



Australian Association of Social Workers Inc. (Victorian Branch)

50th Anniversary Oral History Project

Transcript of Interview – Connie Benn

Rosie

This is the tape of an interview with **Connie Benn** who has followed a distinguished career in social work and related fields, and is currently retired and working as a Human Services Consultant.

Connie will be speaking with me, Rosie Maddick, for the 50th Anniversary Oral History Project conducted by the Australian Association of Social Workers Inc. (Victorian Branch)

On behalf of the Association, I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this program.

Connie, do you understand that copyright of this interview is shared by you and the Association?

Connie

Yes.

Rosie

This being so, may we have your permission to make a transcript of this recording?

Connie

Yes.

Rosie

We hope you will speak as frankly as possible, knowing that neither the tapes nor any transcripts produced from them will be released without your authority.

This interview is taking place today, the 14th August, 1996 at Flemington. Can we begin by asking you why you initially became interested in Social Work?

Connie

Well, I suppose it was almost an accident, really. I was married and had three small, young children under three, the second lot were twins. I found myself in the situation where I was doing nothing but reading the Women's Weekly, screaming at the children and generally almost getting to be afraid of social contact, which for an Italian person is quite rare.

So my husband suggested that I might like to go back to University and do a subject or two, so I had almost a whole Psychology Degree as part of my Arts Degree. So I went back and did what was Psychology 2 in those days and I found I could do it, much to my own amazement. So then it was a

matter of, I now know I can do a University Degree. What do I want to be?

I went up the Arts Faculty and I talked with the person up there responsible and she told me I could do one of two things - I could go on with Psychology or I could do Social Work. So I thought about Psychology and in those days Psychology was almost a matter of testing, and that is about all anybody ever did, if you weren't interested in research that is. I'm talking about quite a long time ago, 1956. So I decided that I didn't want to spend my life testing people, so I would apply to do Social Work. I was interviewed, which happened in those days, everyone was interviewed, and found to be suitable.

Ruth Hoban and I have forgotten the name of the other person that interviewed me, however, they found I was suitable, so I was able to do a Diploma of Social Studies, which because of my Arts Degree was a two year course. So I did that.

My first job was in what was called then the Mental Hygiene Department and I started work at Larundel Hospital, where I worked until my husband was transferred. He was a Psychiatrist also in the Mental Hygiene Department, so where he went I went. He was transferred from Larundel to Royal Park and I followed him, then he was transferred from Royal Park to Mont Park and I went there. I can't remember how many years I was in the Department, it is on that slip of paper I gave you. I worked there for three years I think, and I worked in three different jobs.

So then from Mont Park I applied for a job at the Citizens' Welfare Service and was appointed as the Director of Social Work and Research, following Alison Player. I was there for five years, I think.

Rosie

1961-1966.

Connie

Yes

Rosie

What sort of work did you do then?

Connie

Marriage counselling and adolescent counselling. I was basically the Director of the agency, but I also did some casework.

It is of interest to me when I look at all the conditions these days of taking on Social Work students that I think I had been in the field six months when I had my first Social Work student, no experience at all really.

Rosie

Out at Larundel.

Connie

Yes, at Larundel.

So at Citizens' Welfare Service where I was largely a caseworker and I was a caseworker in the Mental Hygiene Department also. I moved from there to University. I replaced Len Tierney when he was on sabbatical and did quite a bit of his work and also some field work.

Rosie

What made you leave CWS?

Connie

I thought I wanted to be an academic and I started my first go at a Masters, which I didn't complete at that time. I thought that was what I wanted to be. I was wrong. I have had three goes at academia altogether, and I have never liked it really. For me it is exercises of the mind, not necessarily action oriented, and I am very much pragmatic and action oriented. So I stayed there when Len was away.

Then I went to the Victorian Parliament as Research Officer to the Leader of the Opposition. I stayed there for about five years too. That was an interesting job, because I was the first Research Officer in the Victorian Parliament, it was a new idea. I did all sorts of work there, most of which you would say was not related to Social Work. I think my first job was looking at the situation of water in Australia.

Rosie

Something in common with Peter Johnson.

Connie

The discovery of gas in Bass Strait was happening at the time and I did quite a lot of work on that. The most significant work I did there was working with the Government, which was a Liberal Government at the time, and I was working for the Opposition, but I was able with the help of Colin Benjamin (who you should talk to some time too] with his help we were able to bring about 99 amendments to the Liberal Party's Social Welfare Act, which it was called in those days, by working with the Government and suggesting changes. They didn't seem to have a lot of expertise there, so anyway, I suppose that was the most significant thing I did there in relation to Social Work.

Rosie

That was welfare legislation.

Connie

Social Welfare Legislation it was called in those days. I did a lot of other things of course, but from the point of Social Work that was terribly important. Before that it was the Children's Welfare Act, I think, was all that existed. What we were trying to do is extend the ambit.

