



Australian Association of Social Workers Inc. (Victorian Branch)

50th Anniversary Oral History Project

Transcript of Interview – Edith Bennet

Rosie

This is the tape of an interview with **Edith Bennett** who has followed a distinguished career in social work and related fields, and is currently retired, having worked in social work for some 30 years. Edith 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. Do you understand that copyright of this interview is shared by you and the Association?

Edith

Yes.

Rosie

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

Edith

Yes.

Rosie

Thank you. We hope that 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 22nd August at Burwood. Can we begin by asking you how you first became interested in social work?

Edith

Well, it was a gradual build-up of one's whole background, I would think. I grew up in Western Australia in a very typical suburban middle-class background with parents who were interested in other people, although my mother was very much at home and my father was a business man. My mother certainly took no active part in any sorts of community organisations or anything like that, in those days. But the interest in people I remember quite vividly during the depression, men without jobs coming to the door, and we always gave them a meal on the back verandah. We set it up on the back verandah - we couldn't give them work always, but we were very aware and I was always very aware. We had a little woman doing our washing, a little Irishwoman with an alcoholic husband, and I

was very aware that she did everybody else's work that was too hard for them to do themselves. She moved around from day to day doing the hardest work in everybody's house. The housewives thought it was too much for them.

That was the sort of background that I came from. There was no sign of a school of social work and I had never even heard of the profession of social work. Well, then I moved on. The school I went to was very conscious of building responsibility in students. I remember the prefect system and the active responsibility the older kids were expected to take in bringing the people in their houses up to the best of their potential, where we as fifteen to sixteen year old prefects took ourselves very seriously. We used to pick up the kids who weren't doing so well further down the school and find all sorts of ways of making them feel that they were doing well.

Then of course I moved briefly into teaching after that. That was my first experience as an adult, and was in combination with my undergrad work at West Australian University.

There we were, as most children were, then sent off to Methodist Sunday School. We hated it! We were sent off regularly every week until we revolted at the age of about eleven, but certainly we got some of the church, the Methodist Church's emphasis on social meanings because it was there and we must have absorbed it somehow. Later on I was fairly actively involved in the Student Christian Movement at the University.

Rosie

So you left school and went to the University of WA and did a course in Arts and did some teaching after that?

Edith

I went straight to the University of WA and did an ordinary Arts Degree. Part-time, I got a thing called a Trained Teacher's Certificate, which was one year at a government-run teacher's college preparing people, and then after that I worked in a little one-teacher school out in the country. Then I moved into a three-teacher country school briefly. Then I was posted down to the correspondence classes, because broadcasting to schools was just beginning, and I think they thought that I might move into that after a while when I got to know what that was all about. Also, I wanted to be in the city amongst my friends and it was a favour to me as well. At that stage the WAAF opened, and the WAAF director came over.

Rosie

And what was the WAAF?

Edith

Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force. It had opened six months earlier and had been closed down because the WAAF were too much of a nuisance amongst the men. Then Pearl Harbour happened and they needed the WAAF in a hurry to release the men, you see, so the WAAF Director, who

was a Clare Stevenson and very much a big business woman who worked for Berlei Corset show. She was in staff training, or very senior in that, and she was recruited to set up a WAAAF, a first for women's services. She came over to Western Australia, and a friend of mine who was in the city - I'd just come down from the country - came speaking glowingly about what the WAAAF was going to do, and I thought I'd go along and make some enquiries. I was not very serious about joining at that stage and I found myself whipped in on the WAAAF's Director's last day of interviewing, and somebody came to me and said "You'll be in Melbourne by Christmas". So of course going to Melbourne was pretty exciting for a Western Australian. We were very cut off over there.

Rosie

Can I ask how old you were then?

Edith

Twenty-three. What happened, you see, they were recruiting WAAAF officers. They had to start with officers from somewhere, you didn't go through the ranks. We were given a crash three weeks' course at MLC Melbourne, which was a rude shock to me. We took ourselves seriously as students. We were looking at all sorts of issues. I remember the SCM running a whole day at the University called "What of the Aborigine?"

Rosie

The SCM was the Student Christian Movement?

Edith

And really through that, I came into contact with very top notch people over in the eastern states. In Western Australia, various professors belonged to it you know -Professor of Philosophy - and over here we ran student conferences and I came over to one in St. Peters in Adelaide and one at Geelong Grammar School with Mr Darling, who later became head of the ABC. They were really some of the top people, professors in each university. They provided leadership for students and the emphasis was on thinking. As students, your job was to think. We mixed amongst ourselves, some of them were very top students in those days. So I learnt a lot from there. And again the emphasis was on social responsibility. At the age of 23, as I say, we were given this crash course at MLC and sent out to train other WAAAF.

I went up to New South Wales. I can remember very vividly I'd never conducted an interview in my life, didn't know anything about it, but being sent down to Woolloomooloo where they were recruiting WAAAF, and I was told there'd been five very senior WAAAF officers in the early batch before they decided to close it. I arrived to find this milling throng of women, probably about 500 of them, and a WAAAF officer fighting her way through them to me when I arrived on the edge of the crowd, and saying "Well, Squadron Officer Hawthorn hasn't arrived, I think you'd better get started". So here I was. I saw one woman after another, putting them in just because I liked the look of them or I didn't.

The WAAAF had many situations where you had no background for it. As a WAAAF officer and from

Bradfield Park where we did training, I was sent up to Uranquinty, which was on the other side of Wagga, and I was really escorting the first group of air women up to form a unit there. We arrived to not a blade of grass, a fence - a compound sort of thing with a few iron bedsteads thrown in its middle. And I was trying to get the WAAAF settled and not being very responsible, I went up to the office to say goodbye to the WAAAF CO and was told, "I've just got a signal, you're to stay here with the air women". I'm only giving these as illustrations, but you learnt to handle situations.

I met my first unmarried mother in the services. I hadn't had such things in my experience. I was asked to see a WAAAF whose name an American had given as a VD contact. I remember being very embarrassed about taking this up with my little WAAAF, this was out at Laverton later, and when I said an American had given her name, she said, "Which one?" This is the kind of experience.

And at Pearce in Western Australia, I went out into the flying unit as officer in charge of WAAAF detachment, as they called it. There was a woman in a hotel near Pearce, which was way out in the bush, and she ran a brothel, and she started trying to recruit WAAAF's in her ranks. It was good experience, you see. I had 300 WAAAFs at Pearce from all walks of life. Suddenly we were thrown together. It was a good background. I'm only saying it because of that. And also the training, straight from the English textbooks, what an officer and a gentleman did. We were the WAAAF equivalent of an officer and a gentleman, and we were supposed to be very responsible for our troops again. We were supposed to be general support for whatever WAAAF, taken away from her own home, got into any strife. We had no training for it.

I can remember going into the mess at Pearce. There were 200 WAAAF officers and me, and how did you handle it, you see? I lived in the nursing sisters' quarters and ate in the WAAAF mess. It was all quite good experience. From that we came on. Under the reconstruction training scheme I had heard of social work in Western Australia for the first time. There was a course called social work in Melbourne, because a good friend of mine from school went over. She was wealthy, she could afford to, you see, and I thought, "That would be nice". That was while I was teaching. I made a few enquiries and it was way beyond me financially, but then after the war, along came the reconstruction training scheme, and that was how I came to do social work.

Rosie

In 1945 or '46?

Edith

That was the end of the war. '45 and '46. Two years it was.

Rosie

And that was at the University of Melbourne? The Diploma of Social Studies?

Edith

With Ruth Hoban. You've probably heard, I expect, of her.

Rosie

She's on my list.

Edith

Yes. Well, you'll be interested to see her background. She kept emphasising to us as students that she was not a practitioner, she was an academic, you see. She hadn't really had much experience, and it was at the time when the prisoners of war from the Japanese prison camps were coming home in shocking condition. That was her first, out at Rockingham, which was on the river at Kew - Rockingham Convalescent it was called, and it was one of my student placements.

Rosie

Really?

Edith

We had a series of rapid student placements in which you picked up what you could. Very often the supervisors didn't quite know what to do with students when you arrived. I went to Joan Tuxen briefly at Red Cross in that time. She was already well established, and I went to the Crippled Children's Association. There I first came across this very special brand of social workers who were psychiatric social workers. Mernie Yeomans had gone off during the war to England and done a course, and she taught me to do my first social history. I didn't know what a social history was, but I remember her insisting I take social histories of these POWs. You might only have had time for two in the time you stayed in the placement, and then you were rapidly sent off somewhere else.

Rosie

I've heard other people say that you did quite a breadth of placements.

Edith

A breadth, but very little depth. Hardly any depth. We read our American text books which didn't mean too much to us, and then we were thrown in the deep end, you see.

Rosie

And what was your first job in the profession?

Edith

Commonwealth Social Services. Lyra rang me on my last day, you see, and said, "Will you come and work for us?" I'd done a placement with her lieutenant Kathleen Crisp. Have you heard about Kathleen Crisp? She was from a Quaker background and she was always Lyra's very faithful lieutenant.

Rosie

And what was Lyra Taylor doing herself at that stage?

Edith

She was head of the Commonwealth Social Work Branch - I think they called it a division later - of the Commonwealth Department of Social Services, and her job was to educate the social workers that you had in little groups of four, five, six, scattered around the states.

Rosie

So she was a national, she had a national position.

Edith

She was a national, brought in by Mr Rowe, the Director-General, to set up social **Rosie**
And she was based in Melbourne?

