Dona Milne 13.12.25

Interviewer: I'm interviewing Donna for the Young Women's Movement Project, Young Women Remember. To begin, please can you tell me your full name, where you're from and your previous role in the Young Women Christian Association.

Interviewee: Hi Kelly, good to meet you. I'm Donna Milne and I live in Edinburgh and I used to be the Deputy Director for YWCA Scotland, as it was called at the time, from around about 1995 to 2001.

Interviewer: Brilliant. So how did you find out about the organisation?

Interviewee: Well, I had a student who actually was a volunteer with the YWCA and when I was a part-time youth worker, I used to work for the YMCA and in Scotland there's some joint YMCA, YWCA, so that's how I knew about the organisation, then I literally just saw the job and decided to apply for it.

Interviewer: And how old were you when you joined?

Interviewee: I was 25, that's a wee while ago.

Interviewer: And you mentioned there your youth work, so what was your previous job and the experience that led you coming in as a youth director?

Interviewee: So I was involved in lots of youth work, I did a lot of girls work. So, when I was in my early 20s I used to set up girls groups in Fife and all over the place, one of the girls groups I set up was in the YWCA in Kirkcaldy and I just got involved in lots of work with young mums and teenage girls and from that I thought that the YWCA seemed to be a natural extension. It seemed like a good organisation to support young women.

Interviewer: So where were you based for your role?

Interviewee: I was based in Edinburgh at the office that they used to have in Randolph Crescent. I remember going there because it's a bit of an old Edinburgh house with big huge rooms, quite posh and that was a big difference from the community centre in Kirkcaldy that I used to work in, so it was a wee bit of a culture shock.

Interviewer: Yeah, I'm from Fife so I know the kind of areas that you're meaning. So, what did your role entail?
Interviewee: So, I was the Deputy Director for Scotland and the job was really to come in and do two things. One was to look at ways to increase the involvement of young women under 30 and the other one was to support all of the staff who worked out in the local projects across Scotland. And at the time there were about 15 projects across Scotland and some of them had staff and some of them were run by volunteers. So, I spent most of my time travelling around different YWCAs across Scotland, which was great fun.

Interviewer: So, what sort of projects were they running?

Interviewee: So, when I first joined, the projects varied. They went from mother and toddlers, girls groups, youth clubs, right up to older people's groups, employability. Some projects had things like community dance groups and arts and crafts and things like that. It was fair to say that when I first joined, the organisation had drifted a wee bit away from its mission of being just about young women and it was for all ages, it was more like an open community centre. There was a bit of a sense that young women were not as involved in the organisation as volunteers and certainly most of the people on the board were older women so there was a real sense that we needed to get back to core purpose I guess, you could call it that.

Interviewer: And did that sort of change over your time there, it kind of moved back to focusing on young women?

Interviewee: It did and it was a really difficult thing to do because if you speak to people about their experience of the YWCA or the YMCA, you tend to find that people have a real sense of belonging and what we were saying to people was, we don't think we should be doing that anymore. The more time we spend on things like older people's groups or community clubs means that we have less time to spend on supporting girls and young women and we've only got a limited resource, so if we need to shift it back, we're going to have to stop doing some things. That didn't go down very well at all, we got lots of letters.

Interviewer: So how did you manage that, how did you go about moving that change back down, what were the sort of projects involved?

Interviewee: So one of the things I did, one of the things I was asked to do towards the end of the 90s was to consult with members, volunteers and staff across Scotland. So, we had focus groups, we had a series of questions, I found the questions so I can give them to you from 2000-

2001 and we basically consulted right across and said, do you think we should prioritise young women or do you think we should stay open to all? The majority said prioritise young women and then we spoke to people about, well, what does that mean? And we pulled all of that together and for the first time, we produced a strategic plan for the YWCA in Scotland. There was a wee bit of tension around that because up till then, all of the YWCA projects were independent, autonomous, could decide what they did. To a degree, I mean, the finance is still reported in centrally, but this was an attempt to say, no, folks, we're all going to go and do the same thing and try and deliver the same goals. So, that's a bit of a change in culture, which took a bit of negotiation to get started.

Interviewer: So, you mentioned that you came into it from working with other organisations. What other organisations were involved and how did that work with the kind of move away to focus on the younger people?