So from there, I went to start the Family Centre Project, for actually there is a little bit there I have left out, largely because it didn't result in a job, but you should know about it.

When I was working in the Parliament, I applied for a job with the Commonwealth Government, which was a very very senior job. Both Frances and I applied for that job and they took 18 months to make a decision about it and when they finally made the decision, they offered me the job and I accepted it and I had it for two days. They even gazetted that job, which is very unusual for the Public Service that a job is gazetted, and then the Prime Minister decided he would cut out that job and two or three others, one in the environment area and this particular one I was in. It is said by a lot of people that it was my politics, because I was known to be very left-wing, but I could never find out. I took all sorts of measures to find out about that, but it was never very clear why.

Rosie

Was it Mr Fraser?

Connie

No it wasn't Mr Fraser, it was well before Mr Fraser. I am trying to remember who was Prime Minister at the time.

Rosie

Before Fraser was Whitlam.

Connie

I am talking about before Whitlam. I am talking about '69.

Rosie

Gorton or McMahon.

Connie

Yes, it was Gorton. It was in the Department of Labour and Employment, I forget what it was called in those days, and the Head of the Department was a man called Cook. I remember that distinctly. I have a lot of paper about that, about applying for the job and about it being gazetted and then I wrote to several members of Parliament to try and find out. I never ever learnt, but I am sure it was politics.

So that is fairly important, because I can't remember the exact date, but it would have been about 1969. Then I went overseas and came back and went to the Brotherhood.

Rosie

So what made you leave the job working for the Opposition?

Connie

Oh, I just got sick of it, and anyway there is a limit to what you can do. You see, all these jobs, there is a sort of history about why I moved from one to the other. I have really just been giving you an employment history, but not much in the way of motivation or why, why, why.

I was on about social change and disadvantage, and I soon learnt when I was at CWS, I think I had a moment of realisation, I think I was seeing my fifth unmarried mother for the day who was looking for

money, because in those days there was no benefit, in order to buy the evening meal really. After seeing the fifth one for the day, I thought to myself this is not the way to bring about change, and then I had the thought that I would go to the University and teach people more about how to change systems. That is one of reasons that I accepted Len Tierney's job. It occurred to me as I was doing it that that wasn't the way, I didn't think I was ever really going to achieve.

Rosie

A little indirect.

Connie

Yes, well I have had the thought again at later times in my career, so that didn't really work.

When I came back from overseas I went to the Brotherhood, really to do a small job which was for the Trade Union, ACTU. They were trying to find out what a family needed to live. They were working on wage cases, so they asked the Brotherhood if they would employ someone to talk to families about their lives on very low incomes.

So I did that, it was a six month job only, and it was a bit of research really, and I did that. It went to the ACTU. I never did learn how useful it was, but anyway I did it. I thought that may be one way of bringing about some change.

Anyway, while I was there, they decided that their Social Work service was quite pointless. They were into seeing three generations of the same family and nothing much was changing, people didn't seem to be able to move out of poverty. So they decided they would close down their Social Work service and start something quite new. They had a germ of an idea about collecting together a certain number of families and trying to assist them to move out of poverty. So they employed me for a period of six months to work on that germ of an idea. That is how the Family Centre was born.

I don't know if you know much about the Family Centre, do you?

Rosie

When was that?

Connie

1972 -1975 and then Hayden Raysmith took it over after me. But anyway, after that experience I really moved right away from casework. I decided casework was not the way to change people. There is nothing really wrong with people, it was the system that was wrong. I developed what is called the developmental approach. If you trained about then you might have learned something about it.

Rosie

Probably. I think the Family Centre Project was going on while I was actually a student, so that is how I heard about it.

Connie

Well, I developed a new theory of social work called the developmental approach, which is used quite a lot at RMIT, but hardly at all at Melbourne, because they're still in the case work mode there. That for me was real work, because what I was doing was pointing out changes that needed to be made in the system.

Rosie

Like the Sole Parent's Benefit.

Connie

Yes, things like that. I think the Sole Parent's Benefit was coming in - we did quite a lot of social action work really in the background, using the families if you like as an experimental group. They had a guaranteed minimum income and the thing we learnt, of course, was that the trouble with poor people is that they don't have any money. So with a guaranteed minimum income many of those people did really well. That was one of the things we did.

We did a lot of research arising out of that, and there are piles of pamphlets and books at the Brotherhood on the Family Centre. When I moved out of that, three years of that was quite killing - very, very hard work - I stayed at the Brotherhood and became the Director of Policy and Research, and at the time it was Innovations, they don't call it that anymore. Social Policy, Research and Innovations it was called in my time, and my job was to do the development of Social Policy, trying to influence politicians and decision makers of one sort and another, and I supervised the Brotherhood research. It is the same job that Alison McClelland does now. Also any new project that was used for demonstration purposes.

Rosie

Program development?

