

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

Interviewee: State Senator Harriet Spanel

Interviewer: Dr. Lynne Masland, YWCA Centennial history chair

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Place: Harriet's home at 901 Liberty, Bellingham

Transcriber: Lori Torres

What was your first connection with the Bellingham YWCA?

I took some lessons at the Y pool and I was not a swimmer but I took my lessons and I got brave enough to go out in a fishing boat one time with [her son] Phillip. But Martha Burns was there. I think it was almost daily swimming laps, and she would do a certain number of laps every day, you know. And it was a big enough pool for me; some people think it's small but it was big enough for me; I felt safe. And I think, you know I'm not sure when it was, it seems like I went with Joy Keenan down there which would have been, it would have to be the late 70s.

Could be, it didn't close until the 90s.

When we went to Sweden in '83, I told myself I was not going to come back and do the same things. When we left the country in '74 and we came back, I went back to doing the same things like women voters and some other things. But I just decided for some reason that I was not going to. We were there 6 months and spent the summer traveling, and I really I had nothing to do that I didn't want to do so it was a nice thinking time too. When we came back, I didn't go back going to meetings or volunteering for anything. I spent a couple months just doing nothing really except what I wanted to do, I guess.

Then I saw something about [WWU Professor] Dana Jack's class at Fairhaven [College] – Psychological Development of Women. So I thought, I will take that, and I signed up for her class and I think I took two quarters worth. It was great, because I didn't do other things while I was doing that, and I always told Dana she opened my eyes. I mean I learned very quickly that anything I ever read in the psychology books was all about men, and we were talking about women and what was different. One of the things she had us do was we had to write our story and when I wrote mine, of course, I always think of my mother because she was a very strong woman; you know, did what needed to be done and what she wanted to do. But I also realized that everything that I had been doing and what I loved doing had a political bent to it so I always credit her with getting me going in politics. So, it was that break – in doing nothing – that you really can figure out what you're going to do with yourself

And it seems to me [gap in tape, question reconstructed]] All the work we had done in the 70s -- around women and women empowerment and thinking about ourselves and seeing ourselves -- as in Dana's case. And many other people were writing and saying, at that time, that women were different and they needed to see themselves differently.

And you know [Dana's] book ["Silencing the Self."] But that probably seemed to hit people in the early 80s. Many women of our generation reassessed the way that we looked at ourselves in community and in our families and so forth.

And another thing that I went through – and I'm not sure but it would have probably been more the late 70s, the equal rights amendment days, the equality – just a lot of women's issues out there. And many of us were just involved in the volunteer things. And it was at one point I decided I was going to get money [for what I did]. I just really had devoted a lot of time to working on some programs at church, and I asked for pay. And they were going to pay me \$5 per hour, and I refused to do it because I was worth more than that. And I did not do it and I decided, you know, for me it was more I would rather be doing something that I really wanted to do for zero dollars than be committed to something and tied to something and not get paid decently.

Good point, I think that was true again for women, they were beginning to realize that their time, their energy and brain power applied to anything was worth something.

That's right. And it was really very traumatic because you know they tried to convince me and I'm a stubborn person at some times, so I was just not going to give on that point – and I quit.

At the same time that was I think a difficult time for organizations like the YWCA and other women's organizations around the country because the pillars, the entire foundation so to speak for those organizations all of a sudden -- not all of a sudden but within the space of a decade [were doing other things].

Right, and I think also what happened was in the 70s there were a lot of younger women really involved. And a lot of those, when their children got in school, were coming into the 80s, so they went to work. So organizations didn't even have the numbers of people to really participate and so meetings and how things had been done in the past, suddenly they had to change because 10 women couldn't gather around my table for a board meeting. And it was suddenly, you know, they were out working or doing something else.

The men's organizations like Rotary and Kiwanis [opened to] women as well; Mary Robinson for example was the second woman [in Rotary].

Who was the first?

Ann Jones, at least according to the Website. All of a sudden here's an avenue where – instead of asking your husband to help out with your project through Rotary -- you could join and do it yourself

That's right, yes. I always did what I wanted to do [laughs]. Les [her late husband and WWU physics professor]), he might grumble sometimes but he never tried to stop me from doing what I was doing.

Now tell me something about (the) rape case we were talking about and how (rape) emerged in the early 70s from un-discussable and in some ways unreported, well not in some ways, very under reported.

Right, I think it was 1973 and that it might have been '72, but I'm pretty positive it was '73. And I was called to jury duty – the first time in my life I had been – and the first case [for which I got] picked – and the selection process was very interesting. I was the League of Women Voters President at the time so I had “credibility” around my name, and I was known by some people and a lawyer for the defendant knew me. You know they question all of the potential jurors, and his questioning of me was – and at that time Seattle did have a rape relief program – and he asked if I had been associated with it at all, and I said no.