Interviewee: So, I guess one of the most obvious partners is the YMCA because there were, I think, four YMCA, YWCA projects in Scotland, some of them are still around, I think in Fife and certainly in Penicuik. So that was a natural alliance where we would chat together about things we did and in some ways, the YMCA was willing to be open to everybody. So, there was an opportunity there for some of the things we no longer wanted to do to shift towards the local YMCA if they were there. Nationally, we used to meet with all of the other national organisations so we'd meet with organisations like Youth Scotland and Youth Link and the Guides and the Girls' Brigade and all of those kind of things. And what we were trying to do was just remind ourselves of what our unique contribution was to youth work in Scotland. And, it was quite helpful to know what others were doing so that you could place yourself in amongst that and not be seen as a competitor or trying to take over someone else's patch, that really also helped us because some of them, their mission was really clear and It helped us pull things back into a core mission for YWCA.

Interviewer: So was that, creating that strategic plan, was that one of your tasks or something you just assisted with?

Interviewee: It was one of my tasks. I didn't do it alone, but I was given the job of holding it together. The director at the time, she had a period of absence and a period of illness so she set a really strong vision for the organisation, but she had a bit of time off. So, I managed the strategic plan, I got some help from other people because I hadn't had any experience of doing that before. So I brought in a couple of folk to help me with it and just a bit of guidance.

Interviewer: So you've mentioned working with other people. So what was your relationship like with the other members, both the other employees and also the volunteers that you travelled and visited?

Interviewee: Really good. I mean, I really enjoyed getting out and about. A week in, a whole week in the office wasn't a good week for me, I preferred to be out in the project, just seeing what was going on. And we had at the time in Edinburgh, we had the Lochend YWCA and we also had the roundabout centre, the International Women's Centre so there was always opportunities, especially with the local projects but we used to travel as far as Elgin. So, sometimes I would do a little road trip and visit the YW in Dundee, which was an international centre. Then I'd head up to Aberdeen and then I'd head up to Inverness and up to Elgin and then come all the way back down again. So, there was a real sense of folk coming together. We started to bring the staff and all of the projects together at least every couple of months and that felt like people were starting to get themselves organised in a different way and think about how to bring in young women. The volunteers in the YWCA have always been the backbone of the work. So some of the local projects didn't have any staff and they were run by volunteers and I was always amazed at how much time and effort they would put in and just how much they got out of it. I remember one woman giving us a donation and telling us to spend it on people under 30, that was the important thing we did. So even this woman who was in her 80s was saying, you need to remember it's about young women, which was good.

Interviewer: Could you give some details or some examples of some of the projects, some of the ones that were being run by volunteers? Where about were they located?

Interviewee: So let me think. I remember one completely by volunteers, which was a YWCA group in Portlethen. It was a group of women who'd been involved in the YWCA for many, many years and they really got behind the 16 days of activism for violence against women around about November time and made that one of their priorities. So they would hold events, they would bring local people together, they would just have talks and all that kind of stuff. But really, really active considering it was a bunch of about 20 volunteers who were running the project up there. I guess one of the things I'm really fond of, because I was a volunteer there myself when I was 16, is the Roundabout Centre summer school. There used to be a summer school in Leith every year in the summer for about a month and it took children from age three right up to 16, run by the Roundabout Centre, and really multicultural and had lots and lots of events, a real buzz about it and ran for about four weeks and it was all run by volunteers, apart from a couple of paid members of staff.

Interviewer: That sounds really good. Can you tell us more about the Roundabout Centre? So outside of those summer programmes, were you involved with it? What sort of other things did it do?

Interviewee: So, the Roundabout Centre, like I say, I got involved when I was 16 as a volunteer and it used to be run at the top of Gayfield Square in a basement. So you would go down the set of stairs and into this rabbit warren of an Edinburgh basement and they had everything going on. So the Roundabout was a women only space, and particularly for women of other cultures where it wouldn't be acceptable for them to be involved in activities along with men. So it was seen as a safe space and families were, I guess, supportive of the women and girls and their family coming along to that space because they knew there wouldn't be any men present but the things they did, I mean, they would have everything. You could walk round all the little, it's like a warren, lots of little rooms and in one room somebody would be teaching English, and in another room there might be some counselling going on, in another room there'd be a creche for the kids, in another room they might have the sewing machines out. So, but all along it was a bit like youth work and women's work, which is just about, a lot of it might be task focused, but actually it was about the conversations that were taking place and what you saw were women coming in quite shy, quite reserved, and within months they were involved as volunteers, they might have been on the board, and they were running activities themselves. So I think Susan England was the manager at the time, if you're able to speak to her, she really did a huge amount of work back then.