Connie

Sort of, there were more demonstration programs, some of them didn't get off the ground. The one that is still going and is off the ground is the SPAN Project in Northcote. That is my idea. I am very proud of the SPAN Project, it was one demonstration project that really worked.

Rosie

For people that don't know about the SPAN Project, that is older people teaching younger people, people with skills passing them onto other people.

Connie

It is people with skills transferring them to other people, sometimes they are school children, sometimes they are other older people. It is like a neighbourhood house in a way for older people. But they do some very interesting work there. They do literacy work with children, they teach each other skills. There is an art program, there's all sorts of interesting things like that there.

Then what happened? I stayed at the Brotherhood for ten years.

Rosie

What made you leave?

Connie

Ten years was too long! In that time I had done three different jobs, of course, it wasn't the one job. I have got a sort of theory, that after you have been in a job for three to five years you have used up all you can give that job, and you must then move onto something new and more stimulating and challenging. So that you will see my history is like that. I have never stayed anywhere very long. The Brotherhood was the longest, but as I say I did three different jobs there, so that was interesting. The demonstration projects were interesting, because each one was a new challenge.

So after the Brotherhood I went to my second go at academia. Head of School at what was then the PIT - Phillip Institute of Technology. I found that was better in terms of what the students learnt, I think they learnt more about social change than system change, and I thought that was from that point of view quite a good job.

But I was disappointed in a way, because everybody was so sort of set up with their particular jobs and tasks and knowledge, that I found it very difficult to teach anything. I found myself just administering and that was all. So I thought, "This is not bringing about change. Just making it easy for teachers and social work students, which is what an administrative job is. It is a facilitating job" - I followed Frances Donovan actually. Frances had set it up very well, but I found myself not teaching and that didn't suit me.

One day Mary Draper rang me up and she said, "The job that is made for you is advertised today in "The Age"", and it was the Director of Social Development in the Premier's Department. I said, 'Ha, I might be able to bring some changes about there". So off I went, I got that job, and it was very interesting and I was responsible for a lot of innovations, many of which have been slowly broken down by the current government.

Rosie

The Premier at the time was John Cain?

Connie

John Cain, yes. There were all sorts of wonderful things that happened at that time that we were able to bring about. They were real changes to systems, but unfortunately they are being undone at the moment.

From there, I moved to the Community Services Department.

Rosie

Why did you leave the Premier and Cabinet?

Connie

It didn't seem to be directly involved with people enough, really. I knew the changes were good and they were happening and if you read anything of the Cain Government time, you will know all about those. I did all sorts of things that were important. I didn't feel close enough to see the changes happening. So I thought I would move to Community Services Department, and there I felt more involved. Then I think I began to burn out a bit, I was getting a bit exhausted.

John Cain said that what he wanted to do was set up a Planning Office for looking across all Government Departments to try and see what could be done about legislation for older people. That was one of the really good things that he did, and that has since been undone, of course.

So he asked me would I go and do it, and because I was feeling a bit exhausted I said yes, because it seemed to me it might be a less exhausting job, which it was.

Then I just got that all set up and ticking along and going well, and David Penington asked me if I would go and take over the Social Work Department at Melbourne University, so I thought about that for a long time. I thought, "Maybe I will be able to move them out of that casework mode, into looking at social change and more social policy directed things." So I went there for three years and then I had to retire because I was 65.

Rosie

Did you get them out of case work mode?

Connie

I don't think so. There are some good changes. I brought in a few community development people and a few policy people, and with the current crisis up there most of those people have been fired.

Rosie

I don't know about the current crisis up there.

Connie

The current crisis is that they have had to downsize and had to lose something like six people.

Rosie

That is the University-wide crisis, not just a social work crisis?

Connie

Yes, it is not a social work crisis, it is a University crisis. What they have had to do is ask all the people on contract to leave. A lot of those people are people I brought in. The remaining person who is a very good policy person is Wendy Weeks, she is still there. The current Head, Alun Jackson, is more oriented to policy and administration really than casework, but the majority of the rest of the people there are still teaching casework. Well, they have got that orientation, they don't all teach casework, of course, but they have that orientation.

Rosie

So you left there because you were at retiring age?

Connie

I had to leave there and I was offered two things about that time - the Chair of the Adult and Further Education Board, which was really a half-time job, and also whether I would become President of the North West Hospital Board. So I did both those things, one was voluntary of course, the other was a paid job. I was lucky in a way that although the Government changed, they left me there to serve out my term and then they didn't reappoint me, they appointed a good Liberal Party member - which I am not.

So then I thought, "Will I work or won't I work?" and for a while I did nothing and I got bored, because with that sort of a background, when something happened all the time, you can't just sit around doing nothing, so people started to ask me to do things and I started to do them. But I keep it very much under control and I have done a few things, a few consultancy things and I am doing a couple now. So that is the employment history.

I think the motivation was always to see if you could change the system, because it always was so bad, and it was just starting to get really good and improve and now it is going backwards again. So I suppose everybody has been telling you that as you have been moving around.

