

Stories of working with community in Western Australia



Transcript

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Helen Cattalini pictured at Murdoch University, 2nd March 2004

DP Thanks very much Helen for agreeing to talk to us about your history of involvement in Community Development in WA.

HC Quite all right. My pleasure.

DP Can I ask you to begin by telling us about where your involvement in community development began?

HC Well my interest actually came during my social work studies. We had this unit called Community Development and I never, I knew I was interested in it but during my studies, never got quite a good grasp of what it really meant and I think that, at that time, it was sort of a new concept that was being brought into such studies as well. So I think the people who were try-



ing to teach it didn't have that good a grasp of it either. But I knew when I left social work I wanted to get involved in this sort of community work area and so I stayed away from all the positions that were advertised for case workers. So I was actually thrown into it straight out of social work at the age of twenty one and I applied for a position

as social worker at the Fremantle City Council and that is where my community work started. Here was a local government authority who wanted to be involved in the community and look at community needs and do something about them and that was almost as far as their thinking had got. So it was a matter of trying to assist this authority in carrying out their plan so I was actually sort of thrown into it.

DP When was this?

HC That was in 1971. And so I had to really start thinking about, a bit more about, what community meant and I thought, well the only way to do that is really sort of talk to people and so we sort of threw open the doors and people came in discussing all sorts of issues and problems. Because part of my role was also to assist people in that sort of broad social work sense as well so, as I had more and more people come in to me I started appreciating more about what some of the community needs were. Then started looking at, "Well how do we approach helping people overcome them?" because it seemed to me that to continually assist individuals try and overcome some of their difficulties without putting some structures in place that would sort of assist groups of people, or get people over humps that were caused, not because of some personal deficit in them but because the programmes or services didn't exist. And so, people were coming with all sorts of problems about, you know, kids and their old folk, a whole range of problems, and so I decided that the way to go forwards was to bring some of these people together that had common issues and start talking to them about, "Well what can we do about this?"

and so it was really trying to involve the community in making some of its' own decisions and from that sort of approach, we were able to put some proposals to Council that fortunately they took up.

If I can just give you a couple of examples of those, people were coming with problems about child-care which was very scarce in those days. Child-care centres were barely existent but people were coming in, maybe single parents who had kids or were on welfare and wanted to be able to go into some sort of training or work or whatever but, "What do we do with these kids?" So we developed a range of services for children out of that, but we did it by having a community sort of committee that came together and developed it. But also, at the time, we had some supporters in Council and this is two concepts about community involvement, having support of people that had power over decisions, and getting them to come along with you is really, really, important concept in any community development. You can have all the bright ideas, you can have all the community action but if you can't influence the people that make decisions then it is not going to go anywhere.

So we were quite fortunate that we had on Council, people like, and you might recognise some of these names, Esme Fletcher, one of the few women in Council at the time, Fred Notley and you know we have got the Fred Notley Daycare and the Esme Fletcher Nursery, which was pulled down recently, you know on the corner of Parry and High Streets it was and redeveloped elsewhere. Those sorts of people were really, really important because while I was involved in sort of developing the concepts and everything, they actually sold it at Council at a time I think when it was very difficult to do that because Local Government traditionally had been the suppliers of footpaths and rubbish services and not so much that sort of community activity. So we were able to develop that and it went in stages, sometimes things worked really well and sometimes people got a bit tired of the effort that was required



but generally we had quite a good group of people in the community who not only helped us develop those services but keep them going.

DP What sort of people were involved?

HC Yeah, it was some people who, if we keep with the childcare services at the moment, people who needed those sorts of services, and quite often just people who were sort of active people who were just interested in developing their communities as well. So it was a broad range and I think that it is really important to get not only the people who were willing to help and have got the time and the effort but also the people who need services so you can go along with those and we were able to do some quite innovative things with that sort of involvement.

For example I think the Esmé Fletcher was one of the very first child care centres to look after kids in family groups, ageings, rather than have all the babies together, all the one years olds together and so on but so that kids from the same families could actually be together in small groups. And also because we sort of had the community we were able to offer places to some children who had special needs. They might have been behavioural problems or disabilities, and the other thing we were able to do was to provide services to people who had other languages, so that by involving some Portuguese people for example we were able to bring the Portuguese kids. And it seemed so simple a statement to make but you know quite often we forget that we need those sorts of things in place. For a little while we had no Portuguese kids until we got that involvement and then they started coming just because they were comfortable, they knew the person who was involved and that person was able to introduce them.