Interviewer: That sounds really good. I know there was lots of other centres, and you mentioned visiting them, but it was Roundabout that you had that connection to through Edinburgh. So how did you get involved as a volunteer when you were younger?

Interviewee: When I was 16 I was homeless, and I was involved in a project called the Bridges Project and I was going to, I always thought I was going to become a teacher, but when I got involved in the Bridges Project they got me involved as a volunteer. And, you know, I just needed things to do to keep me occupied, so I was still at school, and they said what you should do is do some volunteering, and there's this roundabout centre just down the road, why don't you go try it. And I also got involved in a kind of homelessness project supporting young people and running a creche, it was just stuff to give me a chance to do something different whilst I was trying to work out what I was going to do. But then from the volunteering, I switched from going to be a teacher and I switched to do community education.

Interviewer: Right, so it was really quite, just that casual involvement ended up being quite a form of a path for you.

Interviewee: Absolutely, and I think my support worker at the time really just sent me there to give me something to do, and to try and get me out, trying something new.

Interviewer: So did you know when you came back to work for a the YWCA, did you know that Roundabout was attached to them, was that kind of influencing your decision?

Interviewee: Yes, I knew that the roundabout was part of it, and it was really funny the first time I came in, you know you're coming back in as a senior person actually, and meeting up with the person that used to be the manager of the roundabout, who was still the manager of the roundabout, and we were reminiscing about when I was a volunteer, which was only about nine years before.

Interviewer: Do you think having that experience in utilising those centres and utilising that support work, do you think that benefited you when you were then involved in making those strategic decisions?

Interviewee: Yes, because there's nothing worse than somebody in a head office making a decision that impacts on a local project, it just shouldn't happen. So everything we did, if we can track down a copy of the strategic plan, the first one that we did, you'll see that it was all about gathering the views of the local projects, the only constraint on them was we were trying to refocus back on under 30, 13 to 30 was the focus but other than that though, they could do what they liked. And I think the local projects really helped shape where the effort went nationally. So, from the local projects, for example, one of the things they said was volunteering is big for us, we can bring in young women as volunteers, and they can develop new skills and it helps them with employment or study or whatever. So we put in a joint bid to the lottery, the lottery was new at the time and there was a huge amount of debate as to whether the YWCA as a Christian ecumenical organisation should accept money from the lottery and I think it went to about three board meetings before we made a decision. We then decided that we would take the money and put it to good use. So, we submitted a bid for all the local projects to get some money for volunteer coordination at a local level and that was helpful. So it came from the local projects, but the national project did the bid and we got £300,000 a year towards it, brilliant, absolutely brilliant.

Interviewer: So on that funding, what were the income streams? Was it other funding? Was it through the Christian aspect, through churches, the local fundraisers and how did they get funding in?

Interviewee: So most of the local projects had some degree of local authority funding back in the day when you were given a grant as a kind of core cost, so it paid for the building and keeping the lights on and maybe the coordinator. And then what you would do is bring in trust fund funding for other projects and the YWCA did get a generous amount of legacies from people, it was in their will that they would make donations. Sometimes we would get a letter unexpectedly saying, here's £50,000 and so that kind of money would go to some of those projects too. So, every local project had a real mixed bag of funding and the national projects sometimes would get national funding and disperse it as well.

Interviewer: So, with the funding applications and the local council work, was that something that the local groups would come to the national organisation for help and support with? Or were they sort of fully running kind of independently?

Interviewee: They were fully running independently. So, they were running, they had local, back then it was local management committees and it wasn't necessarily a SCEO or a company limited by guarantee, it was an unincorporated organisation. So you had a local management committee, often a project manager, maybe a part-time member of staff, but not many other members of staff. And then that grew over time as things like lottery funding came on board, people were able to expand their staff teams but all of the staff teams remained relatively small across all of the projects. Trying to get money for some of that was difficult, but they were all really good, they knew their local networks well, built their relationships and were able to pick up and tap into local funding.

Interviewer: And you mentioned the lottery funding was a little bit contentious because it was a Christian association. Were there any other times when that sort of religious aspect or that kind of Christian focus came into contrast with anything that you were trying to be doing?