Rosie

I experience it myself, as life.

Connie

It is not good. I think several things together are making it worse and worse and worse. Privatisation is one of them, of course, and compulsory tendering is another. Deinstitutionalisation hasn't been done properly. These are all things that are problems.

Rosie

So just leading on from that, what have the frustrations been? We are starting to talk about the frustrations now.

Connie

Well the frustrations are that it is almost impossible to change the system for the benefit of people who are disadvantaged, and that includes a lot of people. It goes right through women, ethnic groups, poor people, I mean there a lot of very disadvantaged people and it is not improving now. It did improve for a while, things were looking reasonable and I suppose the one that we have maintained, and it took years to get it, was to get the Aged Pension to a reasonable level.

Older people now are not too badly off. So obviously they own their own homes of course. If they don't own their homes they are not. But the majority do own their own homes, but those who are renting or don't own their own homes are still in a very bad position, and the Brotherhood is trying to

work on that now.

I didn't go anywhere near the Brotherhood after I left it for about ten years, but I am now on the Brotherhood Board, so I hear a lot of what is really happening.

Rosie

Other frustrations?

Connie

Yes. It has been difficult being a woman in some of the jobs that I have had. I have actually been turned down for jobs because I was a woman, right early in my career, I will never forget this. It was when I was just about to leave the Mental Health Department. I applied for a job as Supervisor of Family Group Homes. I was interviewed by Alison Player and the man who was in charge of Child Welfare at the time, whose name I have forgotten, and one other. They actually told me I should be home minding my children.

Rosie

Oh dear! Is that the job that Philip Anderson got, or before that?

Connie

Gudren Malare got it. There have been other experiences like that. That one sticks in my mind, because it is the first time that I have experienced that sort of thing. The children were well cared for - I had a Mothercraft Nurse and God knows what. I wasn't working for money, that's what it amounted to. I will never forget that. There were other occasions.

Rosie

How did you know that, Connie - they straight out told you at the interview?

Connie

They told me in the interview. Other times I hadn't known actually, but I felt that that was the reason. You know when you are the best candidate and when you are not. I think that is the only job that I have ever applied for that I didn't get.

There are other occasions when you know that being a woman has altered the situation. I applied during the Cain Government time, that is the other job that I didn't get, to be the Chairperson of the Ethnic Affairs Commission. I have got an Italian background and I thought I was eminently suitable to do that job, and I had a lot of experience within the bureaucracy then, and I didn't get that job and I am pretty sure it was because I was a woman.

Rosie

What was it like as a woman working in the Government Department?

Connie

It was all right. In the Premier's Department I was really the only woman head of a division, the others

were all men. I didn't find that too difficult. The permanent head would occasionally say things like, "There, there dear, it will be all right", you know. But you get used to it after a lifetime working and don't take too much notice. It wasn't too bad, and I think that was largely because Cain had several female advisers and they did a lot about equal opportunity during that period, so it wasn't too bad at all.

Rosie

Other frustrations, or would you like to go on to satisfactions?

Connie

When I saw your questions, I tried to think. I suppose one of the biggest frustrations is the way in which social work doesn't change much. I am finding it difficult to put it into words, but the Social Work School at Melbourne, for instance, I reckon are still teaching the same sort of stuff as it used to teach when I was a student. That was 40 years ago!

I think there have been some changes in recent times, particularly through the AASW. There is a whole saga there you should ask Colin about too. Colin and I were terribly heavily involved in the business of creating the Social Welfare Union.

Rosie

I have got a whole section on that.

Connie

Yes, who has told you about it?

Rosie

I have heard from Helen Stuchberry, and also Frances has said something about it, and so has Elery.

Connie

You should find out a lot about that, because the AASW when I was heavily involved in it, there was a lot of resentment. It was a Union. They decided they would prefer to be a professional body only, and Colin and I were very active at the Federal Executive level of orchestrating that change of the setting up of the

Social Welfare Union. Colin will remember much more about it than I do, and Elery will too. But that is important - I find it difficult to find the words to describe it, but it seems to be stuck in a mold way back there.

Rosie

The AASW does? You are also saying social work hasn't changed much in the way it is taught.

Connie

No, I don't think so. No, not at Melbourne. It is quite different in the other schools, and I don't know a lot about them. I think RMIT is not bad, as a School of Social Work. They seem to still find major

defects in people rather than the system.

Rosie

Social Workers, looking for causality. What about satisfaction from working, in all the different areas you have been working as a Social Worker?

Connie

Well, I achieved some things in the Premier's Department, which were lasting, which were changes for the better. I like seeing people grow and develop.

Rosie

Were there any satisfactions in academia for you?

Connie

Not many, no.

Rosie

So seeing people grow and develop. Mental Health field - is that where you saw people grow and develop?

Connie

Not really.

Rosie

What about the Counselling at CWS, is that where you are talking, or are you talking Family Centre?

