

WOMEN'S INFORMATION SERVICE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Transcript of interview with Lien Nguyen-Navas

Interviewee: Lien Nguyen-Navas

Interviewer: Kati Murphy

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[00:00:05]

MURPHY: This is an interview with Lien Nguyen-Navas by Kati Murphy on the 9th of November 2017 at the State Library of South Australia. Also present is Caroline Pascoe. It is a part of the Oral History Project for the Women's Information Service.

Firstly, welcome and thank-you for coming.

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Thank you

MURPHY: Would you mind telling us when you were born?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: I was born in 1956 in Vietnam.

MURPHY: And where did you grow up?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Vietnam

MURPHY: Ok, would you mind telling us when you came to Australia?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: I came to Australia in December 1978 as one of the boat people.

MURPHY: Thank you. We'd just like to ask you some questions about your time at the Women's Information Service. When did you first start working at the Women's Information Service?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: I start at the Women Information Service in 1988, I was first, ah no sorry, 1987, I, I was one of the volunteer and when the job became available, I apply and I was successful. So I became Information Officer then.

MURPHY: And when you were working at the Women's Information Service, when you first started, where was it located?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: It was at the Institute Building, next door to the Library here...

MURPHY: On North Terrace...

NGUYEN-NAVAS: ...beautiful building.

MURPHY: And, could you tell us how long you were working at WIS. From when you started as a volunteer 'till you finished?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: I was with WIS for 13 years and I believe back in that time I was the longest serving member. Paid member that was. Lou, Luisa Sheehan one of the project officer, Italian project officer, before I left, she was the longest paid workers, but unfortunately, Luisa passed away.

MURPHY: And, could you tell me a little bit about why or how you came about to work at the Women's Information Service? How did it all pan out?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: I, before I came to WIS, I was working, I, I worked for. back then they called the Migrant Women's Support Accommodation Service, and I thought that the linking between WIS and that particular service got to do with supporting women so, that how that I came to work as a volunteer at WIS.

MURPHY: And why did you specifically want to work at WIS? Was it your experience at the Migrant Women's Centre that catapulted that?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: No, No, it was just that I, I thought that WIS is a place of full of information, a central information and disperse those information out to the community, and I also see that a needs for my skill to be used fully to assist the women that who speak my language and so therefore that I would just become a volunteer there.

MURPHY: And you mentioned before that you became an information officer after you'd finished volunteering, did you hold any other roles while you were at WIS, besides the information officer role?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Long time ago now, cannot remember exactly, but during that time, I think that it was a period that I was working on a project that reviewing the radio program which WIS had at the time. At the time WIS had four radio program. One for the Vietnamese language, one for the Spanish, one for Italian, one for Greek languages. And, it was funded by WIS (Office for Women) and those program were once a week every, only half an hour, broadcast on 5BI, and so, I got sort of pulled aside to do a project to review those program. And, the reason that at the outcome of that project is was that if we were to continue with that, those program, then the languages that broadcast to the community would be limited to only four communities group. In the meantime, out in the community there was far much more community group than that. And so the program ceased in 1996. However, the funding of that, allocated our program was to support community groups who have had radio program for their community for us to give them the information and they used their, their language skill to convey it into their language and we sort of supporting them financially for that particular piece of segment. And that went on, I believe went on for about a year or so, before that was just totally die off.

MURPHY: Could you tell me a little bit about what you liked about working at the Women's Information Service?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: What I like working at the Women Information Service is that I feel that the supportiveness that amongst the women themselves. And also that the advantage of linking with the, the Office for Women back then was the Women Advisor, that given a woman a voice to sort of fit into government to make policy, to make changes.

MURPHY: Very good, and when, when you were at WIS could you tell me some of the aims and objectives of WIS at the time? What were they aiming to achieve?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Empowering women, providing information for women to make their own choices. I think that those are the key objective and also that you give woman independent tools, to become independent and therefore we run a lot of information sessions. We want information to become readily available internet was, internet classes were teaching women how to accessing it and we run many information sessions on finance and laws and all sorts.

MURPHY: Was there, when you were at WIS, was there a hierarchy in the workplace, sort of levels of management really?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: In any workplace there will be hierarchy. When I was first started there was only the Women Advisor, that who was sort of taken the role of filtering through the government. But then after that, that particular position was abolished in creating the office for women. And then of course there will be the level of the directors, the managers and then team leader and so on. And so in any, in any organisations there will be a hierarchy. One thing that I like about WIS is that on the ground where you're working there's no hierarchy. And so, yes behind the scene, politics and whatever, there always are, but in term of working on the ground, and we were just all equal.