Interviewee: Interestingly, not really. I remember when I first started, so I don't have a Christian faith, and the thing that shocked me most was they would start every meeting with a prayer. And as a relatively young new member of staff, I wasn't sure what to do, but I knew I didn't want to pray but I spoke to my manager about it and she said, you don't have to, it's for people who want to and people who don't. So, it was really inclusive and I think the YWCA, because of its international work, and the work with the Roundabout Centre, which was international, and actually Dundee YWCA was also an international women's centre, it really positioned itself as more of an ecumenical organisation, so it was people of all faiths or of none. So, there were a few times when people said, I don't feel very comfortable with this, but nobody was felt to be, I didn't feel anyone was judged if they didn't join in with a prayer or something like that. There was a chapel in the office and every, either Monday or Tuesday

morning, I can't remember which one, at 9.30, one of the members of the team would lead a prayer or a reading in the chapel and it would be great fun to write a letter to the owner of Severn Randolph Crescent and ask if it's still there, just to see, there will be some photos of it somewhere.

Interviewer: So were you based at Randolph Crescent the whole time that you were involved?

Interviewee: Yes, six years.

Interviewer: And do you know when they moved away from that?

Interviewee: No, I don't. I know that when we decided to move back to just being about younger women, some of the YWCA's closed. Basically, they never had anything for younger women, it was all for older people, and it became more of a community organisation than a YWCA, then some projects fell on hard times and didn't have the money to keep going and sold off their properties. Some of the properties were no longer needed, I mean, in Aberdeen they had a three-story house and that was no longer needed, so they sold that off and moved into something smaller so quite a lot of the property was sold. When I first joined, I think they owned about £5 million in property, if you look back at the accounts from round about that time and then gradually sold off things they didn't need.

Interviewer: Yeah. So you've mentioned the Lottery funding and that being a new thing. Were there any other social or political events that were impacting on what you were trying to do? Interviewee: Oh, that's a really good question. I think at the time, when we talked about priorities, I think round about the probably later 90s, there was an increased focus on things like gender-based violence and I was really pleased that the YWCA took that as one of their priorities. One of the things we did was we worked jointly with Zero Tolerance, so you may have heard round about 2000, I think, 1999-2000, I think, there was a project devised by Zero Tolerance called Respect. That was a primary school teaching programme. And it was money from, it was actually money from Portlethen and YWCA when they folded, they gave their money to be used for a violence against women project and we invested it in a partnership with Zero Tolerance to create this education programme.

Interviewer: So they were one of the voluntary ones.

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: And then they closed, but they put their funding back into there.

Interviewee: And it was a real response to, I guess you're saying that were there any big political issues or challenges at the time, so it was a real response to a recognition of just how things were not improving as quickly as we would like to see, particularly for girls and young women.

Interviewer: So do you feel like the work that you did in the organisation was impacting the communities?

Interviewee: Yes, looking back, not all of it would be seen as positive. So one of my highlights was the Lochend YWCA was a bunch of porta cabins held together by gaffa tape, I think, and the standing joke was that if you went to the ladies toilet, you had to put your feet at either side of the wall because there was a hole in the floor, it was so decrepit. And one of my highlights was we managed to do a deal, I guess, with Port of Leith Housing Association, because they wanted to build houses in that area and couldn't get any land and we said, well, we've got this corner of land and if you build us a community centre on the ground floor, you can have the land and they built flats above it, it's still there in the community and still being used. It's no longer YWCA, but it's a local community project called the Ripple Project, so every time I pass that, I think, oh, I was involved in helping to build that, Hard hat, going round, looking at things, trying to design it in a way that would work for women and girls. So at the time, you don't always think that things make a difference but I think that has definitely made a difference because it's still there and it's still nice.

Interviewer: Is that something you expected when you took on the role, how varied things would be? You mentioned going in and being quite young, to then being, you know, agreeing with councils for lets and for buildings and things like that.

Interviewee: Yes, I mean, we did have really good lawyers, you know, they didn't just let a 25-year-old moose to negotiate that kind of thing, we had a lawyer as well but I built the relationship in order to get the initial agreement. One of the things I found about the YWCA was you could have a go at something, so because I was a volunteer quite young, I often used to just put my hand up for everything, I could get enthusiastic about many things and I just wanted to be involved in lots of stuff. So I'm absolutely convinced that the YWCA and my education job before it gave me such a breadth of skills, you know, I was dealing with HR, I was dealing with finance, I was negotiating contracts, at the same time, I was looking at young women's participation. I was going to Geneva for the World YWCA to see what they were doing and what was happening in other parts of the world in terms of young women's movement, we

were looking at how do you increase young women's opportunities as volunteers to help them thrive in the future, so it was hugely varied, but it was great fun.