Connie

CWS there was a lot of changes there that I think were important. It was change in individuals and families, and also I introduced marriage counselling to CWS and adolescent counselling. We did some good work in adolescent counselling. We set up support services. Wendy Weeks was working at the time in CWS. We set up the first hostel for girls who were wards of the State.

Rosie

Which one was that?

Connie

It was in Kew. I have got a couple of books about it that Wendy wrote. We were funded by the State Government and Wendy still has contact with some of those people. Once again it was providing them with resources and helping them to develop and learn new things, and it wasn't putting them down all the time.

Rosie

Empowering them.

Connie

We were empowering them. That was what the Family Centre was all about, it was empowering people. I suppose if you want to look at satisfactions, that is the satisfaction that I have had along the line. I have tried to empower people and groups of people in systems. That was what I was trying to do.

Rosie

Wonderful. Would you like to move on and talk about the AASW or does that really sum up your satisfactions?

Connie

I think it probably does.

Rosie

There is so much there.

Connie

Yes. But it is terribly disappointing in some ways. I did an enormous amount of work at the Brotherhood after the Family Centre on employment and unemployment. I worked very closely with David Griffiths and we did a lot of work. We even had a demonstration program, for the Neighborhood Employment Development Program. One of the things that really annoys me is that they are doing it over again. All the things we did, the lessons we learned, and they were all very well researched and written up. It was all there, even the Brotherhood in its latest program called The Future of Work is just repeating what we did in the 1970's. Now that is not a satisfaction, that is a dissatisfaction.

Rosie

People don't learn.

Connie

Well, people don't learn, we were really, I suppose, ahead of our time in a way. The Employment Development Program was actually into hydroponics and recreating, not quite recycling, doing up old cemeteries and using bluestone in creative ways. They are only starting to do that now as part of employment development programs, and we were doing it in the 1970's. It makes me furious. Maybe we are just a bit ahead of time, but you would think people would learn **Rosie**
So people are reinventing the wheel.

Connie

It is very interesting actually. One of the things that we are using once again, talking about satisfaction and dissatisfaction, one of the things we did in the Family Centre was a thing called developmental plans and open files. Each family person had a plan and they owned their own file. Now that was fine, and that is one of the ideas from the Family Centre that has really gone all over Australia.

But the cheek of some of them. I have had people telling me about this wonderful Open File. I makes me cranky.

Rosie

It even got into Community Services Victoria.

Connie

That's right. I have forgotten the name of the Regional Director, but I did a review with him - I can see him.

Rosie

Gerry Pearce, Jack Halliday?

Connie

No, neither of those.

Rosie

John Leatherland.

Connie

No, a little bit before that. A bloke with curly hair. Geelong, that area.

Rosie

Denbigh Richards.

Connie

No, before Denbigh. Anyway, I reviewed his practices with him and we did open files and the whole business. Anyway twenty years later, somebody tries to tell me all about Open Files. That sort of thing really makes me furious, that people don't know where ideas come from, they reinvent them.

Rosie

They don't acknowledge them.

Connie

I didn't particularly want acknowledgment.

Rosie

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that they were not good at and they are still not good at is the public front of the Association. People must ring up nearly every day asking for a comment on this that and the other thing, they never quite got on top of that. So when you see a very important social issue coming up, you never see that the AASW said that. You don't get that sort of thing, we tried, I tried terribly hard when I was there to see if we could that organised. But it became almost impossible for people to organise themselves well enough to do it. They didn't ever have enough money to employ a publicist or something like that.

But if anything goes wrong in the medical world, you will always get a comment from the AMA.

Psychologists you often get comments from, but never Social Workers. So I am disappointed in that.

Rosie

I remember one time when they commented and they did really well, when I think Helen Murray was involved in the inter-country adoption thing, when the Indian baby was taken away.

Connie

We have done quite well with adoption. When I was President of the AASW we went and saw Whatmore (Director-General, Social Welfare Dept.) about adoption and we got some changes in the adoption law at the time.

Rosie

1984?

Connie

I can't remember, but it would have been well before that.

Rosie

Yes, it would have been well before that. There was one in '64 and one in '84.

Connie

It could have been '64. So that we were able to do the odd thing, but it is not consistent. All this stuff at the moment - why aren't Social Workers commenting on that child that has been put in gaol. They are not social action-oriented, I reckon that is because of their training.

Rosie

Those that are are not mobilised enough, they are too isolated.

Connie

The AASW should be able to do something about that. We did try pretty hard when I was there. I don't know what they have done since. I became too frustrated.

Rosie

So you weren't actively involved in the Association after 1972, after the ASWU was set up?

Connie

For a little while. But then the ASWU started to have some real problems and I got involved in a whole lot of other things. I was very heavily involved in setting up the Industry Training Board for welfare services, I forget what it was called. Community Services I think, now it is Community Services and Health. That was a very important job I did while I was partly - I used to do a lot of that work for the Brotherhood. But the AASW should be doing that, but it sees itself as just a professional study group really. I think it should be more than that.