MURPHY: What, when you were working in the shop front, can you remember what the atmosphere was like when you volunteered and when you worked there?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: When I was first started as a volunteer, I, back then, WIS at the Institute Building, a beautiful, old building. Very, very high ceiling and sort of, people, women, can just walk in anytime and we were, everybody was just there because its only one room, everybody was just there. When, when we did have to move across to The Station Arcade, I have to say that at first I was not happy because I thought that, given that, that the atmosphere at the Institute Building is friendly, is easy for people to accept because is, although, is because its everything in one room, it could be messy but that's part of life. But when you go across to the Station Arcade everything would just become classy. And, and for me I thought that the women would not feel comfortable to come in because, in particular there was women that who do not feel confident when they see something that's a bit classy, they will feel hesitant to come in. But my mind changed when we actually moved into Station Arcade. I felt that yes, although it does look classy, but the attitude of the workers and volunteers. When I said, sorry, when I use the word worker, I mean paid and unpaid staff who on duty at the time. That they friendly and they welcoming, and so women can come in easily, and so then I thought they deserve it. They deserve to have a better atmosphere, a nicer place to come into, rather than the place that messy like back then was in the Institute.

MURPHY: When, when you were volunteering and work there, do you remember some of the names of the other workers and volunteers you worked with?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: There was Norma, Norma Booth, there was together with her, I forgot the other woman name, but the two of them was very, very close together. There was Heather Beckman, Mel Tonkin, Gill, Pat Gill

I think, Willmot, Jo Willmot, Luisa Sheehan, Rose, Rose, what's her name, Rose, Sophie Rose, her name back then was not Rose, but afterwards she changed Rose, Stella Hellender, Renee Wills, Barbara Wood, the admin person, Pat Ellis, I don't know whether Pat started back then.

MURPHY: Well Pat is still there.

NGUYEN-NAVAS: No, no I mean back in the time that when we were at the Institute, back in the time when we were at the Institute, sort of like earlier time. Then when we go across to, then we go across to the Arcade, oh God, I can see her, very slim, very tall woman from Port Lincoln, I forgot her name. Very softly spoken as well, she worked for the library, then after that she got a job in the library. Wendy Thompson, Michelle Carrol, Shannon, my God, what's her last name? I forgot. And of course sitting in front of me Caroline Pascoe and a lot of other people that I can't remember their names!

MURPHY: That's a fantastic, that's a fantastic list. Do you remember who the co-ordinator was as the time when you were there?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: The co-ordinator? Well yeah, back then when were the Woman Advisor, then there was the co-ordinator. The Woman Advisor, when I first started was Carol Treloar, and then , and of course before Carol Treloar, there was Deborah McCulloch, and then at the time co-ordinator were Andi Sebastian, when I started it Linda Matthew, and after Linda Matthew left, then, ah sorry, Linda Matthew become, is it a co-ordinator or the manager? I cannot remember well, but, then Gudrun, Gudrun Boessler, she passed away now, she did acting as a co-ordinator for a little while and then Vaia Pro, Proios also coming in. Sophia, Sophia, what's her last name?

[00:15:10]

PASCOE: Allouache.

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Allouache was the manager before I left. Yeah, there was, there was a period, that there was period that WIS has a lot of co-ordinator and manager in and out.

MURPHY: That's a very compressive list, thank you, that's fantastic. Would you be able to tell me what a typical day at WIS was like, for example, what would just happen day to day?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Ah, day to day? A lot of people on the phone, a lot of calls, sometime it sort of like coming in one day coming in with call only DV, and we just one call after another, and then someday there was just call coming in with financial issues, just one call after another. And that was the pattern. It was sort of like sometime we just seemed like the whole day was just that topic and someday we just all mixed. Some day were just really distressful, because the nature of the call, I suppose the nature of the service, so we have to learn quickly of how to leave behind when we leave the door.

MURPHY: WIS has also seen many changes over the years, what were some of the changes that were implemented when you were there?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Ah, the moving from the Institute to the Station Arcade, the change from the Woman Advisor to the Office for Women and as I mentioned earlier, the temporary position of so many managers and so many co-ordinators! There was some period there.

MURPHY: Do you think the service...

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Ah, in term of the service itself, we changing from just information over phone to information over internet and running internet classes and all, yeah so that, that is a big change.

MURPHY: It has been. Do you think the changes have been positive?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Oh definitely, definitely the change, we, we had to change by, with the flow of, the flow of the technology and the flow of the world and I think that is, is, is a marvellous change.

MURPHY: Do you think that WIS is still relevant to women today? And in what ways?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: If you look at the sense of women who able and capable to access Internet maybe is not so much of a need. But if you look at the emotional support I would say yes. WIS still needed to be there to provide a support.