HC So one of the things we were able to do was talk to people about what sorts of things they needed and one of the things they said was, “Oh we go to work all day you know. We drop

the kids on the way to work, pick them up on the way home, go home, cook dinner. You always seem to be on the go.” So what this community group decided to do, they decided that we would have an evening meal together at the day care centre. So we asked parents to bring the kids pyjamas in, all these people came in and bathed the kids and put their pyjamas on so at 5:30 when Mums and Dads turned up there was meal ready for them and they were able to have that evening off.

Just have a nice quiet meal with their kids and go home and put them to bed and have a little of a bit of time to themselves.

So I think it is really important to bring communities into services like that because you are able to do more. Of course this was all voluntary effort on that part.

The other thing I learnt at my time at the Council, just from people coming to me was the number of people within the ethnic communities who had no services and sometimes not many people to go to. Their were still not that many people from those communities who had gone into the professions and so there were not a lot of people around who could assist. And we had quite large groups of people. For example, the Mills and Wares biscuit factory, which is now housing, provided income for a lot of those people in very basic process sort of work and we were able to talk to those people about what sorts of services they would like to see, to have and their desire was to just have more information about a whole range of things. You know they just didn't have any point where they could go in their own language and get some information and find out what is happening in the community. People to help them with a myriad of things, letters that arrive, social security, all those sorts of things. Those discussions, with that particular group, led to the formation of The Meeting Place in South Fremantle which, at that time, was very much different to what it is now because now it is a Learning Centre. At that time it was more an information and resource centre if you like. People wanted a place where they could meet locally, do some of their own cultural activities. Get information about their communities,



have an input into things that were happening. And so that is how, that is what was happening there at the early stages of The Meeting Place.

DP And that was always in the house where it is now?

HC No it was actually just slightly up the road a little bit but very soon went into the house that it is now. The other place was a little semi-detached house. I think that the Council owned it at the time and it became too small very quickly and so moved to its current premises.

DP And that was in the early seventies?

HC It was in the seventies. Probably not so much the early seventies as the mid to later seventies I think from memory..

HC Some of the other things that were happening during the 1970's, because it was the time I think of that greater surge in community development, were things like the establishment of places for the aged, again which was something that local governments had gone into in terms of Meals on Wheels and that sort of service but not really in terms of accommodation places. And again, this is something that the Council sort of took on after submissions from people and discussions about what people needed and again getting the community involved in planning. We were able to set up the Stan Reilly Centre. So there was a whole range of services being set up at this time and you have to think about, "Why was it all happening at this time?"

DP And you were there, do you remember what your title was?

HC Oh I think I was just called Social Worker. So I was actually at the Fremantle Council from 1971 to about '79.

DP And you were the first Social Worker at the Fremantle Council?

HC I think I was the first Social Worker employed in a local authority at all in the State. So we have to maybe look at why that was happening at that time and I think again it was all about people. Esme Fletcher had been a social worker at Fremantle Hospital, although they used to call them almoners at that time, so she had a great deal of influence on the Council about you know "We need to look after people and not just properties and roads and things." There was also a person employed there, I think at first, just in the Health Department, and I am not sure what his title was but it later changed to the Community Planning person and that was Vern Nowland who had a great influence on Council's approach at that time. His background was in Health Surveying so it was quite interesting that he should now turn his attention to Human Service Programmes and I think my being involved and his support and people like Esme Fletcher was just sort of a team within Council that was created that had a great influence. The other thing that was happening at that time was Gough Whitlam came to power and he was a great believer in the power of community and began programmes and grants that local communities could actually access without going through state governments so you could actually go straight to the Federal Government for grants for a whole range of community initiatives and that helped

DP Was that just in the Western Australian Assistance Plan or were there many others?

HC There were a whole raft of other programmes.

DP Do you remember what they were?

HC Yes. For example, I can remember getting a call, and this was on a weekend, from somebody in Canberra who got my name through somebody saying, "Look there is going to be monies



available for a range of programmes, Women's Refuges," which had never been thought about here before. Innovative type of aged programmes. Employment programmes. There was going to be a whole raft of these things available. The reason that I actually got the call on the weekend was that

the Prime Minister was going to announce some funding for Women's Refuges and, at the time, I am not sure whether we had actually started the development, but this was one of the programmes that the Council was initiating. We had recognised the problems that women were facing and realised that there was no other way around that but provide some sort of support and safety for women who were victims of domestic violence. Whitlam was about to announce this grant, it was something that he wanted to be moved on really quickly because he felt that we needed these services really quickly and we needed to get submissions for funding in really quickly. Because the council had already been at that stage of thinking about it we were able to take good advantage of that particular programme but that wasn't the only one.

