

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPTS – DARLENE HAAS WELLS

(Compiled March 16, 2007)

Interviewee: DARLENE HAAS WELLS

Interviewer: Janet Hoshour

Interview Date: March 14, 2007

Location: Cedar Grove, NC

Length: 75 minutes

This segment is an example of what I had hoped for in the interview. I feel that Darlene's narrative effectively illustrates a time and place in our social consciousness that was revolutionary. This is one of the times that I felt Darlene connecting to the topic.

JH: I wanted to go back a little bit and just talk about...you know, I have this sense, and you had also said that you began with women's issues very early on...probably in the early seventies. Is that...

DHW: Mmm, hmm.

JH: So, I'm curious about the environment you were raised in, how you perceived women's roles as you were growing up...and how did that shape you're moving into...

DHW: Yeah, that's curious. I was the youngest of nine...and my parents, my family was of fundamentalist Christian kind of background. So, very traditional roles, I was raised in. I think the, the one interesting aspect was that my mother was very interested in all of us getting an education. It was extremely important to her. And so I know that that influenced a drive for me as well as everybody else. And my older sisters, my older sister had gone through a divorce and went back to school and got a graduate degree and got a job in elementary school counseling. And so, you know, and she's twenty years older than me, so she was certainly an older role model who presented you can get through you know, tough times, and support yourself and your family, which she did. And my other sister who was a little younger than that, she, she also went back to school after she had her children and got a teaching degree and taught kindergarten. So, I think that that even though I had a very traditional upbringing as far as male female roles, I also had, you know, those two role models...and...I think that I had the good fortune of marrying a man who did not have a stringent, traditional, conservative, you know...expectations. And so, I said, you know, I'm really feeling a need to make more connections with women and this is, I'm going to be out every Tuesday night with this group...he was there with the kids. And he was involved as a parent in a way that at that time not that many men were doing. So, you know, it's a combination of, you know, that relationship also which was, one that had a lot of flexibility...and respect and consideration. So, how...I don't, I can't really pinpoint what happened in terms of my being interested in women's issues, but I think it surrounded my own struggles to find myself through, you know, going back to school and trying to find a job, and trying to figure out, you know, where I fit it and what I could do...other than being a mom in the South, which I felt I

did, you know, I had a great time doing those two things and felt quite successful doing those, because I was playing both of those roles, but I wanted more and I wanted to...be out there. And so, that's, I guess, I guess I just started talking with other women who were moms and that's just how it kind of started. We started spreading out and listening and finding out what was going on. And I remember literally reading the first *MS Magazine* and just thinking I'd died and gone to heaven [*laughs*]. All that information right there just about women and women's rights and women's needs. That was really, it was really an exciting time...as I recall.

JH: you talked about your older sisters being role models. Are there other role models that you would identify as...helping you on your path?

DHW: Probably some instructors in college. Definitely. You know, people who...gave me a lot of, helped me build my self-confidence. Because I was a very shy, not a confident young person. The background I came from...I was very quiet. Anyhow [*laughter*]...during my academic pursuits, you know, getting a lot of positive feedback along the way. I think that those were definitely people who were important to me. And certainly all the, all the women instructors that I worked with at Goddard College, they were all feminists, and they were all just...they were gang busters, they did all kinds of cool stuff. And were, you know, real supportive and really helped us move ahead, in whatever direction we wanted to go in. Locally... I was aware of, I became aware of some woman who were active locally. Like Miriam who's mentioned in that [*points to*

copy of the web article "The First Twenty Years" from The Women's Center webpage].

And Janet Palm and Connie Renz.

JH: When you talked about that...Don or Donald, which does...

DHW: Don

JH: ...the role that he played, you know, that allowed you, that you had a more contemporary, like in terms, that you had a more contemporary relationship and attitudes towards family life and how children are raised. Were you in a social circle that supported that, so that he had contemporaries among your friend where the men, other men were playing the same types of roles?

DHW: Yeah, I would say so. We moved here in nineteen-seventy...nineteen-sixty-nine to be involved with Carolina Friends School. And it was a school, a Quaker school. I don't know if you are familiar with it.

JH: Mmm, hmmm.

