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Discussion at the Meeting …

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Abstract
Discussion at the Meeting … following the presentations by Irene Arrowsmith and Val Dolan Discussion on a number of different campaigns and issues included…

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following the presentations by Irene Arrowsmith and Val Dolan

Discussion on a number of different campaigns and issues included...

Irene: The chicken shop, that was scandalous, we didn't get much media coverage on that because we could get sued. He had a small chicken shop in Crown Street, an atrocious man - talk about sexual harassment. The commonwealth employment service kept sending him girls every couple of days. (We) painted outside footpath, glued up his doors (every night); (we) went in the shop and made a commotion.

Val: P.... E.... had the right as union organiser to look at his books. She had a complete record of the turnover, because they signed the book when they started. She basically told him to close down and get out of town. Sent him back to Balgownie. He ended up very frightened.

The role of the Women's Centre...

Irene: It was a place where women could come to find out things, not a refuge. The Smith Family had a refuge.

Val: Taxi drivers all knew where refuges were before we opened. Women used to have to go and find a taxi driver that they could talk to before the WWIC opened. They (the taxi drivers) said "Oh Good!" when we opened, "now you go to a feminist place to ask where to go". Because it was very secret, ...to keep men away. ...I suppose the logical thing, when leaving home is to ring a taxi, then ask them where the refuge is. There must have been some really good taxi drivers, to keep that under their hat, not tell the fellas. Women told us that was how they had found out about it before.

Irene: We don't think much has changed with domestic violence, but looking back on those things it has, attitudes to domestic violence have changed to a certain extent. And protection, there was no protection... and the woman was always blamed. ....

Irene: I..... R..... whose son had murdered her husband. The son got off and she was jailed for a long time. And people used to say, well why didn't she leave him. Everytime she tried to leave him he went and got her, if she got a job he used to go and smash the windows and doors in wherever she was working and she'd find somewhere to live and he'd go and smash that up too. In the end she was probably demented.

Irene: We often sent someone up to the courthouse to get AVO's and things. We often used to drive women and children to court....

Links between family, friends...

Val: My interest in this case (the Judith Mitchell Case) goes right back to my mother saying when I was pregnant saying to me "now look, don't go to the toilet by yourself when you're in the later stages of your pregnancy because giving birth is very much like bearing down, like going to the toilet you see". She said she knew people who have given birth in the toilet. When I read about the case my self, I rang my mum. Mum and I actually went to the first meeting ever. And I think, in all women's experience, you know someone, who knows someone whose had an experience like that, and for that woman, who had two or three living children to then be accused of killing her child deliberately was just so outrageous. The toilet collectors just got the baby, and came around and said to her "did you give birth in the toilet" and she said yes, because she was just so traumatised by the whole thing. Then when we got the experts witnesses going, people just said she wasn't in any condition to be questioned when this happened. It was just so simplified, she was just being treated in the legal manner. It was just so awful. On the tapes she talks about when she was in prison, and then they moved her somewhere else, and there were people going to visit her, and they'd miss each other, passing each other on the bridge over the Hawkesbury. They could see the wagon. It's a bit like the keystone cops on the tape. Everyone just had their job to do. I didn't ever meet her. She came down and stayed with Liz Hilton for a couple of weeks after she got out, because she just needed to get herself together. I didn't personally meet her. But we all did so much, networking, building for all of us. Taught me how to organise politically, and that gave us strength.

Val: My son was sixteen; he used to cut the lawns at the centre. He'd go past the window with the lawn mower and stick his head in the window and say "I thought feminism was about equality". I often paid him pocket money to mow the lawn. ...He's grown up a really good bloke, I think the women's centre had an effect on him too.

Feeling good about one's self...

Val: Someone came to the bar looking for [a candidate for] an SRC representative. I asked did they have a rep for mature aged students, and he said no, but you'd make a good women's officer. I didn't realise at the time that that was a fairly unpopular position. Until I spoke to people who'd held the office before me. We'd set up a women's room at the university and held meetings of WWC ... day and night groups ... community members as well.

Those people! They accepted me totally, when I had to give my report at the end of year, they said , I'd made all these things happen, it was not just things that had happened on campus. The double page of *Tertangala* ... they got advantage from me being there. It went in to the community really well.

Experience that they were able to pass on...

Val: Well I know that from the Judith Mitchell case, that there were at least two more cases that came up in the paper. We rang up from the Women's Centre, once and both Ruby and I talked to the solicitor who was handling the case, we rang the court and found out who it was, and said here's the precedent and they rang back and said great stuff. And then later on there was a very similar case, we wrote to them and said look at this, this is the way to get them out.

How 'others' felt about the 'type' of women who belonged to the Women's Centre...

Irene: The women from the Women's Miners' Auxillary (sic), it was called the Ladies Miners' Auxillary... They were very nervous of women's liberation and the outrageous behaviour. Sally (Bowen) coaxed them here I think. They always met in their own demountable. They didn't have much to do with the house, they were very nervous of it, as were their husbands. And all the trade union men. Because it was trade union policy the men all supported it, but they didn't like it. They were very nervous about

> having anything to do with 'that type of woman'. And I can remember ....I've recently been to some peace demonstrations, demonstrations about Afghanistan and there was a man there who was a prominent trade union activist. He's retired now, but still going to all these things. ...I remember we had a dispute at Woolworths, when he threw someone over a fence. ....I said, "I'm off now. I'm going down to the Women's Centre" and he said "Are you, I didn't think you'd be in that sort of thing Irene". He was supporting that policy (trade union policy), but didn't approve (of that type of woman).