There was a whole range of programmes and, in fact, the City Manager at that time was a man called Stan Parkes who had been involved at Fremantle for quite a long time. I remember Stan Parkes going to Canberra to initiate funding for programmes. I mean to actually put Fremantle's point of view across to these people who were dishing out the money in Canberra. So for quite a number of years Fremantle was able to take advantage of funding programmes that other councils maybe missed out on at that time because they just didn't have the people who were focussing on that.

So there were a whole lot of things coming together at that particular time and a community momentum and demand for things. I think it all happening in the seventies wasn't by accident. I think it was the policy makers, we had a Council that was interested, we had workers who were specifically em-

ployed to do it and we had a community that did have a sense of community anyway. I mean in that time Fremantle was also a little different than it is today. We had a greater concentration of migrants. We also had a greater concentration of people who actually were born in the area that still lived in the area and who not only lived there but also worked there. And so we had a really high concentration of people there. Fremantle actually was their community in all sense of the word. So, they lived there, they worked there, the kids were still living there. You know their grandparents were still there, so it had this sort of community spirit anyway that it made it easier to engage people in the process.

DP Was there anything unique about Fremantle Council at the time? Because community development hasn't been taken up by many other West Australian local governments at that stage?

HC Yes. Yes. Yes.

DP Why hadn't other Local Government Authorities got involved in Community Development?

HC I ask myself that same question. I have never been able to explain it fully.

DP But do you have some ideas?.

HC But I think it was the sort of people that Fremantle had around it and the fact that they employed somebody to actually do it. I was actually being paid to carry this forward, it was something that they had made a decision on and I suppose, I kept it before them.

DP Yeah.



HC That whole period of the seventies when I was there. As I saw needs, I put up things and I was fortunate because we had a Federal Government that was giving out some money and there were people on the Council who could understand. I mean I have only mentioned a couple but the Council as

a whole was very active at that time at looking at community. You know I remember them having two, three day seminars about, “What does community mean?” and “Where do we want this community to go?”

Maybe the Council is making a bit of an attempt to get back to there with these precincts, community precincts. I haven't been involved in those but one understands that that is a sort of an attempt to have this sort of community input again. We didn't have that sort of formalised approach but somehow I think we were able to bring people in and was it a better way, I don't know. But it was just a different way. It was just because we were sort of very focussed on the needs that people were bringing and that, as we went along, we could show people that we were actually listening to their needs, we were actually able to do something about them, so they had a bit of faith in what we were doing because we had done some things.

My experience with the ethnic communities was interesting there too because I have talked about The Meeting Place as that sort of information resource area. It was during this whole period too that the Federal Government decided that it was going to set up what it called Migrant Resources in various areas and we have one in Fremantle, the South Metropolitan Migrant Resource Centre it is now called. That was a very interesting activity for me personally but also in terms of how those centres were established.

The Immigration Department was involved in that and after Whitlam came Fraser and the whole Gallbally Report and Migrant Services Review and all those things that established a

whole range of programmes for Migrants. One of those happened to be the setting up of Migrant Resource Centres in the hands of the Immigration Department. The Immigration Department decided it was going to set up a certain number of these around Australia and that it would appoint some community committees to run them. So it was almost a government programme that they could still control but have some community input.

When I heard about this idea I thought, “Well Fremantle needs one of these.” So I gathered the sorts of people that I thought might be interested and they were some people who were the leaders within the ethnic communities. There were some church people because the church was, in terms of the ethnic communities, a very important player, and some people who were involved in other services like the person who was running The Meeting Place. People like Beth Hewton, we had Father Ned O'Donovan from Christ the King, I think he set up the first English as a Second Language programme in a Primary School at Christ the King school. I think that was the very first one. So we involved him. We involved people from the Italian community, the Croatian community, the Portuguese community and so on and I got these people together and thought, “Well this programme is available and we should have a part of it. The community needs, you have been calling out for services for migrants for many years.”

But what we were concerned about as we started talking about it was the Department's control over it so we decided that we would put in a submission for them to fund it but for us to control it without their input and we were one of the very few in Australia. There were a couple of others, the North Perth Migrant Resource Centre got established in the same way, as did the Wollongong centre. So the three centres were actually ones who decided to take it upon themselves to have a real community centre with membership from the wider community. “We will elect our own management. We will run our own service



and so on.” In most of the other places they were government appointed committees which consisted of a mixture of government community people.

It is interesting to note that those three centres have survived.