Edith

Yes. And with her was a non-social worker, Lindsay Cheeseman, who's still around, who was the librarian. She started the Commonwealth Social Services Library that at first none of the men used, none of the administration used at all. So with Lyra, anybody who had any problem out in the field, voluntary agencies, certainly all her own branches throughout Australia, would write and say, "Can you find me anything about this?" and within a couple of days a book would be there, carefully selected. Lindsay did a wonderful job as a librarian. But it was not only to her own division, it was to social workers in all social agencies when there was very little literature available. And she had her contacts in America and Canada that kept pouring the literature in. Mr Rowe gave her the backing and the finance to do it, and she built up a very fine library. Now later on, as the thing developed, the men in her own department began to complain, and they said, "Well, we want to know about that and every time we get it, it's out with some private social agency". So she had to curtail the service. But not only would the book come out, but usually a personal comment from Lyra, "How are you getting on? That's an interesting question you've raised" sort of thing.

Rosie

She must have worked round the clock.

Edith

She did. She was just completely involved and Kathleen Crisp did too, and Kathleen Crisp was asked to go up to Singapore, I think, in the early days when Singapore was getting on its feet and write a social report on the problems of Singapore.

What happened to me, when I went to Brisbane, I'd been working away for about two years getting established, and one day the phone was picked up and Lyra's distinctive voice said "Edith, how would you like to go to America?" Now I had never even thought that even slightly within reach, and what she was doing was offering me a six months' United Nations' Fellowship, which were then restricted to government people. It was hard to get any finance anyway, and the government would only send its own people, but I got my first opportunity to go overseas.

Rosie

When did you go to America?

Edith

I started social work in '48. About '51 I think, yes, 1951, and I went for six months, you see, and they had a whole program set up, in their generosity, for teaching international students who arrived from all over the place. You went first to United Nations Headquarters to get a general orientation to America, and then you went down to various fields. They had all sorts of students coming from all over the world. Then you went down to Washington and they had a woman who was in charge of international student programs - not students, international fellowship programs. There they collected all the people from the whole broad welfare field together for about a week, and then you were moved out. I was sent up for a semester to

University of Michigan - really mostly just auditing. There wasn't time to do it but you got the feel of American social work and how it worked. I was shown incredible generosity in teaching time and everything else. I worked and I wanted to learn about casework in those days you see, but because I was in a government agency they had planned to send me to a government agency. When I got there they discovered that wasn't what I wanted at all. I wanted the American Family Services Association. It was the centre of in-depth casework. So at the very last minute they persuaded Marion Faria who is now one of my very best friends. She'd given up supervising students. She was executor of the agency set up within the University of Michigan. They saw staff members who were in strife and all the rest of it, and it was right in the middle of the primary school so that she took on the job of teaching me for the period while I was there. I learnt enormously from her, and the real thing that it opened up was in about 1957, four years later. I wanted to get back and get more, and I wanted to go and work, but Australians weren't allowed in to work, you see, unless they could prove that no American could do the job. By then Marion was down in St. Louis and she persuaded her agency, her very big family service agency, to persevere until they got me in, and it was very generous of them. It was no advantage to them.

Rosie

So you went back?

Edith

I went back for a full year that time, and worked as a caseworker under very good supervision in the full battery of psychiatric consultation at the university, which was wonderful, and they paid me for it while they did the teaching. They paid me as a caseworker which was incredible generosity, really. On the fellowship program, it gave me the contacts that you'd have to fish for if you went by yourself - for instance, the chief research officer down there in Washington. Kathleen Crisp had been before on one and I arrived down and was just settling myself in to the YW, which was quite an elaborate set up down there, and a voice said, "Edith Bennett? I heard there was another Australian social worker here, and we like Australians. Would you like to come and have dinner with us?" You see, this is the kind of contact it gave me. Now they made their home open to me while I was there which meant all

their thinking about the difficulties of research at the time, and when I went back in '57 to St. Louis, because I was overseas and it didn't make anybody there jealous or anything, I was allowed to sit in on all the supervisors' conferences, although I was only a junior caseworker really. I was lucky. Really lucky.

Rosie

But you had had something like ten years social work experience at that stage.

Edith

Yes. And Lyra always insisted that it was no good sending beginning social workers and that what you had to do was get your teeth into the Australian situation, and the International Fellowships' Program said the same thing. They don't want people until they've done at least five years practical work in the field. That it's a waste of their time. They either swallow the whole American scene whole and go back and reject their own country's scheme, or they don't understand what it's all about. I would never have got there by myself. We were paid a pittance in those days. One of the big things we had to work for was better salaries, that's for sure.

Rosie

So how did you get your teeth into the Melbourne scene, in terms of what you just said before?

Edith

Into the Melbourne scene?

Rosie

Well, into the Australian scene? You started in Melbourne with Lyra Taylor.

Edith

No I didn't. She sent me straight down to Adelaide.

Rosie

You started in Adelaide?

Edith

And then after about a year and a half as I remember - it might have been two years - I was sent to work about in Sydney and Canberra, working away on cases, but also keeping my ear to the ground and reporting back to Lyra on anything I observed in Canberra, and then I was switched to Brisbane where I did a solid chunk of work. I think I must have been there about four or five years or something.

Rosie

Before you went to America?

Edith

About three years before I went the first time. But with the casework we had to work how we did it

ourselves. Brisbane was incredibly backward welfare-wise. The state was very sure it was right. Joe came along later and Joe epitomised ... and he did some good things but I can remember setting off, flying to Cairns and coming down by other sorts of transport, picking up cases on the way from the little regional offices that were set up there. They're not offices, they were just one man with a couple of...

Rosie

A clerk? Or a welfare person?

Edith

Not a welfare person. They had no experience. My job was to get them to know what social work could possibly do, you see, and I found that I just couldn't even begin because I knew so little about the local feel of the place. So the first thing I did in each city was scout around until I saw who counted in welfare in the city, and I would go and interview the police. I'd interview the local woman who was doing good works, until gradually I got the feel of the city, and it was then that I did usually one or two cases. But what I was doing - I can remember writing a report - I went up in the middle of drought. The trees were grey with dust. Cattle were dying and feeding along the roads, the brolgas were dancing on the fringes of the town, because there was no water further out. It was quite an experience for me.

Rosie

So you were offering a sort of statewide casework service?

Edith

That's right.

Rosie

How could you pick up those cases and then follow them through?

Edith

You couldn't. But you found what kinds of problems existed. That was in our own department. I'm sorry, I skipped a bit.

Rosie

That's OK.

Edith

Can I go back to the Commonwealth?

Rosie

Certainly.

Edith

You see, I'd already had experience of this because when I was with the Commonwealth in Adelaide, the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Scheme was getting underway. They were doing the rehab themselves, and my job as a social worker (along with all the other bits that social work branches did, was to see the people who'd been on invalid pensions for years and years - go out to the country, have a look, interview the families and make my judgment on what the possible prospect of getting those people back to work was. Now, after I made the report I went back with the whole team, with Dr. Cornish, the doctor. We worked as a team. He interviewed and I interviewed family. So really, I was exposed that way to case after case after case after case. And that was the strength of that early social work. The fact that you'd done it yourself. You hadn't read about it in books.

Rosie

And you were doing a lot of assessment then?

Edith

Yes. You were looking at the social problems. Now the other thing, in those days, there were a few categories, like widow's pension and aged pension, and then there was a general drag-net clause in the legislation, saying that you could pay a special benefit to anybody who by reason of health, so and so, or for any other reason, could not earn a livelihood for himself or his dependents. Now in the course of the ordinary social services paying of benefits, you would come across things that they saw were difficult and they'd ask a social worker to go and do a social assessment. Now you'd go out and, for instance, we picked up the days by seeing case after case after case of women who'd left their jobs to care for old parents, and two of them were living on one aged pension. Now they started as a special benefit to just see whether you pay a benefit to that person, and gradually people realised they were categories. The elderly migrant

who'd been brought out from Europe, sponsored by the family, and a tremendous clash arrived and they weren't entitled to any benefit, and they were hated all the more because they had to be kept. This way, some of the present categories of people covered have been built up by case after case that fell into categories, and we as social workers did that, that kind of writing up the cases so that you could see they were a category.

Now this trained me, when I was supervising students later, I tried to get students, every individual case they saw, to ask themselves, "What general social problem did this case illustrate, and what can be done about the general social problem?" so it was not just casework, but it was part of the look of the case. What are the underlying problems, the general problems, wondering what can be done about it. That was the way I came to look at it, rather than just, "How can I help this family?"

Rosie

So you had a much wider view.

Edith

Very wide.

Rosie

Did you initiate any particular benefit category? Were you able to get any of those recognised in your time?

Edith

Well, special benefits was granted to all women who lost income to care for elderly relatives, so at least they had enough to live on while they were doing it. But I became very aware of the families where all the others married and one would be left at home. There was no respite care. There was nothing. You became very aware of the need for respite care. The families would go off and say, "Well, it's her job to look after mum" and often they'd think, "Mum's happier with her. She's used to her". They didn't even visit. It was very general that. Often the person might be the one in the family that had not married, or had a slight disability, something like that. But it was the lack of support from family for women who were doing this very isolated job, who were destroying any skills they had for jobs, because usually mum died when they were in their middle to late 50s and they couldn't go back to work. No work skills. These were the kinds of problems that threw up as we went out on general cases that seemed to have a problem. The problem of alcoholics eating up all the child endowment. You became very aware that these problems occurred and you kept feeding it in to central administration.

Rosie

So you had that experience before you went to the Sydney/Canberra week about and to Brisbane?

Edith

Well, I had some of it in Adelaide, but it was the continuing job of the social work branches. I had it in Brisbane, I had it in Sydney, I did some cases up in Canberra and I looked around at the special problems of say, young people in Canberra and that kind of thing. You know, that you thought that way in those days. Of course Lyra

thought very clearly. Now, not only did she get social workers employed and feed them with library material all the time, but somehow she got the finance (I can't remember how often it was, probably once every two or three years) to hold a central conference to which she brought social workers in the Department, and my goodness, did we have to work for it. You didn't just arrive and have a chat, you wrote a formal paper. I can remember writing from Brisbane a paper on 'By what criteria do you judge whether a social work branch within the Department was doing its job?' The things came up. It was interesting work. But she always tried to conceptualise, and I can remember working out the things you looked at to see whether your branch was being effective.