And on recording history...

Irene: To put it down as history, you've got to put it down as it actually happened.

Editorial Comments (Frances Laneyrie)

Val and Irene were both concerned that their accounts may not be what "really happened" because their accounts were partial and from their memory. Val felt she was still seeing bits of the story that she hadn't thought about before. Early in her speech she exclaimed that she had just realised after listening to Irene that "the Wollongong Working Women's Charter Committee had probably been thinking about it (setting up a Centre) for a bit longer".

Putting down the history as it actually happened is difficult. In places their personal accounts agreed with each other but clashed with details from official records such as minutes or submissions, and both acknowledged limitations of some of the existing written sources. Irene had earlier explained to me with amusement the group's pragmatic approach to obtaining resources, such as the house in Stewart Street, illustrating "particular constructions" of facts in documents such as the submission to Council for rental of premises (Arrowsmith, 15th September, 2001). These stories help provide some of the context necessary to understand the history of the WWIC. We would also miss the richness of experiences, the personal energy and the importance of connection between what appear to be separate events that these speeches reveal. Hearing Val's story of gluing to-gether the doors of the *Mercury* adds another layer of richness to comments about the anger of women toward the *Mercury* after the article on the 1979 IWD march.

One of the major aims of the WWIC was to obtain a space for the use of the expanding number of women's groups that were

emerging during the late 1970s. Lenore Armour in 1982 explains that previous attempts to set up space, such as a refuge for women had failed; "I believe due the fact that there was no interaction between women's groups". Lenore described the decade leading up to the opening of the Stewart Street Centre as one of "consciousness raising". While acknowledging the work of long time female activists before the 1970s, Lenore claimed that "at this time we were starting to understand that there were issues specifically relevant to women and they *were* important" (Armour, 1982). Val and Irene's speeches offer personal insights these claims. Val stated that she'd never done anything feminist before becoming women's officer with the SRC, and her personal story reflects a changing political awareness during this period. Irene's stories give us insights about the social pressures at a personal level, such as the male trade unionist not approving of her involvement with the WWIC and pressures to conform to 'proper womanly behaviour' that were confronting women in existing groups.

In 1978 after the success of the Free Judith Mitchell Campaign, many members fired by the sense of "power and friendship" (Dolan, 1999, *WWIC 20th Anniversary Tape*) formed the Wollongong Women's Collective. This was soon followed by the emergence of the ACTU Working Women's Charter group that gave the women a focus for collaboration on issues which affected women. "We had started to see the advantages of combining forces" (Armour, 1982). This combining of forces in the stories presented in this edition of *Unity* focus on three different groups of women. Those belonging to a) the trade unions, b) existing women's groups and c) women from the University of Wollongong.

One of the tactics women trade unionists have used to further the interests of women in Australia had been to organise separate political spaces for themselves both inside and outside the trade union movement (Curtin, 1999: 37). Curtin claims that particularly during the 1970's, this allowed women not only to utilise mechanisms already existing but to supplement this strategy with "explicitly feminist discourses and policy platforms" (1999:37). Inside the union movement women's committees, special courses, conferences and networks began to emerge. In Wollongong (see Table One: *Timeline:A quick reference to feminist activities*) we see new groups becoming active within the trade union movement from late 1978 with the emergence of the WWWCC. Existing Wollongong women's groups, such as the Union of Australian Women, Combined Women's Miners Auxiliary and the IWD Committee, each had their own separate focus. For example during 1979 the "Miners Women's Ancillaries" (sic) were actively campaigning for the "provision of public nursing homes

and adequate care of the aged" (*Community Voice,* May 29th 1979:15) but were changing under the influence of the influx of new ideas to incorporate some specifically feminist issues (Armour, 1982, Arrowsmith, 15th September, 2001; also see South Coast International Women's Day Committee Broadsheet). Groups at the University such as the Marxist Study Group, and Women in Society Courses were contributing to organised feminist activism, such as organising the Free Judith Mitchell Campaign, they were active in the emergence of a number of politically active women's group such as the Wollongong Women's Collective and the controversial 'women's room', participating in other feminist initiatives such as the IWD march as well as in broader social issues, such as the anti-uranium marches in April 1979 (*Community Voice*, 29th May 1979:15).

In Wollongong, the separation between women who belonged to the Unions, the university and existing women's groups is not straightforward. Val was a member of the university community and a trade union member but new to feminism, Irene was an active member of existing groups and a trade union member and an experienced activist. Ruby was a member of the PSA, a member of the university community and active with a number of women's groups. Irene identified a number of differences between women involved in centre including: "the softly spoken university women" and the "loud working class women, who were used to yelling at kids all day" (WWIC Anniversary video, 1999; WWIC minutes for 26/6/99); the conservative "Miner's Ladies" and the "younger ones who don't care about respectability". Val pointed to differences within the University women. She identified how differences were used strategically, for example in her story about a rape case, the younger students felt she 'looked' more conservative and would be a better person for dealing with police.

Any story about of the centre and the women (and men) who participated, is at the same time complex, multiple, fluid and only partial. Not only were the campaigns and committee's individuals participated in sometimes different, so are their backgrounds, their personal lives and their politics and, the way they perceive their involvement with the WWIC changes. However, without these personal stories the history would not be as textured, we would miss much of the detail about the different class, gender and politically based aims and strategies for achieving feminist outcomes at both the grassroots and political levels. The establishment of the WWIC is one of the 'enduring achievements' of this colourful and dynamic period in Wollongong's Labour History. We would like to thank Val, Irene and Lenore for sharing these stories with us.