MURPHY: I'd like to talk about some of the clients that used WIS now. What memories do you have of women who came in, or called in for information, for example the backgrounds of the clients, as in their demographics, older, younger, CALD, Aboriginal, that sort of thing. What type of women used WIS?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: We, there were all sorts. I don't want to say all sort because it sound like a thing, rather than human, but there were women who were coming into WIS, they were all different, ranging ages, and also that range in background. I had --- that unless you have a worker who specifically for that particular culture than you attract people of that particular culture coming in. So whenever that Jo Willmot was around or the Aboriginal, or the other one, the Aboriginal workers, her last name Davis, her first name I forgot, that, and then Ann, and then another one Ann, I believe Ann still there? Is she still there? Aboriginal worker or Tanya Hosch, yeah, very famous woman now, holding a very high position now. She's also one of the worker there. Then Aboriginal people coming in. And so, so women from all walk of life, not, I mean, not that we, we asked them their background or their economical background, however, when they coming in with the issue that they bring about, there were all

ranges . Either economic or educations or background, cultural background, all sorts.

[00:20:30]

MURPHY: You mentioned before that some days on the phone you would have all DV, [domestic violence] or sometimes you'd have all finance. Can you remember some other types of queries you might have gotten when you were there?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Employment, legal, even recipe, even recipe, because back then, Internet was not available, so they would just ring up, 'Hello, how to cook this, or how to prepare that', and that kind of thing. So we just used the brains of all the women around the room to answer the question.

MURPHY: Were there times when you weren't able to help? Some women or someone, and why weren't you able to help them, if there were times when you couldn't? Can you remember?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: I, I, I don't remember specifically, but no doubt there were time that I would not be able to help someone. But if I'm not able to help someone, somebody else would be able to. But at the same time I have to say that given my look, Asian, right? Sometimes the client coming in, they don't feel comfortable to, to, use (talk to) me, I mean not to use me, but to, access me as a worker that to assist them. For whatever reason, I don't want to name, it's only my assumption.

MURPHY: Fair enough. During your time at WIS, so you mentioned you started in 1987, what were the important social issues of the day?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Domestic violence and 'till today still Domestic Violence. Not change. But then maybe it was taboo, now a little bit more out in open, but still exists.

MURPHY: Oh yeah. Ok, I'd like to talk a bit about the WIS processes, and you did mention before about the Internet, when did WIS bring in the internet?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Oh my God, I can't remember!

MURPHY: So you started...

NGUYEN-NAVAS: I remember, I remember that WIS started the Internet before we moved to, just before we moved to the Station Arcade. When we moved to Station Arcade it was fully set up but when we was back at the Institute were about to set up, but it was limited number (of computers and space). But I cannot remember when.

MURPHY: So, you started

NGUYEN-NAVAS: I cannot remember the year,

MURPHY: No, that's fine. You started at the Institute in 1987, and they didn't have the Internet there.

NGUYEN-NAVAS: No

MURPHY: So how did you go about getting the information you needed to help the women when there was no Internet?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: The knowledge of all the women in the room, so we exchanged information from one to another. And also that cards, books, CISA, Community Information, what's it? South Australia? I can't remember what it stands for, CISA, so it's the data base that produced by CISA that we used that data base to sort of making referrals of services.

MURPHY: When the Internet, oh sorry

NGUYEN-NAVAS: and a lot of that relied on knowledge, experience and skills of women around the room.

MURPHY: So when the Internet did come in, how did it change things and how did it impact the women working at WIS?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: I suppose that information available readily, but at the same time, it's not, but then, then at the time the information were first started on the internet, it's not like now, although the information was readily but it's not as much as its now. And also even that the information was on internet is still whether is reliable source or not, is still a question and so we, we still using part of the internet to assist the women but then at the same time we still using the women's brain to assist the women.

[00:25:36]

MURPHY: Fair enough. How, how do you think the introduction of the Internet affected your relationship with the women that came in. Did it change your relationship in the way you gave them information and the way you spoke to them?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: No personally I don't think so...

MURPHY: No...

NGUYEN-NAVAS: I don't think there was any change at all.

MURPHY: And, just one last question about the Internet. Were you involved at all in the women's Internet access program?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Yes

MURPHY: Yes, and what was your involvement in that program?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: I, well like anybody else, we all take turn to show women how to access internet and in fact I was the one that putting the kit together.

MURPHY: Fabulous, thank you. I'd just like to ask you some questions about the Women Information Service and the community. Were there any kinds of women's and community groups that WIS had a connection with while you were at WIS? For example, rural outreach, the field days or talks to different community groups?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: We, we did we took all the opportunity to set up stall, to set up information stall at field days and all and at the time I, when we were still in the Institute building I work one day outreach out at Salisbury, because the people up the North that they not coming in so I based in the women's, based in the Migrant Resource Centre in Salisbury. Once a week I would go up there and in fact now talking about it I remember I was out here, carrying my daughter, my younger daughter.