Fremantle has been under threat recently when we recently lost our core funding. North Perth lost its funding several years ago but because it had that sort of community involvement it became part of the community and the community rose up and kept it going and we are experiencing the same thing with the Fremantle Centre now. Six months ago or so the government announced that it would no longer fund the centre and so the membership of that centre decided that, ‘Oh well we are going to have a crack at keeping this going without Immigration Department funding.’ and so far we have survived. We have got people like Ken Posney, Malcolm Allbrook and myself as the main players but with the support of other people deciding that Fremantle still needs services.

We have taken a very positive approach to this because having innovation funding meant that we also had to abide by their guidelines and while the centre was set up for the whole community, migrants especially, “How did we define migrants?” well it was anyone who defined themselves as a migrant. It didn’t really matter. If somebody had a need we were going to try and see if we could overcome it. And that was the strength of the centre. It was very wide open, didn’t really try and define what a migrant was or wasn’t. Had the support of those main community groups and that is what we are now going to take the centre back to, because it had lost some of that through the funding because Immigration Department started re-defining the term ‘migrant’ for us so that you could no longer provide services to all migrants. You had to only service those who were newly arrived and how did you define that? Well it was in the first five years of their arrival. So if you were a new arrival you could go to that centre and get

services but if you had been here six, seven, ten years, “No. Couldn’t go there.” Even though they might have just the sort of service you need, spoke the sort of language that you spoke and so on. Then the Immigration Department redefined it again a few years later to new arrivals being people who arrived in the last two years, or you were a refugee. So then they said, “Well Fremantle is not really having enough clients in that group so we won’t fund you any more.” And we have sort of seen this as a really positive move that we can actually take this back to what it was before and that is what we are attempting to do.

All the other programmes that are being funded by State government, for example, employment programmes, emergency housing programmes, the Croatian / Bosnian grants, all those sorts of grants we are still receiving and the community is now managing it so we are going to keep that centre alive. It may be that it might need to change its place of location or it might need to really have another look at the types of services that are being run there but we are really sure that the community requires such a service. The broader Fremantle community, so we don’t want to lose it.

DP When was it established?

HC It was, I think established in about 1978 or something.

DP I was going to say ‘79

HC It might be ’79, yeah my memory of dates is not very good but I know it was around about that time.

DP And you were still with Council?

HC I was still with Council at that time although my involvement there was much more, after the initial establishment, on a voluntary basis and I was, I think, Chairperson of the committee there for a few years before I went off to do some other things.



DP You have maintained your involvement?

HC Only just as a member, my involvement has gone up and down. I mean I am very heavily involved at the moment because it is under threat and don't want to see it go, I am putting in

a whole lot of time there now so yeah my involvement is just varied. I was heavily involved at the beginning and then as it was just going along I went off and did some other things and I have come back to it. Ahh (laughter)

DP Can you talk about some of those other things say from '79, and not just what you did as a paid worker?

HC O.K. An interesting little story, with a friend called Ronelle Brossard, I don't know whether you have come across her, Ronelle came to see me one day and said, "I've got small children and I sit at the bus stop catching buses to Fremantle a lot." She lived in the Beaconsfield area at the time and she says, "and often meeting Portuguese women and Italian women at the bus stop and I try and practise my few words on them and so on." And she said, "I've struck up conversations with a few of them and realised that a lot of them don't have good health. A lot of them don't you know, go for their pap smears and their breast examinations, they are too, they either don't know where to go or, you know, they don't understand English well enough, they are a bit embarrassed about going to their male doctor. They don't know about the importance of this, you know, as well." So she said, "I think we should do something about it. You know, I want to set up something." And I'm saying, "Oh god look, you are talking about a health service." And she said, "Yes." (laughter)

So she said, "What do I do?" and I said, "Well first of all you need to find a supporter because doing something like this just completely on your own is just going to be too much. You need to find somewhere where you can actually make a start

and have support around you." So the Fremantle Migrant Resource Centre at that time that she approached, offered her some space to actually just run something that had information in different languages and just had health information but Ronnelle realised quite soon that we needed something more and she came to see me and she said, "No. No. We have got to have something bigger than this and we have actually got to have a place where women feel comfortable to go to have their pap smears and their breast examinations, where they can get a whole range of services or information at least in their own language. We don't need doctors who speak their languages. We need some health educators who speak their language." And I'm saying, "Oh this is a really big undertaking." And she said, "Yes. But we have got to do it." So I said, "OK. If we are going to do it we need to plan this. You know we have got to get community behind us and involved again."