Rosie

So the contributions to the conference came from the social workers themselves?

Edith.

The social workers themselves. They'd written papers, I can tell you, and we slaved over them.

Rosie

Fed by the library?

Edith

Fed by the library. Now at the same time, the papers you presented were feeding information back to a central administration you see, because what you were encountering was what they had to deal with in policy.

Rosie

And this was the late '40's early '50s. The post-war years.

Edith

In 1948 it started, yes. After Brisbane I was posted to the same kind of work but in a different setting. That's where I learnt that setting was so important. Brisbane was quite a different kettle of fish from Melbourne.

Rosie

In what sense?

Edith

The whole feel of the thing. It was more sophisticated. In Brisbane, I suppose it was the fact of the isolated states and the further north you went ... In Brisbane there was this ... I'm struggling here. It was a very old-fashioned view of welfare. It was new bidding, plenty of goodwill, you understand, but you were up there and they were down here sort of thing. In Brisbane what you had to do was get the general feeling. But at the same time moving into welfare was this feeling that as a citizen of a country, you were subject to the limitations of being a citizen, therefore if things went wrong for you, whatever your category or class, you had a right to some compensation for it, to have your problem dealt with, partly by the country as a whole. Now it's moving right away from that you see back to people having to look after themselves financially and every other way.

But what we were trying to get over was that welfare needs are there in all classes. Old people have the same needs whether they're rich or poor, although it's easier for some of the rich to deal with. There was always this great discussion about means testing, but it was a moving from thinking of the welfare recipients as being a separate class of people to, "We're all people and we all have problems."

Rosie

You went from Brisbane to the States?

Edith

I went from Brisbane on the United Nations Fellowship to the States and I was back for about a year in Brisbane. I also went over and worked at Nottingham County Council Children's Authority on the end of the fellowship and saw the great contrast between what was happening in England and what was happening in America. I can remember my shock when we were all thinking confidentiality, and this council meeting where everybody gathered around a table, and everybody knew the families that we dealt with, and there was a general discussion by name. Now, it's not too different from the conferences on people's future that are happening now. An awful lot of people get let in on it, don't they?

That was one of the big issues. What is confidentiality in social work? How much help do you deprive clients of by refusing to share what you know about a case with people - even with the clients - by feeling you shouldn't. Is the social work profession's job to keep its little black box of tricks to itself and be special, or to share its knowledge with as many people as can use it to help people?

Gradually one came to the conclusion and this came up very strongly at Allambie. What did you do? People were just beginning in the medical field to think that they needed some social background. Did you allow small groups of medical students in on the Allambie placement meeting, which took the case histories way beyond the Department? We also had groups of lawyers coming in. Did you say, "Oh no, this is confidential". Was it more important for the doctors to understand something about what's happening to families or for the lawyers to understand? You see. It was constantly there.

For a while you felt the childcare staff looking after the children shouldn't know anything about the background. Their job was to care for the children, and they might misuse information. They had to feed in to placement meetings just what they observed about the child, but they weren't to know anything about the family. Later on, assuming the senior child care officer sat in on the placement meeting, the person's story was spreading wider and wider. A bit like we'd had in England on the local council sessions. Now which is better? Because in the long run people are not going to get the help they need unless the whole community understands the need.

Some people are going to suffer by misuse of people's private affairs, but it's where you draw the line that became a matter of personal judgment in each situation. Was it better for Mary McLellan in Brisbane to keep the goodwill of the Director of Social Services and work with him, or to stand up against him and make him reject her and social work? I don't know. It's still there, that problem. Although there's so many conferences. Now in the course, you are moving from being in charge and transmitting things down to taking more and more people further down the scale into your confidence, and then the great realisation that those people further down. I mean generally it became accepted that a lot of the policy things should be initiated by the people who were actually doing the work and passed, would we say, up and over to you to do what you could with policy. The problems are still there. The queries are still there.

Rosie

So you were in Brisbane for another year after the Fellowship?

Edith

A year and a half or something. And then I was posted down to be senior social worker here, you see, and Helen Stuchberry was on my staff there.

Rosie

And had things grown a bit? Was there, for example, a course in social work in Brisbane when you were working?

Edith

No, there wasn't. It was just getting started. Hazel Smith. I can't remember whether it had just started. It wasn't on its feet.

Rosie

So to have a social worker up in Queensland it needed to be someone like yourself who'd been trained at Melbourne.

Edith

Yes, that's right. Certainly when I went up there. And there were eight of us altogether, and as I say our only way of pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps was to meet together interagency and discuss our cases.

Rosie

And you said that one of them was Fay Marles.

Edith

One was Fay. There were some really bright people up there. There were good people. We'd all been through the same things.

Rosie

You came back down to Melbourne as senior social worker of the Department of Social Services?

Edith.

As senior social worker of the Melbourne branch. I had Helen Stuchberry and a very, very good team. You would have known Alison Hunt and I think Ella Webb was there, who later became a senior Commonwealth person at that time. They were all together and we really sharpened our wits on each other there.

Rosie

And your work continued in the area of people who were receiving some sort of financial security?

Edith

Yes. Or had applied for and weren't eligible for, to help them anyway. One of the real jobs we had to do in those days was to work as a sort of go-between, sometimes between outside social workers, say working in hospitals, and the administrative men in Commonwealth Social Services administering benefits and pensions. You got the social workers that the men wouldn't have a bar of, who'd helped their clients bypass the legislation, because they thought the client needed the money and the Commonwealth could afford it. There were a few social workers around Melbourne that the men would not accept reports from. They'd only accept a recommendation from me because the social workers, thinking they were helping their clients, helped the client lie to the Department, sort of thing. To the men whose whole job it was to interpret the legislation, that was absolutely unacceptable.

Rosie

So how did you walk that line? How did you deal with that?

Edith

Well, I talked with the social workers usually. They said, "It's ridiculous. There shouldn't be that rule"... some of them. Evidently they hadn't got from the course that you don't help people break the rule. Now somehow they could have got to a point where the men wouldn't even look at a case they put up for special consideration.

Rosie

Which is not doing anything for their client.

Edith

It didn't help other clients, you might get the benefit for that one, at the moment. But it didn't solve the problem either. Instead of trying to change the situation so that it would meet the need, you bypassed it.

Rosie

So you and your colleagues continued to work on documenting needs and providing service to individuals.

Edith

Yes. Very much providing. The great advantage to us as people and in developing the social role was that we did handle case after case after case after case after case and actually went up and supervised other people's case after case.

Rosie

What about the single parents and the mothers? Did they start to become an issue?

Edith

Yes they did. They were there ... I've just forgotten ... I've lost my track on that one. I don't know what

happened about the single mothers. In Commonwealth, you mean? Yes, well they often got special benefit while their child was very small and that became a category later. Most of the real needs - the unmet needs in the community - came out through studies of special benefit. And now also there was community

pressure from outside after a time to make sure on certain needs through the politicians, which was good.

Rosie

Representing the needs of their people?

Edith

Well, there a clash came up too which you would have struck in adoption. How infuriated adoption workers could be if a minister overruled one of their recommendations. How many times people said to me, "Oh, but it's the child, it's the child's welfare". Of course it was the child's welfare, but again, we didn't gain anything by infuriating the politician. He was the elected representative with the rights. Now it was most distressing because a few bad decisions were made, but if you worked with him he gradually understood what social work was trying to say.

Rosie

And would listen.

Edith

If you clashed as Mary McLelland did when she wouldn't give the director the file, because they felt the whole field was their responsibility.

I went from Commonwealth in 1961. I'd been there twelve years and I wanted to work with children. It was at that point - I suppose it was my old teaching background - that I moved over to Turana, when all the children were there.

Rosie

The receiving depot in Parkville?

Edith

Yes. The receiving depot that had everything from extremely difficult big girls who sat along the ridge of the roof and screamed at the boys opposite, to very violent thirteen year old girls. I met some of the most disturbed children that ever lived in that kind of setting. I also met old Sister Clinton who was superb with the babies, rigid in a nursing sense, afraid for infections, greatly concerned for the children. She did a wonderful job. She'd been through the days when children came into the reception centre, under Dr Tusely, and died of pneumonia and died of diphtheria. She was determined that children weren't going to die.

Rosie

And what was your role there?

Edith

At first I was the social worker. The idea was that Dr Tusely was retiring and I was taking over from a doctor with the staff of trained sisters who were used to deferring to the doctor. And in the early days I found that a social worker like me would toss out an idea for thinking, and I'd find that before I knew where I was the sisters had gone and done it because they were used to working under the doctor, referring to the doctor. I got a lot of (what will I say?) artificial respect when I first went there.

Rosie

So you replaced the doctor?

Edith

I replaced the doctor. I'd been there a little while, about six months or something like that, getting some feel. There was a wonderful old matron there who was good, and she could see I was raw as raw, but I didn't know, I hadn't had anything to do with children all those years. So I went to matron and said, "Look, I don't know a thing. Will you teach me?" Now she couldn't have been more helpful. Where I would make mistakes she'd make suggestions, so gradually my own knowledge began to swing in. She taught me about children. Terrible things used to happen. I remember a child, and some other child took the piece of cheese at the dinner table she had her eyes on, and the child was up, quick as a flash, went around the table, smashed every plate, and then leapt at the staff who came to help. A few very violent thirteen year old girls. But old matron took it all in her stride, and she was my mentor about what the children did and what you could do with them because I didn't know. The value of it was, I said to her I didn't know, and gradually she realised that I knew some things that they didn't know either.

