RESEARCH ONLINE

Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History

Volume 2
Issue 5 *Illawarra Unity*

Article 4

1-1-2002

Setting Up of the Wollongong Women's Centre

Val Dolan

Follow this and additional works at: http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity

Recommended Citation
Dolan, Val, Setting Up of the Wollongong Women's Centre, *Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, 2(5), 2002, 15-21.
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/vol2/iss5/4

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

RESEARCH ONLINE

Setting Up of the Wollongong Women's Centre

Abstract
I n the late 1970s representatives of eleven groups of Illawarra women met to discuss the need for a place that provided feminist services to women. Other cities had such places ... Sydney and Newcastle … but Wollongong had nothing. One of the things we did was liaise with some of those people and find out they set their centres up. The setting up of the Wollongong Women's Centre in Stewart Street, Wollongong was a remarkable effort on the part of an energetic group of disparate (and sometimes desperate) women. It took just a year from the thought to the reality – April 1979 to April 1980, and this year was packed with activity from individuals, small groups and the larger body. Now I've learnt something tonight, the Working Women's Charter group had probably been thinking about for it a bit longer, but I'm going to talk about when those eleven groups got together.

This journal article is available in Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History: http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/vol2/iss5/4

Setting Up of the Wollongong Women's Centre

Speech by Val Dolan delivered to Forum of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History on 21st November 2001

In the late 1970s representatives of eleven groups of Illawarra women met to discuss the need for a place that provided feminist services to women. Other cities had such places ... Sydney and Newcastle ... but Wollongong had nothing. One of the things we did was liaise with some of those people and find out they set their centres up. The setting up of the Wollongong Women's Centre in Stewart Street, Wollongong was a remarkable effort on the part of an energetic group of disparate (and sometimes desperate) women. It took just a year from the thought to the reality – April 1979 to April 1980, and this year was packed with activity from individuals, small groups and the larger body. Now I've learnt something tonight, the Working Women's Charter group had probably been thinking about for it a bit longer, but I'm going to talk about when those eleven groups got together.

Val Dolan ensures visitors sign the guest book at the opening of WWIC

I'm the elder daughter of a mother who worked in a fruit shop and a father who came to the area attempting to escape the depression. My mother's family were working class labour with my grandfather working in local coal mines until his death by drowning in the 1920s. One uncle worked in the steelworks and another in the mines, a third raced greyhounds and another competed in bike races. They were pretty typical working class guys from this area. I think that the fact that my mother was working in a fruit shop and was paid very minimal wages was significant for my history. Most of my female cousins worked in the factories that were still here in the 1950s. To my mother's great credit and against all family traditions I was allowed to stay at Wollongong High School to obtain my Leaving Certificate and then went on to Bathurst Teachers' College. I became the first in a large family to have the opportunity for some formal education. I say formal because some members of my family availed themselves of education through the labour movement, which was much more common back in those days others were widely read and some subscribed to overseas socialist publications.

When I began teaching women received 75 per cent of the male rate. To my shame I took no part in the struggle for a just wage but later met some of the wonderful women who had. These feminist activists told their fascinating stories to us one Saturday afternoon not long after the Women's Centre opened. Twenty years after leaving Teachers College (married to a shift working wharfie, with two children and teaching fulltime) I returned to study at Wollongong University. This was in 1976, shortly after free university education had been introduced and there were many mature aged students taking advantage of this. As a representative of these part time students I was elected to the Student Representative Council (SRC) as Women's Officer, a position that was to be invaluable to setting up the Women's Centre. Two Women's Collective groups were set up on campus, one for day students run by Patsy Campbell and Judy Willis and the other for evening students, which I took responsibility, for booking rooms etc.

At about the same time as this, a small item appeared in the *Mercury* inviting interested people to attend a meeting to discuss the case of a Maitland women who had been imprisoned after giving birth to a child in a pan toilet - the woman, Judith Mitchell, had been arrested on Christmas Eve, her two children left with her parents and was now in prison. It was Avril, Ruby Makula's daughter, who had first noted the item [about Judith Mitchell] in the newspaper. A group met regularly at Ruby Makula's home at