And so the first thing we did was to identify other women in the community who may be interested and who had the right backgrounds, and by that I mean we needed some people from the ethnic communities and the right sort of women who could make contact with other women within their communities who would be the women who people would trust and be able to speak to and so on. But we also needed some women who were in positions where they could influence because of their own backgrounds and knowledge so we had to have women who were experienced in writing submissions, we had to have women who were experienced in running organisations, and we had to have women who had an interest in the sort of service that we were trying to establish.

So we got a group of community women together and from there grew the Fremantle Women's Health Centre. I mean it just grew. It didn't just grow. There was a lot of work and effort. We had to write submissions. I said to Ronnelle, "We need to find a building and I don't know how we do that. We have got no money." So Ronnelle went out and found a building. We still had no money but fortunately we were able to get



the agent and the owner of the building to just hold off a bit while we put submissions into various programmes, including the Lotteries Commission who came good with money for us to purchase the building. We had to find doctors who were willing to come along and do sessions. And so we

wrote to and spoke to women doctors. I didn't have those sorts of contacts but some of the other women on the committee did. So just by bringing together the right sort of people, who had the right sort of contacts, who were able to influence other people, and particularly funding bodies and decision makers, the support of the local council again because we had to get planning approval, you know parking, all those sorts of issues that they can help us with.

DP Were you still at council?

HC No this was after my council time and this was just on a completely voluntary basis. I think I was chairperson there for about the first five years of establishment and then I left and again went to do something else when it was up and running. So that was another example of just really involving the community but again, being quite strategic about 'who' and 'how' and ensuring that we had the people who actually committed to it as well and that we were in there for the long haul. That was really important as well that people actually make a commitment to something and actually see it through. So that is the other aspect of community development that is really important. You have to have this core of people who will stay in it and other people can come and go and you can use their expertise in short spurts but have to have some there as the core group.

DP And that centre is still with us?

HC That centre is still with us. My other sort of involvement was with the Italian community that I had a lot of involvement

with. About 14 or 15 years ago a woman by the name of Francis Minervini, whose husband John had been a Councillor at Fremantle Council during my time there, contacted me and said, "Helen we need some help". So here was somebody coming from the other way bringing me into their little circle. We had been a group of women who had been meeting about how they had elderly Italian parents and they had been starting to look around, thinking, "You know, where do these people go if they get really sick and we can't look after them anymore in their own homes." And a couple of people did have those sort of circumstances. So we started looking at the Nursing Homes and Hostels that were around the area and just realised that they were completely inappropriate for an Italian old person. No Italian speakers. Not the right food. Food is very important. It is the basis of all this. Just not the right sort of atmosphere and so on. And so they said, "Right what we will have to do is build our own."

So I became involved in that group and again we brought other people into it. This was a much bigger venture because to build a home requires millions of dollars. Government funding is fairly limited. We spent about the first five or six years convincing the Department of the need for licences for such places in Fremantle because they saw Fremantle as already having a large number of services and some nursing homes and hostels. But we were actually saying, "Yes but you know, they are just not appropriate to people of Italian background." And finally we did convince and we got the licence to build a forty-bed hostel and then we had to go to a different level.

So first of all we had this small group of people who were interested, committed, "We are going to see this through." And then once we got the bed licence we had to go much broader, we had to appeal to the whole of the Italian business community and so on because we had to raise money and that is always an important aspect of community development and operating services. Money needs to come from somewhere, whether it is from a government grant or from fundraising, and



I am here talking about large scale fund raising. So we were able to raise just over a million dollars. We got the Italian community involved in the building programme so that we had a lot of work donated and so on and we were able to eventually establish what is now the Italian Village Fremantle, situated in White Gum Valley.

That operates now and our planning is to actually expand there into higher care places and what we have been able to do there really is establish a place where a whole range of people can feel really comfortable. Only about a third maybe sometimes up to a half of people are of Italian background but people of other European countries can feel very comfortable there. We also have people who are very Anglo background,, a whole range of people but the important thing is that it is a place that actually caters for people's different cultures so, as I mentioned before, food is very important. Religious practices are very important, you know special days are very important. All those little things. So that was just another example. But that is sort of like a really big thing.

Sometimes it is only something really small that needs to be done. I remember helping a group of public housing tenants who were in a small block of flats arrange some activities for their community and especially for their kid. That was fund raising as well but that was more like raffle tickets and things like that so whatever they wanted to do we were able to do within a much smaller budget. But it still involved the same principle. We still had to get people together who were from that group, two or three people who formed the core. We still had to plan what it was that people wanted. We still had to raise some money to achieve it and we still had to have people to operate it afterwards and to get the community involved. So the concept was the same but just on a very much smaller scale.