But I'd been there about six months, I guess, when one day Mr Whatmore who was Director-General came out to Turana and said, "We've just bought the Presbyterian Children's Home. I want you to go out and set it up as a reception centre".

We decided that instead of trying to move all the children we'd take in the new cases as they came up. We left the rest at Turana with a skeleton staff. One of the senior sisters and I moved out and Alex Whatmore said, "Sit down and write me a blueprint of what you think ought to happen at Allambie". I was confronted with all these buildings, you see, and a trickle of children coming in. "What do you need in the way of extra building? We've said we won't have to spend much more money on it," he said. So I had to somehow conjure up out of the back of my head what I thought would be needed in the way of accommodation, given the existing buildings that were there, and what wasn't there.

Rosie

What were the existing buildings like?

Edith

Well, you know Mimosa. We had to name all the buildings. It was just big open dormitories as the Presbyterians had had it. Pretty drab, if you know what I mean. They had a storeroom stacked with hundreds of boxes of cereal that people had given to churches at harvest festivals. And they used to get shoes that the men made at Pentridge and were so heavy, and the children looked like little waifs. Some of the first things were basic things - like children have no self-respect unless they're dressed like other children. I had to convince the Department. It was all done by tender, so I personally had to go around and scout around. I went to see the person in charge of the children's department at Myers, and said, "Look, this is my problem. I know the Department can't buy retail, but can you help me?" She said, "I'd be glad to", and she showed me the kinds of things to look for in children's clothing. And then I went along myself to the Tender Board taking my little seamstress, who was very timid and couldn't fight for anything. Her job was to sew the clothing, fit them onto the

children. I can remember I'd go along with the people from Stores and Property, the section in the head office that looked after quotes, and they were shocked. They said, "My children don't have clothing like that" and I had to convince them that their children had aunts and uncles that gave them presents. They had the voice but I had to convince them that these children had a special need, that their clothing had to last.

Was this social work?

Rosie

The children were obviously staying at Allambie quite a while then.

Edith

Yes. Well they came and we had to plan for them. In between planning for the individual and building up a system of really looking at the cases, summarising files, you had to deal with things like the clothing.

Rosie

Was that social work? Well, was it?

Edith

Well, I thought it was. I thought social work was different things for different people, and you looked at the needs and you set them in priority, and I realised the children were not going to have any self-respect. I can remember the joy for those children when they got their first new clothing. And I can also remember incidents like being expected to use up the shoes the men made at Pentridge that were so heavy. And I tried for a while and I can remember writing across a whole new assignment of these shoes, "These shoes are not fit for any child to wear". I can remember the hysteria it caused in head office when I got away with it. You could get away with almost anything because it was children.

Rosie

And it was a new service.

Edith

And it was new. I remember a great big battle with Mr Whatmore about the freezing Melbourne winter. There was no heating in the toddlers' rooms and he said, "My grandchildren don't have heating in their bedrooms" and we had to convince him you see, that the grandchildren's mother went and covered them up with bedclothes. There was one staff on at night for 30 children and they were cold. And also these were miserable children, part of feeling secure was warmth. Now he fought me and rejected it and I put it up about four times, and he just wrote, 'No'. And then one day he came out and I walked out to the car with him. I said, "Mr Whatmore, at the risk of having my head chopped off, I'm going to ask just one more time. These children need warmth. The staff need warmth. They're going down with infections all over the place." He suddenly grinned and said, "Give me a ring in the morning". Now it was all that extra effort it took unnecessarily, and the same thing over staffing. I had to get stuff from all over the world on what you needed to try and staff children. I suppose I wrote it up about four times and each time - No, No. I suppose they were short of cash all the time. But always in the long run I learned that if you dig your toes in and

move forward, inch by inch. It was constant bedlam, you see, if you accepted the decision. So you accepted the decision on unimportant things.

Rosie

So the trickle of children grew?

Edith

Very fast. It grew from nothing to - in the course of about twelve months - up to 300, and children all over the floor, and everybody screaming to the politicians about children before they heard these stories. Now there again, you see, we had some nasty situations and the press - Carolyn Jones, who comes on TV now, she interviews special people, she was a grand person. There was this rumour of overcrowding at Allambie, which was politically dangerous and I was rung from head office to say that Carolyn Jones wanted to come out and interview me. And I said, "You realise I can't lie, I won't go out of my way to". And of course she asked very pertinent questions, and it blew up. Bolte and Rylah were the twins in power. It became embarrassing politically, you see.

Rosie

Were children sleeping on the floor? That was always embarrassing.

Edith

Oh yes. They were sleeping all over the floor. The children loved it. We had them wedged between the beds. I remember a staff member coming to me one day. She said, "I'm so relieved." And I said, "What happened?" She said, "Well I lost one of the tots. We looked and we looked and we looked and we looked. And finally I saw this little hand sticking out from under a bed."

This was what the staff were up against. They were sick themselves. The infections were coming from all over the state. We had a doctor at Allambie, doing Allambie medical work, who was head of

Fairfield. And it came to the point where there was a ward at Fairfield where the Allambie children went. It was just like another wing of Allambie. But the staff were struggling on sick, you see.

Rosie

From all the childhood infections that were going around?

Edith

Yes. Almost everybody went down with awful things. They got hepatitis and all sorts of things. I can remember Dr Stanley Williams coming in rubbing his hands and saying, "This is one of the most fascinating infectious diseases settings I've ever come across." It was his specialty.

But this thing of the crowding blew right up. It got into the press, Carolyn Jones' thing, and I can remember her saying, "Well, how are the staff coping with it?" And I remember saying, "They're being wonderful. But sometimes they look as though they'll drop on their feet" And she quoted me because we weren't getting staff either at that time. The sequel was that Rylah ...

Rosie

That was Arthur Rylah?

Edith

Yes. Arthur Rylah, who had some very good ideas when he started. He got on to TV. Carolyn Jones rang me back and said, "Something terrible's happened." She'd interviewed him, and he wanted to go on TV and say I was neurotic. She said, "I could, with a great lot of difficulty, stop it, but I think it would do some good if we let this thing go on." And I said, "Well do it, as far as I'm concerned." I was home, I lived out, and I was over at home and the staff in the staff home put their jobs on the line by ringing up saying, "That's not true" and they didn't do a thing to the staff. They really broke all the rules. I didn't even know it was happening until the next morning. It got quite nasty, and instead of fizzling out like most things, it made it grow and grow in the press until they had to have a full page presenting the problems. It was really quite a nasty battle with Rylah.

Rosie

What sort of time are we speaking of here? You started at Allambie in '61.

Edith

This probably was about '63. That was where I had one of my first experiences with the policewomen who were wonderfully co-operative. If it got too bad, they knew that I wouldn't ring them, but I'd ring the senior policewoman and say, "Look, we haven't a single bed. Anything that's not an actual battery, hold it off for a while" and they would unofficially do that. There was nobody to work with the families because there were no regional offices. There were just a couple of people in head office.

Rosie

Who were they?

Edith

Bill Hughes. Theresa Wardell had tried and moved out in disgust very fast. Bill and Essie were the two who stuck, and Donna Jaggs. They were the three who really stuck with it and stayed on.

Rosie

With caseloads of how many?

Edith

They couldn't do it of course and it was done at a very superficial level. There was nothing to give them the knowledge at that time.

Rosie

So the children stayed an average length of how long?

Edith

I wouldn't know. Those that were simple could very quickly be placed in children's homes. The outside children's homes were places like Orana who picked nice children. We knew all the children's homes, and we knew which could tolerate some of the real problems. And all the real problems stayed at Allambie. All the worst

problems stayed at Allambie. In those days we had these conferences run by the (what was the combine of children's homes? - I've forgotten), but they had conferences and we started going along to those and mixing at the conferences with people. We had one at Healesville, we had one down at Lome, sort of semi-social. But at least we mixed. The government had always been a bit aloof from the private agencies.

Rosie

Was it the Children's Welfare Association Group or the Residential Child Care Association, RYCCA?

Edith

RYCCA. Residential Youth and Child Care Association. They had been used to running conferences amongst themselves with departmental people asked way up there and moved in and worked sort of with them, and we realised what they had. That was one of the big trends, to move from the government being way over there, away from the voluntary agencies. And there's still some of that. The voluntary agencies, in parts, felt superior. Mr. Booth had started a conference on adoption before I went in. Now we extended those head office conferences and invited all the people who ran that type of work. There was a conference on family group homes (were you there then?) and then there was a conference on those who ran the bigger children's homes.

Rosie

The congregate care homes.

Edith

There was a conference on foster care, which we had extended from adoptions, and made it into one on foster care, so they were used to beating a track into head office and talking around the table. And it moved from that to being involved in approving agencies. After a while, anybody who wanted to set up a foster care service had to present its plans to this combined conference of department and non-government and run the gamut of comment from all those. And then what finally came out of those conferences I put up as policy for approval. It was quite active for a long time but could only be run on a centralised system unless they had little ones out in the regions, you see.

Rosie

So that was in your Allambie days?

Edith

No, that was when I moved into head office.

Rosie

I thought it might have been. At Allambie did you start to meet with some of the nongovernment children's homes?

Edith

Well, we used to go to the annual conferences.

Rosie

Yes, at Lorne, at Erskine House.

Edith

We went to the conferences. We moved in. We paid our subscriptions the same as everybody else. We moved in. We didn't particularly give speeches.

Rosie

And you started talking issues in child welfare?

Edith

Yes. With those people. You see, in the early days you'd go to visit, say, a Catholic home, and you'd find the first thing that happened to you was you were ushered into the parlour and served tea on the spot while the sisters sat by and watched you. They weren't allowed to eat with anybody. And then at the conferences, those early conferences, they ate behind a screen. It was as bad as that. It was a very formal sort of thing. And then along came people like Sister Agatha - you know Sister Agatha - now she started breaking those rules. We started getting Catholic students surrounded by rules. I remember the first little Catholic sister I had - she was a delight.