Fairy Meadow. Many people who were to later be supportive of a women's centre, met through this group. Colin Hollis came as a member of Amnesty International. Liz Hilton who worked at the university came too. After finding out the full circumstances of the case we set out to seek justice for this woman. Posters appeared all over town including the Court House and the Railway Station. Mike Morrisey and I went out one night with a huge bucket of wallpaper paste and even pasted a moving bus! As Women's Officer on the SRC I had access to student publications through Murray (now married to Sheri Escobar) but then the editor of *Tertangala*. I'm a bit of a frustrated journalist and enjoyed dashing off articles for these publications. I also attended meetings at various Sydney universities to speak about the case. At this stage young, feminist solicitor, Virginia Bell became involved. Other women staged sit-ins at State Attorney-General, Frank Walker's office and accosted Premier Neville Wran at every opportunity. People contacted doctors for expert medical opinion. Eventually Judith Mitchell was freed from prison and completely exonerated.

A lot of members of the Women's Centre went to the Women and Labour Conference in Melbourne in 1980. Penny Griffith a *Mercury* journalist and I presented a paper on the success of the campaign here. Ruby was supposed to go, but she was undergoing surgery for aggressive cancer. She was supposed to be one of the three speakers who presented that paper, but she told me the night before we were going that she was going into hospital. Our action became the subject of the *Coming Out Show* on ABC radio and it was only then that we each got the full picture of what we had achieved.

The Judith Mitchell Case had been the perfect training ground for political activity. It had also provided an opportunity for networking. It was after this success that we set about working towards a Women's Centre. The Labor Party was in power in NSW and an opportunity to lobby was easier for members of the ALP. I joined. It was Ruby who persuaded me to join. I was one of the people who listed all the branches in the area and in twos or threes we went to the branch meetings and asked to speak about our vision, having first written to the branch secretary. We asked for letters of support. This was universally successful. Our attempts to convince some of the male service clubs were not so pleasant. We set ourselves a cracking pace, four of us, all teachers, even went to a high school camp at Stanwell Tops to spread the word amongst, not teachers, but the kids that were there so they knew we were in existence.

It is impossible to tell the story of a year of hard work in a few

pages but there are some funny stories that should not be forgotten.

Rex Jackson, Member for Bulli, was proving difficult to see so a group of northern suburbs women made an early morning appointment at his home. He'd apparently forgotten they were coming and conducted the interview in his pyjamas. So when they reported back to us it was pretty hilarious. When he did eventually come to the centre, we did really sensible things like cover up all the pro-abortion posters with big bunches of flowers, because we knew what he was like.

We were invited to speak to Wollongong Council ... the meeting was open but only two could present our case, which was for the use of a Council building for a 'peppercorn rent'. The Deputy Mayor had to declare himself ineligible to vote, as it was his daughter, Beth Parker, who presented our case. Wollongong is such a small society really.

The representatives of the eleven women's groups met regularly, almost every Saturday afternoon, at the Non-Sexist Resource Centre in Smith Street. We left each meeting with a list of things to achieve by the next meeting and miraculously these objectives were usually met by the next meeting. Many women were working full-time, some were studying and all had domestic responsibilities. We invited members of the State Women's Advisory Committee down to meet with us and hear of our plans. These women had the ear of top politicians and were an invaluable help. About a month before we opened they sent us $5000 from their funding to furnish the Centre. They were really good contacts to have.

Many other community facilities came into being at least in part because of our example: the Migrant Resource Centre, the Aboriginal Centre and the Warilla Women's Health Centre. Once we got started we had always tried to be inclusive of all women. When the Aboriginal Centre first set up in Kenny Street it took out a lease with Arrow Real Estate. This was Frank Arkell's (then Lord Mayor) business. They had selected the property because it had plenty of off street parking. On moving in they were told the lease covered the house but not the yard and they did not have the right to the parking area. Irene remembers this; she said they were paying a pretty exorbitant rent for the time, about $150. Women from the Centre obtained legal advice and joined members of the Aboriginal Centre to get full use of the rental property. I believe a few threats of exposure to the media were involved.

We had not always had the support of the media. After the first International Women's Day march from the Women's Centre

the *Mercury* ran a story about hairy legged and hairy arm-pitted women who weren't behaving in ways that they saw as appropriate. In the early hours of the morning, with a friend keeping my car running, I stuck the article and a large banner WOMEN ARE OFFENDED: WOMEN ARE ANGRY across the doors and sealed them with PVA glue! [Cheer from the audience] And someone who was there later, said they couldn't get the door open, when the workers came to work … but I didn't hang about to see that.