DP You have just described such a busy time for you. So much activity across so many different areas. How does someone like Helen Cattalini get involved in so many different issues?

HC Well some of those early ones I was being paid to be involved and so that is how I sort of got into those. I think just my experience of that time and seeing some successes in the way that we could develop some of those community initiatives just kept me going I suppose. And I suppose, I am not very good at saying, "No." sometimes. (laughter) but it is that whole really community development thing isn't it? You need people who have done it before. You need people who are committed. You need people who know what to do and so that quite often when people look around they think, "Oh Helen can help us with that." And I think one of the things that I have had to really watch over the time is really not to get over-committed and sometimes I have done that. But these days I am much better at making sure I am only involved in a number of things that I can handle comfortably. But it does mean a lot of time and effort if you are going to do these things. It really does. And I have described some of the things I have been involved in and there are some other examples. But you know, yes it is just a matter of making time but not getting over-committed.

DP Helen, we've talked before about some initiatives in the 1970's that involved the Public Housing Authority or was called, "The Housing Commission"?

HC Yes. State Housing Commission.

DP State Housing Commission. Can you perhaps talk a little about that?

HC Yeah. It was an interesting concept they brought in the 1970's where the State Housing Commission actually employed people they called Community Development Officers. They don't have such people these days but it was just a really interesting

approach because the actual role of these people was to work with established communities within the public housing areas to establish, to look at the sorts of things those people might need within their communities. That was one area and the other area was to actually go into new developments, or where the housing commission was going to; thinking about new developments, or redeveloping old areas as new developments and involving those people in what they wanted their communities to be like during that development.

So going to the first one, the Community Development officers went into say, groups of flats or other Housing Commission areas and worked with those people about what their communities were like and what they needed. Quite often, particularly in the flats, one of the things people just didn't have was space and some community type spaces and activities. So quite often what they worked with the Housing Commission on making available, for example, a house in the area or a flat or two within the blocks of flats when they became available, to turn them into community centres where they could do activities for the kids, where other people in their areas could go and do activities, have some community learning. A whole range of programmes, but trying to establish a community centre from which other activities could grow. That was quite a first I think for a government department to actually sort of say, "Well we can influence community development. We can make some resources available to do that."

DP And this was mostly, or exclusively in the metro area?

HC I think it was only in the Metro area. I am not absolutely certain about that but I think so. The other thing that they did was actually plan new developments, or the refurbishing of old developments. So we saw places like Davis Park, that was in the Beaconsfield area, where they were redeveloping. I remember the Housing Commission establishing a community committee at which one of their Community Development Officers worked with that committee in designing and trying to influence the Housing Commission about how they went

about that development. And also working in new developments in places like Southwell which is bordering Hamilton Hill, Spearwood, where they involved some people, who may be in the future living in that area, in the development of that area. So it was quite an interesting concept because I had never seen that done before and I don't think I have seen it since by a government department.

This actually brings me to a point about community development because I don't think that governments can do community development very well. I think they are, like State Governments and Federal Governments, too far removed from communities. That is just my view. I think their role would be actually to fund community development activities rather than try and influence because, while that particular programme had, I think, some successes I think it would be more successful if the local authority or some other local group actually took up the running of those sorts of things because these were new people coming into the area often. They might have just been allocated Fremantle as an area for that particular six months that they were going to be working in. They come and they are gone.

I mean I see community development more as being who this community means something to and being there for the long haul. Not necessarily always involved but you know having that sort of community spirit and just caring about what happens to their community. That is I suppose, where my involvement comes because I was actually born in Fremantle and I have got a real personal contact. I really care about what is happening. I really care about what is happening to Fremantle today and I am bitterly disappointed at the moment that the local authority seems to be closing a lot of its services that we worked so hard in the seventies to establish.

There might be a whole range of reasons for that to be happening and I haven't really gone into it but I just see that a lot of the services we've established closing down and I don't see that the needs for them are any less. It is just probably the cost



of running services these days. Maybe State and Federal Government is not funding them as well. I really don't know the reason behind that but I think what we are actually going to be finding is that, later on, somebody is going to have to pick that up. Maybe the community will have to do it again but

the local authority at the moment seems

to be going a different way. I mean it has established these local precincts as it is called. I don't think I can get involved in anything that has got precinct in the name, it is a bit American for me but I understand that this is an attempt to get local people involved in their communities and community decision making. I am not sure how effective that has been but at the same time the council seems to be saying, "Well these other services that the community needed, wanted and worked so hard for to establish previously are ones that we don't want to have part of any more." So it all seems to be a bit sad to me.

DP Are there other community-based projects you have been involved with?