Rosie

And Sister Agatha was a Sister of Mercy?

Edith

Yes.

Rosie

Working in the Western suburbs?

Edith

In St. Vincent's Children's Home.

Rosie

In Geelong, later.

Edith

Yes. Then they moved down where they thought the need was, down to Geelong. The other sisters were longing to break out, but didn't dare until she did. In her own way, she was a real leader. But in a way she moved so fast. I can remember Sister Agatha sitting in my office discussing a problem, and little sister sitting beside her - they always had one second one - and Sister Agatha's ideas were growing and growing and I was encouraging this and I remember the sister sitting back, saying, "Sister, please." She could see they'd be landed with the work without the staff to do it.

Rosie

You had to hold her back a bit? So how long did you stay at Allambie for?

Edith

Ten years. Right from the beginning through till I became Director.

Rosie

We'll come back to some of that work later under issues and things, but is there anything else you want to talk about at Allambie for now? Or could we move on to when you became Director of Family Welfare? Was it Director of Family Welfare Division in the then Social Welfare Department in '71?

Edith

The first thing that happened to me was that Mr. Booth who'd been in the job couldn't conceive of a woman in it. He thought it had to be a man with a family, you see, and he recommended against me.

Rosie

He recommended Bill Davey, was it?

Edith

Yes. Bill had been his protege from the beginning, and he sincerely saw it as a job for a man, you see, and a man with a family. And Bill of course had come out of St Vincent's Children's Home and had made good. Bill was liked around the Department, as you know, and he had recommended against me. The personnel officer rang me up and said, "Are you going to appeal?" I said I hadn't

thought about it. And he said, "Well, you should." He initiated the appeal really, so I found myself with Mr Booth sitting beside me and my addressing the Board, and his using the fact that I knew nothing about adoption to say that I didn't have the qualifications to move in, and the Board kept questioning me, and I said, "Well, I know nothing about adoption. I haven't done anything in that. They said, "Do you think you could do the job?" and I said (I can remember it so vividly) "I just don't know, but I'd like to try." By then I was sort of warming to it. I hadn't seriously thought about it. I never for a moment thought I would be in it.

Rosie

What made you want to leave Allambie and apply for this job?

Edith

The fact that I came across so many problems at Allambie that could only be corrected by Head Office.

Rosie

You wanted to get in there and make it happen?

Edith

Yes. But it was a severe blow to the staff because at first I had to interpret to them that I wasn't deserting them. But then when I moved into head office they thought I was going to favour Allambie. You couldn't win.

Albert Booth was Director-General and had himself done the job of Director of Family Welfare before me.

Rosie

I see. So Albert had moved from Director of Family Welfare to Director-General when Alex Whatmore left.

Edith Yes. He moved up.

Rosie

So it was his promotion that created the vacancy.

Edith

Yes. His promotion created the vacancy.

I thought we were all still one big department and Albert would always be there, but the first thing that came was a formal, legal delegation of powers from Albert to me handing over all the adoption, the wards of state. I suddenly became the legal guardian of 1,200 children. Now he could overrule me, but mostly he wouldn't know what was going on day to day.

Rosie

So he delegated his guardianship to you?

Edith

Yes. He delegated it to me. He still could be a co-guardian, but he wouldn't know what was going on because I was supposed to make the decisions as he had always done, you see.

Rosie

So you had enormous responsibility. You had delegated guardianship of 1,200 wards of state, you had licensing of x number of children's and family group homes.

Edith

Well, they had to be rubber-stamped by Albert Booth. I couldn't do that. They had to be approved but I had to put up the recommendations on them, and they always followed them.

Rosie

And you had an enormous range of government and non-government children's homes, family group homes, adoption, foster care.

Edith

Yes, I was responsible for all of those. The little family counselling section was very small. Gudrun was a very good person to have there in the background.

Rosie

That was Gudrun Malare.

Edith

Yes. She had good knowledge but it was almost a peripheral section in the main job of child protection that was going on. We also had a benefit claim section, family assistance.

Rosie

For children who lived with relatives. Non-parent assistance.

Edith

Yes. And I can remember Albert Booth at Allambie placement meetings not wanting to tell the grandparents who left their jobs to look after grandchildren that they had a right to assistance. You saved the Department money, you see, to begin with.

Rosie

Like it was your own money.

Edith

To begin with. And I can remember how we had to dig in our toes and say from our social work training that people had certain rights. I'd been trained to this in the commonwealth department, I

insisted that people had the right to make their individual decision. Even the Director-General there had done that, that it was your job to see the people in your area and if we made a decision against people we used to make a point of telling them they had a perfect right to appeal, and this by the way they did. So that was a clash of values to begin with, with Mr. Booth gradually coming round to realise, and really being almost pressured by the social workers into moving that hat.

Rosie

How would you sum up your time as Director of Family Welfare from 1971 until 1978?

Edith

I'd sum it up as a tremendous learning experience for me, and a time in which the values of social work got gradually disseminated through the Department against considerable resistance from the old administration to begin with, and then gradually the learning to dovetail in together. A very valuable part of the time was a much greater co-operation with the voluntary agencies. The moving from where the Department saved the Department's money to moving to feel that we should be subsidising. For instance, there was a great argument about what foster parents should be paid, an assumption that if you paid people a decent allowance, at least something that covered their expenses, that you'd get people coming into it for the money. I don't know how many times we sold the fact that in all other places in the community people who did a good job were paid decently for it, that people valued their job in our money society.

Rosie

And that was how they were showed that they valued the work?

Edith

Yes.

Rosie

So therefore you could conclude that there was no value placed on being a foster parent.

Edith

That's right. And it also destroyed their confidence after a while. So there was a move to working *with* the family agencies, with the outside agencies, the voluntary agencies, duplicating some of their services, because that way you knew better what they were up against, and consulting with them on many occasions. Acting as a sort of headquarters to which they could come together and discuss common problems and even giving them a real voice in what was put up to the Department about new services. It was an exciting time. We didn't do it very formally.

Des Lavery - did you ever come across Des? - Des came in as a well-educated person who could get the essence of a conference down. First we had to try and remember it and record it afterwards, and then Des came in as a sort of recording person and picked out the main ideas and afterwards he'd get together with me and tell me what were the important things that happened at that conference. But we

did spend a lot of time in conferences. We spent a lot of time consulting. It moved from staff - I think I'm right in saying this - who were doing the actual work around the Department, accepting instructions passed down - to this feeling that a lot of it should come up to us, and we shouldn't ignore what the staff were thinking. But then it tipped overboard and we got every junior staff member around the Department to feel they should be included in on everything and vast time was being wasted. Twelve people sitting around discussing something that could have been solved by two people.

Rosie

While the others were out working.

Edith

And demanding to know everything that was happening. This was a social work thing. We have a right to know the total picture. Now this was a move from when Albert Booth first came out to Allambie and I asked a question about what was happening at head office. He almost implied that was nothing to do with me. Allambie was my job. But you got junior staff clamouring for more and more and more conferences. Now it was a time when all the heads of the divisions got together with the Director General chairing.

Rosie

The departmental executive?

Edith

Yes. The executive. And the research branch, with Colin Benjamin, which had all its time to prepare plan after plan and would come and thrust it all at you at a second's notice and you had no time to think it through. After the executive I would get the heads of my own sections up and give them the gist of what had been happening, leaving out the thing that was ministerial property, explaining to them why, and they were supposed to go back and transmit it. After a while I found the staff still didn't know anything about what was happening because

the section heads hadn't passed it on. So they were all clamouring to have the minutes of the meeting, which was the top executives in the department, so I put it to them, and they decided they'd write some minutes that didn't include the politically sensitive stuff, that wasn't theirs to present. But it was very few things, almost everything was quite sensitive. So I said that we would table it in the directorate and anybody who wanted was very welcome to come and read it through, but not one person read it. You see there was this clamour. Most of them were very young adults who wanted to be in everything and you know how they'd spend hours discussing their case with somebody from another agency that wasn't going to contribute one single thing half the time. That did happen a lot, because they enjoyed the social contact.

Now, how did you get staff responsible with time? I learnt in the Family Services Association in America that this was strongly discouraged. They were very democratic but if you worked in a family agency you had your own supervisor. And the way it was put, you didn't waste the time of the rest of

the agency by moving from person to person discussing it, because they had a job to do and the time had to be costed. Now it was a very hard thing - you were probably through that stage when everybody wanted to discuss everything - and people felt hurt and left out if they were not told every detail. The lack of trust in leaving some of the stuff to the people whose job it was. I think that's dangerous. Now that all went by the board when the new Director moved in. I went back one day to get some information about a voluntary thing I was doing and he had directed that you picked out one person to collect the information. He went around from person to person but didn't have everybody else sitting by while he found it out. It was nice.

Rosie

So people became more conscious of time management.

Edith

I hope they did. They didn't like it. They wanted to be in on everything.

Rosie

They certainly did later when they got into case management systems and points for different cases and workload points.

Edith

They just wanted to be in everything and wanted to know everything. And it's understandable.

Rosie

This was in a time when people had caseloads of something like one hundred families.

Edith

And there were also meetings happening around the section, you see, and how it came to me first was that I'd get complaints from all over the place. People had rung to try and get information and were told he was in a conference. Nobody could get access to anything in the Department because everyone was busy conferring. I'm sure that was true. It was to move from that to find the quickest way of making sure

you got the best ideas from everybody, and I think probably that new Director who moved in, he just made no bones about it. He just said, "It won't happen" in the beginning. He said he'd come to clean it up.

Rosie

I left soon after that.