Rosie

So what do you think is the future role of the AASW?

Connie

It will go on being a professional study group, I assume. I think it should be more of a public front, lobby group, it should be able to exert pressure on politicians about social issues. They know more about social problems and issues than anybody else in the field. They don't use the knowledge to get change. That's what annoys me, I suppose. I tried for a while, but I didn't get very far, so I gave it away.

Rosie

You tried for a long time.

Connie

Then I gave it away.

Rosie

Did you want talk anymore about the split, when you worked with Colin Benjamin?

Connie

I think I was Federal Vice-President at the time. We believed that there ought to be a Union that covered more than Social Workers, and in fact it does. The ASWU covers all sorts of people these days, from Community Development Workers right through. We believed there ought to be a more comprehensive Union and the AASW at the time not only felt that other people shouldn't be a part of their Union, but they didn't really want to be a Union either. They didn't want to worry about working conditions, never have. Just wanted to be a study group really.

I think it is changing. They have done quite a good job on the competency issue. But this is very recent, these are recent changes and I think they are good ones. But really I dropped out of it a long time ago, in fact I stopped being a member for ages, but when I went to become Professor of Social Work at Melbourne University, I thought I had to be a member.

Rosie

You have a bit more satisfaction since from seeing some of that work done.

Connie

Well I got terribly involved in a whole lot of things too. Through all this I did a Masters on the Family Centre and maybe that is one of the reasons that I dropped out too. I did that in 1978, I think.

Rosie

Was that a Masters in Social Work or Arts?

Connie

In those days you got a Master of Arts (Social Work).

Rosie

I think I remember that. You did that in 1978.

Connie

I think so. I did it when I left the Family Centre. I was on the ABC at the time as a Commissioner. Whitlam introduced some Scholarships, has anybody told you about this?

Rosie

No.

Connie

Whitlam introduced some scholarships for Social Workers. There weren't enough senior Social Workers in Australia. So he introduced 70 scholarships for the whole of Australia and quite a few of us in Victoria got them. Myself, Liz Ozanne was another one, Colin Benjamin. There were about seven of us of the 70 in Victoria.

Rosie

To do a Higher Degree?

Connie

Full pay while you were doing a Higher Degree.

Rosie

Wonderful.

Connie

It was wonderful. So for eighteen months I didn't work, but got paid my full salary while I did a Masters. It is down there on the front, under Awards -1975.

Rosie

Actually that was the year that Whitlam was dismissed.

Connie

Yes, I was on the ABC when he was dismissed. Because I remember when the announcement was made in an ABC meeting. Dick Downey died on the same day, he was Chairman. It was a terrible day, I will never forget it. He was

Chairman of the Commission and he died the morning that Whitlam was run out of Government.

So that is when I did my Masters, and then after that went back to the Brotherhood.

Rosie

Well, it proved, I suppose, that it was worth putting time into getting more Senior Social Workers, giving them time to study.

Connie

It was a good idea. It meant that some people who would never have got Post-Graduate Degrees, and there weren't many. There were about two people in Victoria that had Post-Graduate Degrees and they got them from somewhere else.

Len had one, he got it from America. So there were very few people even at the University. So the idea was they would help a lot of us, some people just didn't get there.

Rosie

Can I ask you about major issues and debates that were significant during your professional life or significant changes - issues, debates, changes?

Connie

Gosh, there were so many of them. I should have given that a lot of thought, I haven't really.

Rosie

I think there is a lot of value doing it off the top of your head.

Connie

I am just trying to remember. I think one of the significant things for the profession is that it started to be paid properly. I can remember my very first AASW meeting, a grand old lady of the profession, whose name I am going to forget, standing up at a meeting and making the argument that Social Workers should not be paid. The old lady bountiful stuff. She was a very good Social Worker too and trained. Well, there have been a lot of changes since then. At least they are paid a reasonable wage, still not good, but reasonable.

I suppose one of the really big issues that I had in and out of my life has been the Child Protection thing, mandatory reporting. I have always been against it, I think the Victorian Branch was against it, as Branch President, even as far back as that I remember going to meetings at the Children's Hospital against mandatory reporting. Then again when Whatmore was around and again at various times when I was in the Department, I think Carolyn Hogg was the Minister at the time. We had a lot of talking to her about mandatory reporting and stopped it from happening then. So that has been a really big issue, as you have gathered, against mandatory reporting.

Another big issue that is more recent is the deinstitutionalisation issue. It was one of the big things that happened while I was working in the Premier's Department and then in the Community Services Department. The ten year plan for the future of intellectual disability was written at the time. I served on the Committee from the Premier's Department that steered that whole thing. I don't like what is happening now, in relation to deinstitutionalisation. Not that I am against it, but I think it has been done without the proper resources, and it has almost been done as a money saving measure rather than for the good of the people. So that I think there are people who are out there who are not getting the best out of their lives. They are not being included in the community, so that brings me to another big thing that I am doing at the moment.