HC Well I have. They are very sort of similar programmes. I was heavily involved in the establishment of the North Perth Migrant Resource Centre as well. I was part of a small group, because by that stage I was actually working in that area, working fulltime at the Italian Welfare Centre. So I had an involvement in the North of Perth community at that time and was working with a group of people there and we took very much the same approach as we had taken at Fremantle with the local community there getting that one established. So my involvement outside Fremantle has been less, but along the same sorts of programmes. I think one of the things about North Perth that was a little different was that there was a broader range of ethnic backgrounds involved in that. There were different community groups and there was a larger community as well so that when we actually formed the first com-

munity committee I think three hundred people turned up at the local North Perth Town Hall to vote for the local committee to run this little community centre. So that was a different experience and I think that came about because there were a few people involved who were more politically active who saw this as a means of expressing their...

DP Political ambitions.

HC Yes thank you. Their political ambitions in some way but in a sense that was a really good thing because it brought a whole lot of other community people into that and that in the end is, I think, what saved that centre. just the fact of the sheer number of people that were involved. That centre is just, since it was defunded, it has just grown. So it is quite an interesting concept really that from something that was going to be closed down to what it is today. They have just had to expand their premises and all those sorts of things. So that is quite interesting.

DP Yeah. That is an interesting story. The secret of success?

HC Yes. Is to go community rather than government

DP Can you talk about the establishment of a community organisation?

HC One of my early, again in the seventies, was my work with the ethnic communities and establishment of the Ethnic Communities Council, which was another interesting organisation. This was very much about lobbying rather than service provision at times so it makes it a little different to other things I have been involved in.

DP What do you mean by lobbying?

HC OK. I'll just give you a bit of history there. The Ethnic Communities Councils began being developed around Aus-



tralia in the 1970's. They were a response to a couple of things. One was the number of people from ethnic backgrounds who were starting to enter the professions and becoming articulate in the community and taking community positions and that previously hadn't been available to them.

The development of the Gallbali Report and all those services that I discussed before. So there was this little bit of an impetus amongst the ethnic communities, really pushed by young people within those communities.

Ethnic Communities Councils had been established in some states. They were established really to get government to listen to the voice of ethnic communities so they were very much pulse, lobbying communities. What I meant by lobbying was people who would really do things to make governments listen and so that sometimes meant protesting, it sometimes meant community meetings, public meetings, all those sorts of things, activities to get governments to listen to the voice of the ethnic communities. There was no Ethnic Community Council in Western Australia at the time. I think they were in all the other states and they wanted to form a Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils around Australia and so somebody contacted a few people in Western Australia and said, "Why isn't there one?" and, "You should get one going." So a few people, Sam Piantadosi, who was later a member of parliament, people like George Vassiley, myself, people like Nic Agosh, other people in the communities got together and said, "Well let's form one in Western Australia because the communities, the ethnic communities don't have a voice here. It would be a good thing to do."

And again the approach we took was contacting a few people within the communities that we knew, some of the leaders, and then calling a public meeting and asking the people what they thought. We actually had that meeting at the Leederville Town

Hall and I think we just had over a hundred people come and we talked about the need for it. In fact Charles Court was in power I think at the time because within the next couple of days there were some writings in the local papers about people, "The ethnics wanting to take over." Or some darn thing like that, you know, and Charlie Court being quoted as, "Why do we need these sorts of things. We look after these people very well." Those sorts of noises. And so the Ethnic Communities Council was born.

It was a community organisation, it had local elections and still is going. Still operating on that community model and over the years has been active in lobbying governments and in establishing policy, so they work by the same sort of things. Sitting on government committees, trying to influence government decisions. Meeting with appropriate Ministers, writing submissions, writing policy papers, doing all those sorts of things that those community organisations do.

Alongside of that, I just wanted to mention my time at the Multicultural & Ethnic Affairs Commission which was a government established programme and that was born out of some of that lobbying that took place through the Ethnic Communities Council where people, like myself and Sam Piantadosi, Claudio Pierluigi, George Vassiley and others were actually lobbying governments to establish an Ethnic Affairs Commission within government that would oversee government programmes, make them more responsive to the needs of ethnic communities and so on.