Edith

I saw the instructions he handed out to staff when I went in that day, but the truth is somewhere between. It's what perspective you see it in. We got the same thing from the voluntary agencies. They would ring up, and they would write an elaborate screed of what they wanted. They'd even write,

"there shall be" and they'd pass this up to me. Now I would pick up my telephone and say, "You've got some interesting ideas there. There's one more thing that's necessary before it can be put through. Could you put up your ideas on how it would be costed?" There was a deathly hush, very often I don't think they'd recover. Now this was a social work thing, because we hadn't been taught much about costing in our training, had we? They would be inclined to say, "Well, that's your job to find out"; but until they understood what was necessary. When we started to try and get funding - and were way ahead of all other states in the funding of voluntary agencies for various things - we found that the very verbal agencies who had people who were good at writing, the academics, the social workers, they could put their case beautifully and they tended to steamroll those with an insignificant idea that could be worth giving a chance. So we tried to draw up an outline of what was necessary in a case for funding. I can remember slaving over that, working it out, just as we'd worked outlines earlier in the Commonwealth, and what background you needed to make a decision about that. I had a sort of case outline.

Rosie

To guide the agencies?

Edith

Yes. Well more than that. We tried to get together with them and help them put their case to make them realise we also had to put up a case for any services we got. Now they had to put up just as much information and to help them with what was needed before we had a chance of getting it through Treasury. So it was a constant give and take. What's happened now I have no idea. It's totally back to centralisation, isn't it?

Rosie

It's starting to go back.

Edith

I remember when I moved in David Green had been detached from his administrative work to work on the regionalisation system, and so it was the beginnings of the trend away from centralisation to real regionalization, but nobody had really solved how we were going to provide the central cake under that system.

Rosie

Particularly when some areas were better serviced than others.

Edith

And nobody had been able to work out how you were going to preserve the central skills, that for instance the adoption section had built up.

Rosie

They're still arguing about that.

Edith

When an agency out there might only get about two cases.

Rosie

They still didn't resolve that until the late '80s/early '90s.

Edith.

I don't think there's any resolution of it unless you have a group of people working on each specialty, and you can very quickly lose all the skills that have been built up.

Rosie

So you were Director of Family Welfare until 1978?

Edith

Yes, about nine years.

Rosie

What I'd like to do now is talk to you in general about some of the satisfactions in your social work role and some of the frustrations. Now you've touched on a lot of this but I wonder if you'd like to focus for us across that.

Edith

Satisfactions?

Rosie

Was it satisfying?

Edith

You felt it was a job that really needed doing, and that each small bit you could achieve would affect a lot of people. I personally, with my bent for practical things, felt that it wasn't just getting material ready for an essay for the university. It was getting it together in a way that would affect people's lives, even if only in a small way, and I felt very strongly that what you did with cases threw up the general problems in the community so that the help you were able to give went beyond those particular cases to policy.

Rosie

Did you see yourself as doing social action?

Edith

No. I just saw myself as doing what was required.

Rosie

But in retrospect would you have seen that as social planning/social action?

Edith

No, because I didn't then move out and get together with groups. I wouldn't have had time to.

Rosie

But you were sowing the seeds of it.

Edith

I remember the opportunities came up, you see. Now was this a satisfaction? At one time, at the end of the year, I became very aware of the trivial things that can bring forth policies. There was a bit of money left over and Albert Booth said, "In two nights produce something that'll use it." I can remember working three nights. I had the weekend and one day and working out my first blueprint for a support unit. We wanted a house. I wanted it not tied very closely to what it had to be used for. I wanted to put it in charge of a group of people to use it for different things at different times. Sometimes it might be a drop-in centre. We set out to prove that although granting extra money to families in dire need in special instances with a support unit supervising, it would cost some money. It wouldn't cost as much as keeping children in a children's home. I worked it out and it was a terrible struggle because I don't have that sort of financial bent.

I can remember sweating over this and putting it out and it had to be something for aborigines so I put it first up as a support unit for aboriginal families.

Rosie

Did it kick on?

Edith

I think so. It went well at the time. I don't know what's happened to it now. There are support units all over the place now, I gather. Bill Joyce rang me and said, "I found out, you were the start of support units."

Rosie

So that would be the family support services where a person would go into the home to help people with their parenting skills?

Edith

Well, that could happen if you made a headquarters for those people. And also the people could come to the place. In a place like St Kilda it was somewhere ... I remember going and finding the house.

Rosie

So it was the St Kilda Family Support Unit?

Edith.

Yes. But you see people were used to the Public Service Board having to know every detail before it would approve any new service. Now what I wanted them to do was

grant the house and leave it to people on the spot. Grant them a certain sum of money and let them use it as they thought would be most helpful.

Rosie

A very flexible concept. A responsive concept. And that was anathema.

Edith

Totally, totally foreign to the Public Service Board whose whole system was that they knew every detail and then they made decisions about whether they would spend any money. The Treasury.

Rosie

I think it's still going. So there was satisfaction in seeing something like that.

Edith

Something grown. There was a feeling that you were creating something. There was no question about that. Can I go to some of the frustrations?

Rosie

Yes.

Edith

The fact that when anybody moves into a senior government position you become the repository of everybody's hates and dissatisfactions. They personalise it to you. It's one of the penalties of holding a senior public position. Now I'm sure you have to - just the same as they do with Prime Ministers - they do the same thing don't they. You're responsible if you can't change everything that's bad in the community overnight. You're responsible. In a smaller way, the head of any government department or the head of any business firm, he'll get sacked if he doesn't produce the bottom line. In the government you didn't get sacked, you just got niggled at, often by your fellow professionals who saw it as their job to get things changed, and were right. Now it was good for you to be niggled at because you sought and sought and sought for solutions. But you did, every time you couldn't meet a need of any other agency, you were to blame.

Rosie

You personally?

Edith

Yes, you personally. I think that's one of the roles of the heads of government departments, to be personally to blame. I think more of it gets passed off onto ministers now. Certainly one got quite a lot of it, for instance, when we decided to close down toddlers' homes. We did it by ... I remember going

down with David Green to Ballarat and we felt it was a constructive thing that we closed down Alexandra Toddlers' Home, but it was Ballarat's pet thing and it was also a place where people from the Western District took children home for Christmas. They had a child for Christmas Dinner. The theory was that it was near enough to Ballarat orphanage, as it then was. I remember the battle over that word 'orphanage'. They argued that the brothers and sisters would see each other. They never did. And not only were

the children removed from their brothers and sisters, but they were removed from their parents because the trains didn't fit in.

Rosie

So these were Melbourne children.

Edith

Melbourne children. We had nowhere else to send them, you see.

Rosie

Sent up to the country.

Edith

Now we started in my time ... there were satisfactions in that we got fares paid for the parents. We used to write out letters and encourage parents to come in. We were interested to see them.

Rosie

Something practical.

Edith

Yes. Practical things. But then you offered the incentive by paying their fares.

Rosie

You worked in the era of maintenance, didn't you? Weren't parents charged maintenance for their children being in homes? If they couldn't afford to pay it they'd stop visiting? Is that something you were involved in?

Edith

I don't remember.

Rosie

Parents had to pay something to the state for the care of their children, but if they lapsed they got guilty and they wouldn't visit their children.

Edith

A lot of parents were guilty anyway.

Rosie

In your time that was actually scrapped. Perhaps it was later. I thought in your time it might have been scrapped.

Edith

It probably was but it was scrapped probably by head office because I was not actively involved in that. Not that I can remember anyway at this stage.

Rosie

But you got fares for the parents to visit.

Edith

We did. We got fares to bring them and we wrote out if they didn't arrive within a certain time we said Johnny was with us and we'd very much like to meet you, his parents and Johnny would like to see you.

Rosie

Did you want to say anymore about the satisfactions and frustrations?

Edith

Frustration - we were the repository of the complaints. There were opportunities to get something done about some of the community problems and to move out to the voluntary agencies and see what their problems were too. But the frustrations - it was slavery - we worked 24 hours a day practically. That's an exaggeration, but one worked very long hours. For instance that work, particularly at Allambie, at the weekend when all the crises happened, head office packed up and went home. I found myself making all the decisions for head office and everything at Allambie. People would ring me, anybody who couldn't do anything would ring Allambie and the social workers rostered themselves without any extra pay to work on Sundays.

Rosie

When did you get your first social worker at Allambie?

Edith

When did I get my first social worker? Oh, I had them from the beginning. I had Barbara Symons out there for quite a long time. She and I worked as a real team for a long time. And then I had several, I got up to five I think, in the end.

Rosie

I know you said earlier that you started really with just Donna Jaggs and Bill Hughes in head office for a while.

Edith

They would come out to placement meetings and we chaired them. Now it was Mr Whatmore who made that requirement, that the top people should be in planning.

Rosie

You were talking about frustrations. You were talking about long hours and slavery.

Edith

And the fact the sheer drudgery of getting people that one would have expected to know the needs, like Mr Whatmore and his heating and like rejecting the Pentridge stuff that was not suitable for children.

Rosie

Working against the system.

Edith

Working against the head office, who'd been being taught to think that almost any clothes would do for children if they were cheap, and making them realise the need of the children was greater. Working also for the children's homes, some of the

voluntary ones had been used to economising so keenly. Frustrations. They were constantly around you. But it was more than anything the sheer drudgery of getting any new idea through. The fact that you would get it rejected a number of times. You had to just chip away, chip away, chip away. But I suppose that's part of almost any job. Except the needs were so obvious when you were on the spot.

Rosie

And you did that from a position of not wanting to put people off side as you very strongly said before.

Edith

Yes. And you needed to do that because you really needed to work with them. Unless they could somehow be educated you weren't going to get anywhere anyway. To give you an example, one Christmas, probably about the second year I'd been at Allambie, or the third year, we were shockingly overcrowded because all the voluntary children's homes used to close up shop and send their staff on holidays - or at least the staff - and the children out to whatever private family would take them.