I am member of the Victorian Community Foundation. That was the Foundation that set up Ross House. Ross House is a big building in the middle of the city which was bought through the Victorian Community Foundation to provide office space for small organisations, and that was its first big project. That took about ten years.

The second big project is what I am heavily involved in now, and that is to look at deinstitutionalisation and what happens out there to people who are being deinstitutionalised.

Rosie

As a watchdog?

Connie

No, it is research. Setting up and looking at programs that might assist. At the moment we are working through the Neighbourhood Houses. That is my influence there, because I was still on the Adult Education Board when we started this project, and Neighbourhood Houses are the biggest provider of Adult Education, alongside the CAE. We are working through Neighbourhood Houses to see how they are including people who have been deinstitutionalised. And they are. In some Neighbourhood Houses they are crowding out the people who aren't intellectually disabled. It is becoming quite a problem for the Neighbourhood Houses, because they need different sorts of programs.

Anyway, I am heavily involved in that at the moment. That is a big change. The other thing that I was involved in that was also a big change was the movement of intellectual disability out of psych services, because I was in the Premier's Department and heavily involved in the transfer of functions from the Health Department to the Community Services Department. All that Child Care stuff went to CSV. Intellectual disability went to CSV. So I was chairing the Committee that organised that. Meredith Sussex did a lot of the work and that took an enormous amount of my time, that transfer of functions.

That and the Prostitutes' enquiry, I spent a lot of time on that too. The Premier's Department set up a working party on prostitution and we were the pre-runner to the Royal Commission. The working party recommended the Royal Commission and Marcia Neave then became the chairperson of the Royal

Commission. But we did a lot of preparatory work for her. They were the sorts of things that I used to do with the Premier's Department.

Rosie

Is there anything you haven't done?

Connie

It has its disadvantages, having done everything. You never really become an expert in anything. I have done just about everything, yes.

Rosie

That actually brings us into the next question very nicely and that's did you have any further comments on your area of expertise in Social Work?

Connie

I suppose I started out as a caseworker and ended up as a Manager. I think the casework experience stood me in good stead as a Manager, because you learn a lot about managing people. Some people say women manage differently from men and they do indeed. They think more about how their workers are going to respond to each other and to their clients and to themselves, so I think that experience was very important.

I have always thought that everything I did was social work. Apart from a few of the things that I did when I was working for Clyde Holding, as Research Officer in the Parliament, I think nearly everything else I did was social work really. I can't say that studying water was social work.

Rosie

It is a service for humans.

Connie

It is. But I see it all as social work, I see social work as having a very wide ambit.

Rosie

So you started as a caseworker and ended up as Manager, but you have also told me in between about your role in social action, research, program development, counselling etc. Lots of other things as well.

Connie

But when I sat down to think about what sorts of jobs I wanted to take as a Consultant. I haven't ever advertised, I just sit here and people ring me up and say, "Will you do such and such?" But then I think to myself, "Now what things will I do and what things won't I do?" and it is quite interesting that I am still using case work skills, but most of the work that I am doing is organisational development, professional development, management stuff really. But I do use casework skills all the time.

I did a professional development review for the Anglican Marriage Guidance Council. That was the most recent thing I did, and then when I had to present it to the staff, they were highly critical. It is a terrible organisation or it was, it is going to change, because we have done a beautiful review and it is going to work. So when I was telling the staff, a small group, about sixteen people, I was using group work techniques. I often do when I am trying to get something across, acting as a facilitator or trying to get an idea across to a group of people. I use group work techniques and when I am talking to an individual I use case work techniques.

Although it is management work I am doing, I still use a lot of the techniques I have learnt in social work.

Rosie

Because you were involved in Human Resources management.

Connie

Yes. So, the other big issue that seems to have faded and gone away now is the whole issue of regionalisation. You will know about that if you worked in the Department. First we were regionalized, and then we undid regionalization, now we are regionalising again. Some people are just discovering regionalisation and other people are centralising again. That has been a running issue for all my working life.

The other running issue for me has been anti-Freudian theory. I am very much against Freudian theory. I suppose if I embrace any sort of theory it is sort of structuralist. One time I was a learning theorist for a while, but I got over that.

So they are the sorts of things that have been running through my working life. I haven't any other really big issue.

I spent a lot of time working in Co.As.It for a while, with the Italian community. It means Community Assistance Program, something like that. It is well known, it looks after the welfare of Italians.

Rosie

I was wondering before, presumably you are bi-lingual.

Connie

No, I am not. But I have been very involved at times in ethnic affairs. I was on the Migrant Task Force, I was on a Federal Government enquiry into migrant services for migrants - Jim Jupp headed that. So I have done a bit of work in that area. I designed setting up the service program for Co.As.It when it first started.

Rosie

Because it has been extended over the years.

Connie

Yes, it is becoming quite big now.

Rosie

It is moving out to the West now.