I eventually became Commissioner for Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs and during that time one of the things we initiated was bringing community people in to discuss our programmes and other government programmes and how we thought we could influence, and what sort of changes needed to be made. The thing was that a lot of these people had never before been invited to do this sort of thing and, as ... said to me, "This is the first time that anyone has asked us anything about gov-



ernment and even how government works.” I mean we were running some community forums about just how do governments make decisions and how we can influence government and so on and some people in government didn’t like us doing that. That is another discussion. But what we actually

tried to achieve there was to build up

communities within the ethnic communities. We were asking governments to start programmes so that the communities could get themselves organised. The larger ones had facilities, like the Italian Clubs and so on but the smaller communities and the more newly arrived communities didn’t have those sorts of forums. So we tried to establish some of those forums to give them a sense of community and to get them to be able to participate in the broader community in decisions that were being taken.

So that was just sort of a slightly different approach to it.

DP And what year was this?

HC That was in the 1980’s when about that time community development started to wane in the whole of Australia I think. I mean we haven’t spoken about the Australian Assistance Plan of the 1970’s but I am sure other people have discussed that, and that gave another impetus to community development. But as that fell away and other programmes fell away, changes in governments and no longer the same sort of funding programmes available. I think also that a lot of local authorities in the 70’s didn’t actually take those opportunities of becoming involved so that there wasn’t a great deal of activity going on anyway in some areas and the impetus wasn’t there. So when the whole funding thing ceased and things started to dwindle there wasn’t that sort of background in community development that could keep it going through those, if you like, difficult times for community development. It really started to drop away and I suppose we are just sort of seeing now a bit more

of an interest in it again. We have got local authorities starting to re-employ people in those sorts of positions, whether they have the same sort of role I had at Fremantle I am not quite sure but we do see a little bit of an increase in community activity in the last, I suppose, five or ten years. We have seen communities becoming a little bit more active, we didn’t see a lot of that in the 80’s but when communities are threatened now we see people rise up and say, “Well you know, you are not going to take this away from us.” Things like that. We are seeing a bit more of that.

DP Have you got any observations about the more recent re-invention of community development?

HC Well yes. I suspect that it is somewhat different. I suspect that it is a new movement rather than a reliance on the old and I suspect different models are now being used. I mean my involvement in that community development is still the legacy of what I have been doing all over the years but I think other people talk about it differently these days. It seems to be much more of a political movement if you like. It is much more community inspired rather than government inspired if you can see the government inspiration of the 70’s being the funding that was made available and that whole Australian Assistance Plan, Forum and so on. We don’t seem to have that so much but we still see the sort of community groups emerging.

I am not sure whether I explain myself very well when I say it is more of a political movement. Or more a sort of a people movement rather, than I think the seventies relied on, this is just my observation. The 70s relied on individuals a lot more than what I see today but then I am not so active in some of these new movements so I am not really sure that I am explaining myself terribly well or that I know the new movement well enough. But we definitely are seeing local governments getting a bit more involved again and that is probably the level of government that is the most appropriate anyway so I think that probably accounts for part of it. I mean in any community



development you need someone to take the initiative. Like there has to be some basis, and so maybe local government, because it is starting to get involved again, is creating some of those.

I think a lot of community activity is around environmental issues and that is probably why I call it a little bit more political these days. But you know people whose communities are under threat will quite often rise up so I think we are very much more conscious now about what sort of environment we want to live in and what sort of communities we want to live in. In the past I think it was more about needs and people having personal needs that needed to be fulfilled whereas I think now it is more about, “Well what do we want our community to be like?” and “We want our environment to be safe. We want to be safe.” So you get the people who are on the law and order trip because they want to feel safe. Whether we agree with that sort of track or not but there are those sorts of activities that are more about what we want our communities to be like. I think that might explain a little of the difference between the movements of the seventies.

The movements of the seventies too, were much more about much smaller groups of people doing the activities. Where you could actually almost get the right sort of five or six people and you could actually do quite a bit, whereas now it takes a lot more activity and a lot more people to actually influence governments and decisions than it may have done at those times. Why the difference? Yeah I am not quite sure about that. I think nowadays unless you can actually get the numbers, the publicity, then you are not going to really get the outcomes. So while I can look at some of my experiences where I just had to influence a funding body to get a service up and running, get some community involvement and so on it seems to me today that you need to use a whole lot of different approaches. You need to use the media much better than you

ever had to do in the seventies. You have to use the numbers game a lot more to get changes made so it is a whole new ball game but the principles remain the same. There has to be some sort of community need. A group of people that comes together and recognises that need and wants to make some changes but the way it actually influences and makes those changes is what is different I think.

DP They are really helpful observations. Helen I am going to have to end our discussion here today. Can I say a million thanks for your generosity in allowing us to get a window into your life and your story about community development. Thank you very much.

HC Well I just hope it has been useful and good luck.

DP Thank you. It has and yeah, it is up to us to see where this may take us in the future. Thanks Helen.

End of Interview