Rosie

Holiday hosts.

Edith

And those who couldn't fit anywhere were sent back to Allambie. Now I had to handle that - by the moment the school moved out, I had baths built into the school. We opened it up as an extra section for the children who came back because there was no room for them anywhere else.

Rosie

Why were there baths?

Edith

So that they could work as a living section. The schoolrooms, they packed up all the desks and put them all into one room, and beds were put up in the schoolrooms, and the staff had baths. So we built in facilities so that there could be an extra section through the Christmas holidays when all the other children's homes went on holidays and sent their staff. The most disturbed children were sent back to Allambie, they couldn't be placed anywhere else. They couldn't go home and couldn't be sent back.

Rosie

So the staff could have holidays.

Edith

Yes, a little bit of recognition for Dennis Oakley who was then at Tally Ho. Once he decided he would keep Tally Ho open and would act as an extra section for the surplus from Allambie over the holidays, which I thought was a superb thing.

It was a blazingly hot day and everybody was going home and the trees hadn't yet grown at Allambie. There was hardly any outside shade and the crowding was impossible inside with no cooling and they couldn't take the children out on the lawn because they would have been baked. So I felt just awful about going to my

Christmas Dinner and leaving the staff to it, and I was trying to think what I could do, and what we needed was a big marquee. So the next thing I thought was, "Where can I get a big marquee? The army has marquees." So I went in to Victoria Barracks. There was no extra cost involved, I knew the Director-General was very busy and I didn't have to ask him for any extra funding - so I went in and presented my sad tale to the head of the army at Victoria Barracks who listened with great concern and said, "Well, this is something our men would like to do at Christmas. We'll provide you with a marquee. We'll not only provide you with a marquee, but we'll send a team of men to put it up and make sure it's quite safe" and I thought, "Well, at least the problem's solved for the moment." It honestly didn't occur to me to speak to head office. You usually went to head office for money, you see. But this was something that I should have gone to Mr Whatmore about, that it was an inter-departmental thing. But having done all that I rang up and just told Mr Booth, you see, that this had been organised. He reckoned it was a good idea. Whatmore heard of it incidentally. He mentioned it to him. He hit the roof! He said it wouldn't happen and, do you know, he rang me up and insisted that I go and cancel the arrangement. The men were on their way. So I had to go in to the head of the army and tell him that I hadn't got the department involved. I hadn't thought; it was my mistake. I was awfully sorry, but the Director-General wouldn't allow it to go ahead.

Rosie

And it was cancelled.

Edith

And they had to go and take the thing back. Luckily the army man was very good. He said "/// ring him." And of course that was like a red rag to a bull. The army head rang Mr Whatmore and he thought that he had been made a fool of. Now how I could have saved it -I was just desperate - that was the kind of frustration.

Rosie

Yes. When you were just doing what you were paid to do.

Edith

I was just doing something to make life bearable. Now I remember this gave me a very good illustration of how important personal concern was to the staff. Mr. Booth, on these Christmases, I learned that he quietly with his family went out on Christmas day to Allambie and went round amongst the staff. That was the sort of human person that staff appreciated so much. But those were the kinds of incidents that you do things to solve the impossible problems. To this day I don't really see that it was of much concern. It was a voluntary gesture on the part of the army.

Rosie

Everyone was willing.

Edith

And it was safe. There was nothing against it.

Rosie

And it was co-operative and caring, and it was Christmas, after all.

Edith

It was Christmas. That's right.

Rosie

Just moving away from satisfactions and frustrations for a minute - they'll probably crop up again - what was your involvement, or were you involved in the Australian Association of Social Workers?

Edith

I was. I was on the committee in Adelaide. The earlier in my career, the more I was involved.

Rosie

So when did you first become involved? Was it as a member?

Edith

Just as a member. I never moved while I was on the committee in Adelaide.

Rosie

A new graduate in Adelaide?

Edith

Yes. I can't remember whether I was on the committee in Brisbane. I really can't remember.

Rosie

So some committee involvement?

Edith

Yes. Not much.

Rosie

What did it mean to you to be involved in the AASW? What benefits did you get out of it?

Edith

It was a means of keeping myself up to date with what was happening in the profession, meeting with other social workers. It was quite important. There was an occasional presentation. I would go to the meetings and listen to the talks.

Rosie

And as you got busier?

Edith

It was impossible later on. It was not until I became Director of Family Welfare and felt the feeling that I was going to favour Allambie that I felt it was wiser to move firmly in with the Public Service Association, and it was about some stage there that I stopped being a member. I never have any time, anyway.

Rosie

Being a member of the Victorian Public Service Association was more relevant to your work at the time.

Edith

Well, I felt my job was with the whole staff, not only with the social workers, if you know what I mean. Now I could have done both, but frankly the pressure was so great that you were pressed to take students, you were pressed to take whatever and you really couldn't. It was already 24 hours a day just about.

Rosie

And do you have any views at the moment on the future of the Association?

Edith

I think it's very, very important for there to be an Association, that people feel they have a clear identity. I think an Association has a very important part to play in constantly redefining what the profession's expertise is, and in acting as an instrument for sharing the knowledge that can help, with as many people as can join in the helping, whether they have qualifications or not.

Rosie

So the Association takes a very leading role in that process. Did you have any other thoughts on the future of the AASW?

Edith

Well in helping those social workers who, particularly those who work in isolated situations.

Rosie

Can we go on and talk about major issues and changes? I've got some notes here, some things that you've spoken about in terms of major issues, debates, changes. I noticed in talking to you that when you first talked, you were talking about a handful of social workers, and then later in your time as Director of Family Welfare, you had many more.

Edith

One of the big trends was the move from being a small profession turned inward on itself, trying to define itself, trying to prove its importance to many people outside who didn't want to believe its importance, to being more comfortable that it really did have a big contribution to make in the community, and the numbers growing and this greater confidence growing with the bulk of numbers behind. That was one of the trends, the expansion of numbers in social work.

Rosie

Would you know off the top of your head how many social workers may have been working in the division during your time?

Edith

No, I wouldn't.

Rosie

I know from my own experience I worked in the section where I think there were about 25 social workers, and that was children's homes section.

Edith

The more people that are working together in a cluster the greater the supports around them are. Some of those people later wouldn't have had any idea of the pressures on the people who work in total isolation. They've only their own resources to draw on.

Rosie

When we were having a tea a few minutes ago you spoke about the issue of social workers in private practice. Do you have some more thoughts on that?

Edith

I feel that the social worker working in the social agency brings to the service of his client - whether the client's a group or whether it's an individual - the resources of the whole agency, the supervision, resources, the accumulated expertise and knowledge of an agency. I feel that human problems are the most difficult anywhere to work with, and the more support for individuals' contributions there are behind him, the better it's going to be for the community. Now I suppose social workers in private practice can build up their own small consultation service, but it's not the same as being responsible to an agency. Some people feel that having constantly to defer to your agency somehow diminishes your role, your status as a professional person. I don't. I think it adds to it. I think it gives a client the benefit of yourself expanded by your agency's knowledge and expertise. I think somehow that a person, if he's going to work in private practice, is going to have to build something else to offer to his client, the full thing the profession has to offer.

Rosie

Interesting. What about other issues, debates, changes, during your 30 year professional life?

Edith

Well, there was the debate about children's homes - whether children's homes were good for children, whether there was a place for children's homes. It had moved from the old foster care back into children's homes because of the abuse of foster care, hadn't it? There was certainly a move away from clustering large groups of children of the same age, certainly young children of the same age, together. People believed in toddlers' homes, people believed in babies' homes, because you get the infections over. There was a move to the realisation and importance for small children of having role models amongst older children, a great trend to bring them together in mixed aged groups.

Rosie

Particularly if the older children are their siblings.

Edith

That's right. Particularly if the older ones are their siblings. But everybody realised the importance. There was a greater recognition, children and families were split up for the convenience of the administration for a long time. I remember very vividly a boy

who was left at Baltara and his three younger sibs came out to Allambie. Now he came out but he had to go to Baltara because the theory was he was too old for Allambie at that time, as Allambie was a congregate institution with the thirteen year old girls. He was about fourteen. And I remember him saying bitterly to me, "They've taken away my parents and now they're taking away my brothers and sisters." Now that was a very real feeling.

Rosie.

We're talking about debates.

Edith

The debate about the closing of toddlers' homes. You could never quite close them because they were always somebody's pet.

Rosie

Vested interests.

Edith

We encouraged toddlers' homes to close by not fighting for extra funding for them. We came up against the vested interests and the fact that we were from the city and we were moving into well-established country areas, and in a way passing judgment on the thing that they created.

Rosie

In terms of other issues, did you have any more to say about the overcrowding at Allambie? You touched on some of that before. Was the facility designed to cater for 288 children?

Edith

The facility originally when we moved in, I think that as Kildonan, I think they had from 60 to 80 children in it. We started with that number. We built a new nursery and we realised that babies musn't be bulk handled. I can remember planning that building into little units for eight babies each with their own staff who stayed with them and fed into with play equipment from a special section. Each had its own bath facilities, an L-shaped playroom and bedroom, so they didn't really mix with the rest of the babies. Very often they had less than eight in, but they were built. I remember all the work that had to go into making sure it was safe for babies. For instance, we had to have strengthened glass put right low down so the babies could see out. Not the traditional way of having windows up here - that the babies couldn't see what was going on outside. We tried to get the sort of playgrounds that were associated with them.

Rosie

So that was the way you dealt with the high pressure on numbers, by trying to still provide a small group within Allambie.