Another case that the Women's Centre became involved with because of my position as Women's Officer on the SRC at Wollongong University was a particularly nasty rape case. The young woman involved came from Stanwell Park, and having missed her last transport home after Thursday night shopping went with her boyfriend to hitch a lift home. The two guys who offered her a lift took her to a road off Mt Ousley, stripped her lower half and took it in turns to rape her until tossing her out of the vehicle. She made her way back to the road in the dark getting severely scratched by lantana on the way only to have several motorists drive by not wanting to pick up a half-naked female. When she eventually reported to the police they had no questions about her telling the truth. They had received messages of a naked female on Mt Ousley. They were also aware of the road where it was obvious by the discarded women's clothing that women had been taken there before. However, in their infinite wisdom, the police decided the victim was in the wrong. Their verdict was that she should report to them every Thursday night!

I went to the Police Station to intercede on her behalf. I was treated with disdain by both male and female police and followed out to my car. The police walked around my car trying to find fault but couldn't because I always kept it serviced and kept good tyres etc on it. That was one of the reasons I was chosen to go to the police station. They said "Because you've got good clothes Val, and a good car … you go to the police station, you go because they won't be able to pick on you". So I said "fine, as Women's Officer I should do it anyway"; that was from younger people who'd had experience with the police … they knew what they'd do and that's why they got me to go. Anyway, the police said to me, "We'll get you". My confident and foolish reply was, "You can't because I don't do anything wrong". Wasn't I naïve! I knew George Petersen vaguely through the Folk Club and told him what had happened to me. He gave me some good advice, which I was able to use quite soon.

Colin Markham and Mary Paris were running a Labor Party newspaper, *District Voice*, at the time. They ran the story that I

had written; it took up a half page of the paper. It was very explicit, everything that had happened. The story was also published in *Tertangala* [Wollongong University student paper]. I wrote the complete story to every local politician, to the Premier and the Police Minister. At some point Women's Centre member, Maureen Magee, sent the article to *Tribune* and it came out on the back page complete with graphic of two large pigs standing over a cowering woman … with my name on it. But I didn't know this had happened, you'll hear later.

At work one day (I was working at Koonawarra Primary School) I received a phone call from the police. They wanted me to come in that afternoon. I told them I had family responsibilities after work and had no time. The response was that unless I agreed to come they'd send a wagon to collect me and they made comments like: "Val, you'll cause a bit of a stir, won't you, when the wagon comes out to get you while you're on playground duty" … if this is not intimidation? I agreed to the next afternoon. I had an appointment with Detective Inspector Wilson in the offices above the Westpac Bank in Crown Street. So I networked and a formidable bunch of women accompanied me to that meeting; Monica Chalmers, Ruby Makula, Maureen Magee and others all stepped out of the lift with me. Me at the head, and Inspector Detective Wilson got a big shock! At the end of my questioning D.I. Wilson took a copy of *Tribune* out of a drawer and shoved it at me! That was the first time I'd seen it. The outcome was I was in the clear because I had chosen my words very carefully, I hadn't exaggerated, I told it how it was. Next time I was to ask for assistance from the detective inspector before setting out on a writing campaign. Who knows what would have happened if I had gone alone? When I got out Monica said to me, "Val, if you hadn't got home to your kids that night the trade unions were all coming out in support" – I felt so protected, it was wonderful. I don't know if it was true or not, but I've told some people about the trade unions threatening to come out and they've said, "that's terrible!"… conservative people. I said "No it's not, it's just so good". I was so thrilled about that.

What lessons were there for us at the Women's Centre? Women could only be protected with an awareness campaign. One of our members was a social worker from Wollongong Hospital. She supplied us with the literature so that we knew how women should be treated ideally. We became involved in the Rape Crisis Centre campaign and lobbied so that all rape victims could expect humane treatment. We ran a public forum on RAPE and invited the police. This was well publicised and well attended by the public. We also had a public forum on ABORTION with speakers

from feminist abortion clinics. They spoke to a packed auditorium of the old Workers' Club.

I failed Women and Society that year and had to repeat the subject! I didn't feel a failure. I'm grateful for the wonderful women that I met through the Women's Centre. I came into it politically naïve and learned so much from the supportive, activist women who became my friends.

There's so much more, so much more. It was such a wonderful time, wasn't it, Irene?