MURPHY: Did you go on any of the rural outreach...

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Yes,

MURPHY: Oh you did?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: we all sort of take turn ---. go to places we also that assigned, we were assigned with regional area, so I was responsible for the Far North, Coober Pedy, Port Lincoln, Roxby Down...

MURPHY: Oh, ok, did you go out there often?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Once a year

MURPHY: Once a year, and when you went out there, what sort of response did you get from the women? How could you help the women? What sort of information were they after?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: When we, when I go out to the rural area, I usually would just keyed up with the TAFE in the local area, to set up group that tap into the group of student or child care centre or school and go and talk to

group. And usually the rural not much different than the issue of the women in city, however, the distance that can be a barrier for them in term of facing the domestic violence. Once woman that live in the rural area, they have, they, if, they are a victim of domestic violence it difficult for them to flee because its only one bus and if she not able to get on that bus for whatever reason she cannot get out. And in particular in the rural area is that everybody knowing each other. The policeman also knowing everybody. So, the woman feel more isolated to get support.

MURPHY: Are you aware of the WIS support group at all?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Oh yes.

MURPHY: And why it was established?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Yes, they meet every month back then,

MURPHY: Yes, they did and did you work with WIS support group representative women's organisations at all?

[00:30:04]

NGUYEN-NAVAS: When they come in to the meeting, I might see them say hello, they go off and that was it... *(comment added by interviewee – Now look back I remember the support group was made of a group representatives of financial, legal services, etc. Through them WIS organised various forums).*

MURPHY: And that was it, ok. Over the years WIS has some collaborated with numerous organisations to provide programs that assist women. For example, legal advice with the Women's Legal Service or modern banking for older women. Were you involved in organising or did you participate in any of these or any other programs?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Oh definitely, we all did, on part or another, we all did

MURPHY: So what, what types of programs did you participate in, in particular?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: All of that, all of what you mentioned, it was to do with finance, to do with law, to do with employment, to do with internet, to do whatever, we all involved in part of that because its not just organising once and that's it. We repeating it. And so because we repeating then, yes, last time somebody did, the next time somebody else did.

MURPHY: Can you remember a particular program that was, that you were involved in that was particularly successful? At all?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Well, I, I think that if you talk about successful I would say that the internet, the information sessions, we also sometime the responding to, I now talk about it, the surrogate forum. We did organise a surrogate forum.

MURPHY: Can you tell a bit more about that?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: I remember vaguely that we, is it at the back of the Institute building, that's, that particular forum, there was a panel, I cannot remember who was in the panel now, but Linda Matthew was one of the person there, and were talking about surrogate mother. We were closely with the relinquish, relinquish mother group, I cannot remember, I remember the name of the group correctly or not, the women who running that group, is still, I can see her face, there was so many forum that we organise, apart from those information sessions, we also that, one, also the forum that to deal with like, time come close to election, give women opportunity that to hear about platform a particular political party (*clarification added by interviewee – I mean political parties' election policies not platform of a particular party*) and whatever for them to make decision. I cannot remember the name but, yeah,

MURPHY: Thank you, that was fantastic. Finally, is there anything else that you would like to add or say, or make known?

NGUYEN-NAVAS: I remember quite clearly one of, one of the women that I help, and this is back, the time that when we were at the Station Arcade. She came in around 4 o'clock in the afternoon, was very distress. It was related to a work issue and I, at the time, we closed shop at 6 o'clock. 6 o'clock she was still very upset and so I would just say to all the others just leave and I will be fine. And so I would just lock the door behind me and we just stayed back and talked to the women. And I have to admit, that was woman would just talk, talk, talk, talk, talk and so 7 o'clock came. The cleaners start to come in and I said to her I'm sorry, my husband already sort of waiting to pick me up, and he was just circling outside and you can see that at Station Arcade, you can see because all clear and so that I could see that he circling outside. But I couldn't leave the woman, because she was still distressed, but by the time the cleaner about to come, she was better, so then I said to her, that I'm sorry, but the cleaner is about to come in and I have to go. I have to leave now too. And strangely she said to me that before I go I want to tell you something. And, then she start, I didn't know that she was a Psychic, she start telling me about the house that I live in. She described the house I live in. What is look like and all. And it was scary, it was so scary and she, and she told me that the woman who lived in the house was waiting for me to become the owner of that house. And I, I, after that session left, I have to say, I have to say, even now I remember quite clearly what she said, although it was really, really scary. And that was the very first time in my life I have ever experience of talking to a Psychic.

MURPHY: Thank you Lien, for sharing your time, for sharing with us about your time at WIS, it was lovely to hear your story.

NGUYEN-NAVAS: Thank you.

MURPHY: Thank you.

[00:36:46]

END OF INTERVIEW