Edith

We still had to have a nursery at that stage, because we got very frail, very sick babies in, who needed specialist nursing care. The child care staff felt they could do it all when they moved in, but in my experience whenever any crisis happened they rushed with the child in arms and handed it over to the sister in charge. Now gradually that

changed as we evolved a group of child care staff who knew more about it, and as training for child care staff came in. There was no training. The selection of staff at Allambie was almost impossible at first. The tram came only as far as Warrigal Road. We had to choose our staff from among those who could get there at difficult rostered hours, so it meant they had to have a car. All sorts of practical considerations like that narrowed down our field so that we could choose only from a very narrow group of people, and we had to be prepared to take on almost anybody that had a chance of filling a vacancy.

Rosie

And there was no training?

Edith

No training at all. Just what matron could give. Now the matrons were sisters not particularly trained for this. They were very good on the medical side. Did you ever know Barbara Kent-Hughes? - her people were lawyers, they were a well-known family in Melbourne - now she moved in with a feeling of status before she started, and she was determined to have training. She later moved up to the training division. She was largely responsible for working out the kind of training that was necessary at the start, and then of course the Department's only training division opened and started. But there was no training unless we happened to pick up somebody with a British Nursery Nurses' Certificate or something like that. We looked for the certificate. If we could get them we were lucky. We got anybody who could get there at difficult hours.

Rosie

Yes. Because you had a very important job to do.

Edith

The other issue was married staff. The conflict between married staff and unmarried staff about whether the married staff could get all the rostering privileges because they needed to be home with their own families. What they were doing was picking up people who were relatively settled in their private lives and the single girls who still needed a chance to mix socially to find husbands, they were being relegated to all the times when nobody else was off-duty. Now we had to move to say that if you joined the Allambie staff you've got to be prepared for whatever. You've got to have arrangements for your own children. That we can't constantly be favouring you over the rest of the staff to give you the hours you need. So, what's the answer on that one?

Rosie

You talked a bit before about particular people like - I'm just looking at changes here -like Sister Agatha, (and I've forgotten Sister Agatha's surname)

Edith

Rogers.

Rosie

You talked very favourably about Sister Agatha Rogers from the Mercy order who was doing change at a rapid rate. What was she up to?

Edith

A very rapid rate. Now she did social work I think. But when she did it, I can't remember whether it was the social work thing. She was always a person with ideas, you see, and some of them ran away with her, but she had vast experience too. One of the difficulties in the Catholic setup for a long time was that as soon as you get a good person coming on who was really good at child care, the Catholic system would move them round to be a teacher, or an assistant to the Archbishop because they had a policy of not letting any of their Sisters get too tied to one thing. They had to be flexible and moveable.

Rosie

What sort of changes did Sister Agatha make? I was just interested in what you were saying before about she had lots of ideas and she changed services and things.

Edith

Well, she started adapting buildings into family group homes at Geelong, for instance, from the big old Catholic institution idea. She started moving with her sisters out into, amongst the general child-care field. Not always requiring they have one other person with them. How she got the order to change that one I don't know, because partly protection against riding in a car with a man and that sort of thing. You know. I discovered that with a student that came to me. I sent her down for the experience of escorting from Allambie down to Ballarat one day and she came back very embarrassed (I wouldn't have put her through it for anything), and said that she couldn't do it. I said, "Why?" There was a rule she shouldn't be left alone because she had to come back on the trip from Ballarat. It hadn't even occurred to me, which was very foolish of me.

Rosie

And she was from an order? A student?

Edith

A very good student she was. But she had to take a stand there. They had all these rules. She'd been given permission to come and be a student as long as she didn't talk about what was happening when she got back to the convent. There were all sorts of rules that Sister Agatha managed to free up because it was alright for Sister Agatha. The others could use her as the example.

Rosie

Sister Agatha was established. Were there other issues or debates or changes that you wanted to talk about? We've actually gone through an enormous number.

Edith

Well, there's regionalisation and how far you regionalised, and how you solved the loss of expertise - we've talked about that - what happened when you had a small group of staff doing a wide range of things, but not developing them. And how you preserve the knowledge.

Rosie

The expertise and the skills, without having people concentrating on particularly difficult fields.

Rosie

And I remember actually you encouraging the process whereby a lot of that knowledge was written down into manuals so that when regionalisation took place it was actually disseminated in written form, which was a reliable form.

Edith

Yes, that's right. That was a real debate that one. A lot of them were not debates, they were just trends weren't they, like the move from waif and toddlers' homes into diverse, into as wider range of types of care as you could provide, because different types of care suited different children. There were other things.

Rosie

Edith, I wonder if you could comment a bit further on your own area of expertise within social work.

Edith

Well, to begin with, it's all been in government. Commonwealth government for twelve years followed by two kinds of work in state government for ten years at a big reception centre that brought in practically every kind of family breakdown, and moving on to being administrator of the division handling various types of services for families and children. The background for the work that it gave me I felt was very, very valuable. More valuable than anything. The experience of personally handling case after case after case after case, so that when you encountered a problem, the illustration of the problem immediately came to mind. You were speaking from professional experience rather than just from books.

Rosie

A strong position to be in.

Edith

Yes. Yes. And the confidence. And I think an authenticity. It was hard for people who hadn't had that, and less and less people have it.

As I came along in my professional career I became concerned about the move away from visiting people in their own homes to sitting in your own office as a doctor would in most cases, and having

people come to you, to your setting. I felt in some ways it put the clients at a disadvantage so the client herself didn't, couldn't perform as naturally unless you had many, many interviews one after another, which most of them didn't. I felt also that it was to the detriment of the social worker's understanding of the case. That moving into a person's own home, his own natural setting, added something that you never quite saw in an office. It put the client himself at an advantage because it was his place, his setting.

Rosie

Why do you think social workers were starting to do that?

Edith

I think partly it was a copycat thing, a feeling that the professions with status summoned people to them mostly, professions like medicine and in most cases psychiatry. They didn't visit people, they had people come to them. I think it really was, some of it was seeking after status. Some of it was to save the sheer time, the travelling time that went into home visiting.

Rosie

Did you want to talk about any other issues or debates? Recording?

Edith

A big change in social worker attitudes towards recording in the time when a social worker either wrote or dictated into a dictating machines reams of ball-to-ball description of what happened at the interview, to the time when she took responsibility of trying to condense it into something that wouldn't take as much typing time, but it then, I think, was in danger of moving away to a point where the social worker didn't put material on paper because it could be read by almost anybody, and people could be open to legal questioning of what their opinions are rather than facts.

I do feel that there was a danger of the caseworker not putting enough on paper to really clarify in her own mind what was happening. I think her diagnosis of the situation in many cases suffered because there was not enough to look back on and reflect on after she'd seen a person.

Rosie

And what if she left?

Edith

There was also the disadvantage of course that any new worker, if the original worker left, had to start again from scratch instead of having the background that had already become available to the agency, and moving from there.

Rosie

And were you thinking in particular of child welfare, or you were thinking of social work in general?

Edith

I'm thinking of social work in general because I think recording, and particularly trying to record in condensed form rather than just pour out everything that comes into people's heads, is a discipline that helps social workers to clarify their own thinking about the families with which they're working.

Rosie

Did you want to talk about any other issues or debates or changes?

Edith

One other big issue that gradually came out was the freedom of information legislation that entitles clients to see their own records. I think it had a very controlling influence on the social worker herself who was trying to clarify in her own mind her diagnosis. It stopped her putting on paper things that, while they were still not established fact, were only part of her thinking. I think sometimes the accuracy of the picture she painted for herself suffered because she didn't have the material there after the interview to go through again and mull over. I think it's becoming more and more difficult for social workers to practice effectively, partly because of the rapidly changing

values of the community as a whole, so that it's harder to keep an eye clearly on what you're working towards with your client. I don't know what the solutions are.

Rosie

Did you experience some of that in your 30 years of practice? Were there different values when you first started?

Edith

I think there probably were. The whole drug culture was not very active when I was practising social work. We only got a very small handful of children who had been involved in drugs into Allambie. I think the whole business of marital breakdown was not happening at the pace it's happening at since feminism and all the other things.

Rosie

Was that because people placed a higher value on hanging together for the sake of it?

Edith

I think so. It was an accepted thing that people since say the 1960's, people have placed a very high value on fulfillment of themselves and sometimes it's taken as having priority over needs of children and the rest of it. Now in that context it becomes harder to practise social work, and I don't even begin to think of solutions.

Rosie

Do you see the future for the social work profession as being a healthy one?

Edith

Do you mean will it survive?

Rosie

A settled one, yes. Will it survive? Yes, will it develop?

Edith

I think social work is more likely to be affected by change than almost any other profession. I think its role is going to be harder and harder because it is dealing with the very fabric of the thing that's changing fastest.

Rosie

So in essence it doesn't have a big control over how it develops.

Edith

Yes. Yes.

Rosie

So that means it's got an uncertain future because we don't know quite how things are going to develop.

Edith

Which direction we're going. I think it must survive because I think it's the one profession that has an obligation to try and interpret it.

Rosie

Social interpreters.

Edith

That's a great role as a social interpreter, an interpreter to the community on the effects on various people of the changes that are taking place.

Rosie

So perhaps a buffer to some of the harshness of some of those changes. Other roles for the social work profession? Or does that sort of sum it up?

Edith

A lot of the roles of the profession fit in with the roles of all people who work to help people solve their problems. Now perhaps social work as a profession, because it has a university qualification, everything else is the apex of some of that. People with perhaps less training, but often with very good practical experience like welfare officers working with the social workers and sharing their knowledge.

Rosie

There are a lot of social workers these days coming out of training courses.

Edith

There are. One of the big questions I have because the need of the social work profession, at its best, is so great in the community is how much social work is the community going to be prepared to bring us funding for? Things that will be ideally handled by social workers are they more and more going to be handled by people requiring less salary and less expertise, because they can get by.

Rosie

Is there anything else that you wanted to say?

Edith

No.

Rosie

Thank you very much. There's some wonderful material there. Thank you.