Connie

Is it? I didn't know that. That's good, so they should be.

When we first started, it was a lady President sitting in a back room in Carlton, trying to do social work and having no idea about how to do it, so I persuaded her she needed a professional social worker, which they finally employed, this is before the grant-in-aid scheme. That came in later, they found the

money and the Italian community employed a girl who was a very good graduate and was out of her depth completely. I have forgotten her name. So I spent a lot of time with her, writing service programs and stuff like that. It became terribly bureaucratised, so I left.

Rosie

So that is another example where you have had an opportunity to walk into an agency that has had a bit of clean slate and start again.

Connie

I have done that several times. I like doing that actually. I prefer to do that, once it is established I don't want to be there anymore.

Rosie

So what do you see is the future of the Social Work profession?

Connie

I think it might go down the drain if we are not careful. It is a shame, because it has got a lot of value in a certain sort of way, but it is losing a lot of credibility, not only in Australia, but all over the world.

Rosie

How is it doing that, Connie?

Connie

Well, you would have read some of that stuff in England about Child Protection. The Child Protection thing seems to be ruining it. There was a time when if you wanted someone to really move on a project and do something, you would employ a Social Worker. They don't do that anymore.

Rosie

So you feel that is an indication that the profession has lost credibility?

Connie

I feel the profession has lost a lot of credibility. It is a shame, because I think it has a nice wide education that enables it to do almost anything in Human Services, that is why I have been able to do almost anything in Human Services because of that very broad education. It just doesn't seem to have that sort of credibility anymore. I don't know what the others are saying about that. I think it has lost a lot of its credibility.

Rosie

So if things were more positive, what would you see it doing?

Connie

I think it should be the forefront of change, really.

Rosie

The cutting edge.

Connie

The cutting edge of change, if you want to use those words. In the social justice movement, that I have got heavily involved in towards the end of the Cain Government, I was on the Social Justice Commission. There were very few Social Workers interested in it and yet I would have thought that Social Justice is something they should have been on about. But there were very few people there, I am trying to think who was on the Committee. I think I was the only Social Worker.

Rosie

Was Caroline Hogg involved?

Connie

No, that would have been the Parliamentary Committee, she was on that. Mary Crooks was Chairing that particular one. But the Social Justice strategy, the Cain Social Justice strategy was invented by me and Mike Salvaris. That was part of the work we did in the Premier's Department. Then it all built up. But there weren't Social Workers interested in it. They seemed to be afraid of politics and I mean in the real sense, not party politics, in the broad sense. They seemed to be afraid of political acts.

Rosie

Political processes, activities, pressure and so on.

Connie

I think they are scared of politics.

Rosie

So they need to become more comfortable in that context in order to achieve these things you are talking about.

Connie

They should be in the forefront, be out there. Where is all the screaming about what is going on at the moment. I don't see many Social Workers actually saying anything much about it, in the newspapers, you get an occasional one. The lass from Missions to Streets and Lanes often writes newspaper letters. Bronwyn Pike is often in the newspaper, but I don't think she is a Social Worker.

Where's all the protesting, why isn't the Association protesting about privatisation? It is their clients that are suffering.

Rosie

ACOSS gets in there occasionally.

Connie

ACOSS does and the Brotherhood does. But the Brotherhood doesn't have many Social Workers any more, I can't think of any, John Wise has left. No, there are very few Social Workers there now. Alison McClelland is the Head of Social Policy, she was a Social Worker.

I would have thought there would be absolute screaming about some of the things that are happening at the moment. Because what is happening is the services for people have been downgraded, they are starting to cost a lot of money, which poor people don't have. A lot of disadvantaged people don't. How can they?

I am disappointed in the profession and I think that unless it really does something about these issues, it will go down the gurgler. Yet, the newsletter says that the membership is growing.

Rosie

Perhaps that is an indication that people are looking for somewhere to focus on something.

Connie

It would be nice if that were true.

Rosie

Did you have any other comments on the Social Work profession?

Connie

It is the lack of innovation. All that Child Protection stuff that is going on at the moment, there ought to be stuff from the Social Work profession that will give them the grand plan or strategy or something that can be done about it all. But I don't know, apart from Goddard, who does a few things out at Monash. I don't know that he is presenting any strategies to overcome the problem.

There are no Social Workers in Parliament that I know of. Very few in the senior Public Service. More and more Social Workers going into private practice. I think that is almost a contradiction. In my casework days I could have never have charged a fee for anything. To me it is contradiction, people who have problems, to be paid for helping people that have got problems.

So I think the future is bleak unless they do something about themselves, and I think it should come from the Association. As I have said to you before, I think it is beginning to get a feel, certainly on a national level. But I would have thought they would be just as outspoken as ACOSS on issues and they are not. They have tried and tried over the years, but it doesn't work.

Rosie

Well, thank you for a wonderful interview about what has obviously been a really long and distinguished career.

Thank you very much.