DHW: Anyway, it was founded on the desire to...have an integrated school at a time when integration was not so, and it was a couple of years old when we moved here and I taught kindergarten and he, and Don, started as head of the, developing the middle school and then he was Principal of the school following that. So, yeah, I mean I would say the

majority of our peers were at that same stage of really looking roles – male and female roles – and that sharing responsibilities of family and...we knew single people. We interacted with single people, too who didn't have children who, you know, became a part of our lives. And they, often they were men – they weren't all women, by any means. We had you know, both friends in and out of our home.

So, I always say that there was a lot of openness amongst the folks that we hung out with at that time. And a lot of discussions, you know. It wasn't all calm and easy-going and beautiful [laughter]. It was open. And it was honest. And that's what seemed to work for a lot of us.

This is a fairly typical excerpt where I found that opening a work-related topic elicited informational responses with little personal exploration or reflection and I personally had minimal success in trying to broaden or deepen the conversation. In addition, her work history was not addressed chronologically and I found we were often circling. As a result, I kept envisioning a kind of interview cul-de-sac.

JH: What year did you finish your MSW?

DHW: I think it was nineteen seventy nine.

JH: Through your graduate work, according to this Herstory on the Women's Center web page, you were working with displaced homemakers in Roxboro. Can you talk about that?

DHW: I can talk about that, but that was actually my first job out of, after I completed my degree. I think I finished in May or something and got this job and...August, most likely. That program, that the umbrella for that program was the North Carolina Council on Women. And they had received a grant to set up these satellite centers around the State to work with displaced homemakers. And the grant was a federal grant called SETA – I can't tell you what that stands for now, but that's what it was – federal money that went through the State to the Council and then that...organization set up the small satellites around the State. So, I went to the one in Roxboro, which is, yeah it's pretty rural – there's a town there of course...the environment all around it was quite rural, quite conservative. And the format of the program [Displaced Homemakers Project], project, uh was a six week program, where women would come in who were single, single moms, or...separated or divorced...or widowed. Those were the, that was what was considered displaced homemakers at that time.

And um, so the, there was a personal approach – confidence building, group building, and then there was the...career or education focus that also, you know, what do you want to do and how do you go about getting there. Teaching and job interviewing skills or if they wanted to back to school, you know, what were the steps to take to get to a community college or in some cases, quite a few cases, actually, to finish high school. There was a

very good community college nearby there called Piedmont Tech, who worked with them quite a bit. And we worked with all the local...Employment Security Commission, and all the local...and the social services.

And then developed all the support groups to help these women to find ways to get where they wanted to go. And it was really, it was really exciting and interesting to see what would happen. Each group, I'm trying to think, remember, I think the smallest was maybe a group of eight and the largest was maybe fifteen. It was a real small group dynamic thing and it was like going to school. They came at nine, eight-thirty or nine in the morning until four in the afternoon. So, it was a real intense...[laughs]...get your act together kind of program. And I'm not sure exactly how many groups I worked with, but the funding ran out, of course, because Reagan came in as President and that was the end of all that. So, I believe I was there for a year and a half...I think, I know it was short of two years, and that was that.

JH: Do you think that was a particular time period that...you know, that things were going on that made that necessary, that kind of program necessary, a certain climate for women?

DHW: Oh yeah, I think that the...especially in rural areas, I mean, North Carolina in general, the South in general, there, really, I mean women were still considered property, basically. And I mean there really, women, the awareness of having rights and being able to support yourself, for example, was really quite new. And...I think...and I think many

of them might have stayed in abusive relationships for a long time. That was also very common in that area in those days. I know it's still common, of course. Not in the same way. Yeah, I mean it was, there were, it just was not acceptable for, I mean even women going out to work was not, was a kind of new concept. So, making resources available and support available to women in those situations was...very crucial. And you know, it would have been great if it continued and grown cause there's a lot of ways it could have grown, but...it was a start.

Later in the interview, I return to the topic of the Displaced Homemakers Project to try and get a bit further into social conditions.

JH: To get back for a moment, I'm just curious. With the displaced homemakers you were working with in Roxboro. I guess I'd just like to explore that a little bit further as far as how did the women do with this new information? With this new way of being? It was so very revolutionary for that time, and especially for this area. How successful was it for them, for their families [unintelligible] supporting what they were doing? Can you say just a bit about what you observed?

