saved so much time by not going after these representative groups which we [would have] spent much of our time cooking luncheons for each other, and it was remarkably little work. I think that Linda, the librarian at Whatcom [Community Collge]...

Lambert

Pat: Yes, Lambert, and I'm pretty sure I remember Linda helped us out in that, and I'm not sure -- I remember her doing some of the work on the files.

Dorothy: That would have been just before my time, I didn't know Ann and or Earla and I don't know...

Pat, was that down at the YWCA?

Pat: We didn't actually do it as a part of the YWCA, but we did it...I think that we figured that this [YWCA] was the organizing force, and we finally just, you know, offered you guys a small team on our own and didn't need to have any body else.

I have a question, Pat, for you; do you remember a time when a woman named Mary Knibbs was there?

Pat: Yes!

Tell me about her because

Pat: Mary, I knew Mary very well. K N I B B S, and she was a local schoolteacher wasn't she?

I think so. And Mayor?

Pat: Oh, she wasn't Mayor, she was on the City Council but she was a powerful, powerful councilwoman

OK, that's helpful.

Dorothy: Is Roma Jones still living in the area?

Pat: I haven't heard of her for a while now.

Dorothy: She might know -- that name was known by many.

Pat: Oh yes. She was a local high school teacher and perhaps retired during that time...I don't know...but she was a real power and a wonderful woman, truly.

This is just wonderful; all I need to do is work on two more chapters, go back and put all this in.

[Laughter]