But the whole selection, which was amazing to me, is I was the youngest woman on the panel, and I would have been probably 34. That was '73; I had 3 children, 2 boys. All the women on the panel had sons. The men on the panel ranged in age from much older than me down to 18. When we listened to all the testimony – and the victim had been picked up in a bar and was raped. But I understood at the time that it was the first [rape] case that had gone to trial. And what I could clearly remember about the discussions is ‘she deserved it.’ She deserved it. And I had so many doubts in my mind just for, you know, listening to what had happened – gut level. Whether you're supposed to use gut level or not, but I've always trusted mine. The first vote we took, it was 11-1. I was the lone one; all the rest were for acquittal; I was for guilty. So some people didn't like it and there was no way they were going to change my mind at that point. And a couple days later, I think I had 2 or 3 of the women who had joined me. But it was obvious that it was going to be a hung jury and so it was. And the person was not brought back to trial because the young woman had done something else and that was going to make it difficult [to retry].

But the interesting thing was that you never get the whole history of some people. And my neighbor, who could not say a word to me before, worked in the Sheriff's Department. After it was over, [he] said you know this person [the defendant] was also acquitted in California of the charge. And I believe it was about 3 weeks later he was charged again and pleaded guilty.

But I think the dynamic that I recall was the men's reaction, and that because I really believe that it was said she deserved it. If she was in a bar, she deserved it. To be honest, I could not imagine it. If I wanted to go have sex with somebody, I would not choose the blackberry bush from hell on an empty lot. I'm sorry, there was something there that didn't sit right with me. But you know the women [of the jury], I think there was something in here you mentioned, judged. She was clearly judged by who she was and what she did and that. But it was also, I think, just a selection of the jury. I turned out to be the youngest woman, and I really question whether I would have been selected if I hadn't been known. They might have just discounted me because of my age – but no

problem with the young men's age, I think some of the older men were to blame, okay? But it was an experience that really did make an imprint on me.

I know that you weren't primarily involved in the Y but you did have some knowledge of what they were doing. We met there with the League [of Women Voters of which the interviewer was President in the 70s].

Oh yeah, the League met there; we had our meetings there all the time, it was one of the places where we could have the meeting. When you're in the League you don't have the money to spend on things. You started the [League] office, Lynne, to get the things out from under our beds, and that was a major move. But yeah, we used the Y and I think probably several of our members were also Y members. And I think it was historically had been a place where the League met -- and I think -- and probably people like Rita Sodt belonged to the Y too. I was sort of focused in on one organization and put all my energies there, but I knew people, a lot of the people, in the [YW] Eco Action [Committee]. Some of them were also League members. I think there were these cross connections in the community too. People did things with different groups, and you just sort of knew who was doing things. There were some groups you might all belong to.

You know that's a thread in this book

Oh, the connection?

Yes and if you want to talk a little bit more about that, I will put it in because the book [100 Years of Challenge and Change] begins with that. The people that founded the Y were wives of businessmen and if you checked their addresses -- you know city directories -- they were neighbors. You know you will hear the names. Frances Axtell was one of the first women legislators. She lived near Clara Donovan. There were women who lived all up and down Forest and Garden streets and they were all neighbors, their husbands worked together. So two of them went to visit a friend one day and they came up with the idea for a meeting group, which was sweeping the country -- that was the popular thing -- and they started the Monday Club [a literary society founded in 1892 that continues today]. This theme of connections is one thing that I think is very interesting and important in women's stories and so if you wouldn't mind talking about that too.

I know that some of my neighbors, not a lot of my neighbors, were also [League] members. But I think the one interesting thing is that one of my neighbors volunteered to be the child care person when we had board meetings. And there were all these little kids, and so she lived just up the street, and she took care of all the little kids so the members could all do their business. And probably [that was] the first child care out of the home for many.

In terms of the Y too.

Yeah, well I'm thinking of the Y 'cause I'm thinking of the Eco Action group because those women were involved in other things too. Of course Ann [Rose] when she ran for the City Council, she was my City Council person, and many of us worked to get her elected. I think you know we had our meetings at the Y and I think that happened because several of our members were also very active with the Y, they might have been on the [Y] board at that time. I'm trying to think of connections. Ann and, of course, Delight [Green] when it came was active in the League and Eco Action and she was our [League] President at one point. And Sharon Schayes I knew from violin with the kids, and I think you know the Eco Action group is the one I think of, but I always think of Rita Sodt because I think she must have been really involved in the Y. I don't know why her name comes up, but it seems like she was one who had her finger in everything around the community because she knew what was going on – where when. And I also was involved with Campus Christian Ministry board, and I think there were some connections there too to the Y.

[Tape is garbled at this point, picks up clearly with:]

Eva Hunter?

Eva Hunter. Her husband was the Episcopal minister at CCM. [They] rented our house when we went around the Pacific, and I didn't know what all her connection was before because she was obviously involved with Campus Christian Ministry. But she was on the Board of the Y – maybe it was in the 90s or something. But I don't know, I didn't know what else. But she certainly was a person who had various connections in the community and then they left Bellingham, then they came back and retired here.

I think a lot of the women I met through Women of Western were Y members, I think of someone like Pat O'Brien and Beth Christman, so there were the various connections with other groups.

And again, you can make a lot happen if you're connected

That's it. There were just all these circles of active women in all these places and I think there's a whole circle that I never knew and probably never will.