DHW: I think that for a lot of them there was a real...the new self-awareness and the building self-confidence that they experienced from going to this program...was a positive impact on their families with their children and so forth. But the others, I think, like their moms or their dads - people like that - probably weren't all that supportive.

I don't recall hearing any horror stories about family reaction to what they were doing. And in terms of their actual success, you know, they're, I do not, I can't come up with what the percentage rate was of those who got jobs, stuck with them, or went to school and stuck with that. I'm sure there was a reasonable attrition rate, that just...it was a drop in the bucket. It helps...they were, they were paid a small stipend to go this program. Yeah. Or maybe it was child care. I think they were given, they were...there was support for child care in the program. I believe that's what it was.

JH: So a well-designed program.

DHW: Mmm, hmmm.

JH: I was just trying to get more of the overall sense of it...it seems that you know, doing those kinds of initiatives right now, it's a part of people's mental furniture even though they haven't experienced it, it's still in our society, but at the time it wasn't so I was just kind of curious about you know...how much they struggled both personally and with family members. I'm wondering if there was a sense of that.

DHW: The other thing I remember about it was the...the...collective sense – the group identity that formed with each of those groups. And they would want to have reunions afterward and get together. And when the program was being shut down, you know, we had one big get together at my house. I lived in Durham at that time and they all carpooled and brought food and everything. And we had one big afternoon party outside

where a lot of them came to enjoy it. And there again that, the women together as a group - not to sew or knit, or do church work – but to support each other and to...you know, increase their ability to stand up for themselves. That was very unusual...for that time and that place.

That was just an exciting thing to do.

This area of the transcript reflects limitations that occur quite often in the interview. For instance, my research indicated that Darlene had been fairly proactive in legal rights issues in more than one of her positions, yet I elicited no passion or enthusiasm in her discussion of her efforts in this area. I felt that Darlene tended not to explore her own thoughts when answering questions, so answers tended to seem very straight forward without personal attachment or reflection. And I had trouble finding the topics that would animate her conversation.

JH: ...and then there was, you started the legal aid program, or were heavily involved in the legal aid program at the Center [The Women's Center]? Is that right?

DHW: We had, when I came there, there were two, they called them resource books and I know that one was lawyers. It was very small at that point and not being...I don't think I instigated it, as kicked it up a notch and got more lawyers involved in committing to give some time to provide information to women who had questions.

Was that a time period, I know the late seventies that as women were divorcing that there is very little power legally, and that custody issues...it wasn't just natural that, from what I understand is that it wasn't natural for the child to go to the mother. That if the husband decided, if he decided that he was the parent who should have custody, that the woman had a much harder battle. Are those the types of things that...

DHW: We, there was a lot going on in the whole legal issues for women in divorce. And separation. There were new laws that I think were coming in that...in terms of...separation of property and all that kind of stuff. We had a number of symposiums on that topic, on the very topic of women and the law. And you know, those were really popular and very...a lot of women attended those, and so saw ...so I mean, I don't remember the specific legal issues, but I know that it was a very hot topic and very new. And also the fact that so many more people were getting divorced. The divorce rate was really jumping at that time. Compared to what it had been. The legal resources and the other was for counseling, I think. The other information and referral thing had, we had a list of...people who, women who gave counseling.

JH: The legal rights program in Hillsborough...it says that you helped create that.

DHW: Again, I think that was something that came out of one of those workshops or symposiums. And we really tried to do outreach to Hillsborough because we knew...because it was...it was more, a lot more conservative than Chapel Hill...[laughs]

at that time. And I think what we did was connect with, make sure that we had connections with lawyers in northern Orange [county], who would be willing to give their time and give...not advice, but information, legal information to women. I can't remember if we did a special phone line, I don't think cause...they were still the same then. But I know, I'm quite positive that we had a workshop kind of program in Hillsborough and did follow up with that. And I remember meeting with a number of women...a group...like a minister, a social worker, a couple of folks from the Hillsborough area, to try to establish something a little more concrete. I don't think it went very far. I mean that's just my recollection that it didn't go real far. But in the beginning stages at the time that I lost my ability to all of that at the same time [laughter].