Interviewer: So do you think, I know you mentioned previously what you went on to do, so what were the jobs that you went on to do after leaving the YWCA?

Interviewee: So I left the YWCA in 2001 to go and manage a Scottish government project called Healthy Respect, its goal was to reduce teenage pregnancies and improve sexual health and relationships for young people. I stayed there for quite a while, about seven or eight years and then I ended up in government, leading on the sexual health and HIV policy for government. Then I did some work on the H1N1 pandemic, which doesn't feel like a pandemic now compared to COVID and then I became a consultant in public health through retraining and following that became a Deputy Director of Public Health and then a Director of Public Health.

Interviewer: And do you think the kind of breadth of experience you had, both working with YWCA and also when you were volunteering, do you think that sort of carried through?

Interviewee: Absolutely, no question. There's a few of us, so I've worked for the NHS for 24 years and there's a few of us who run, or ran, sorry, I don't work there anymore, a young women's leadership programme in the NHS. It was for women aged kind of 25 to 40, in recognition of the fact that women don't always put themselves forward as much as men do within these big organisations so we ran a leadership programme for two different cohorts of young women managers over a six week period and one of the things we agreed with all of them when we finished the cohort was that they became a volunteer. Because those of us running it had been a volunteer before and we're trying to say that it makes as big a contribution to where you're going sometimes as your day job does.

Interviewer: Yeah, no, I like that. I like the kind of passing back skills, empowering people to move forward with them and for them to kind of keep going as well. So, at the time within the Young Women's Movement, did you feel that the organisation was a feminist one?

Interviewee: Probably yes, I think they were pretty clear on their advocacy for women. They got involved in international campaigns, for example, when women were mistreated in other parts of the world. I remember as part of my induction when I arrived at the YWCA, and we used to take all of the new staff within YWCA and YMCA down to a place called Weston Lodge for joint induction. One of the things they showed was a film of the YWCA in South Africa, working with women who didn't have the vote, but their husbands had the vote but often the men were busy, so they would send the women to cast their vote. I love this film because one

of the things they did with the women was they said to the women, he doesn't know how you're going to vote, you can vote how you want, you don't have a vote, but you can have his vote. And basically supported the women to genuinely think about, who do I want to vote for? I'm not necessarily going to do what he's told me to do, why shouldn't I have the vote? And I remember watching that thinking, brilliant, absolutely brilliant.

Interviewer: So was it your intention to work at a feminist organisation? Was that something that was important to you?

Interviewee: I'm not sure if I went in thinking that's what I was going to do, I wanted to work in an organisation that really advocated for girls and young women. I would definitely identify myself as a feminist and always have done so, maybe it was implicit, but I didn't think to myself I wouldn't apply for them because they were a feminist organisation.

Interviewer: Yeah, it was more about because you'd seen the work that they were doing and that was what was going to drive you on. So, you mentioned some of the international work there, you mentioned going to Geneva, was that international side something that you were, how kind of involved were you with that?

Interviewee: So most of the time the international work was for the volunteers. So one of my friends, she became, I think she became world president actually from Scotland. She was actively involved in the world activities, it wasn't that often that staff members did some of the international work, but I did two or three things. So, there was one big study visit for young women and those creating opportunities for young women, it was for advocacy and things and we got together with all the organisations and talked about how we could support each other across Europe. So that was great and then I think it must have been a different trip, I went to the World Wide ABCA, which was just in some little bungalow in Geneva, it was really weird. I expected some massive headquarters, but it wasn't because everything's out there, you know, in the other countries. So I remember I went to speak to them about, you know, where do you see things going? And I guess some of the international work was what spurred us on to refocus our efforts in Scotland because they were really advocating for young women. I mean, we had a session where, we had a kind of five day meeting with young women and one of the young women was from Albania and at the end of the session, she couldn't get home. We were all, what are we going to do with her? How are we going to support her? But she genuinely couldn't get home and it just brought to life, you know, some of the politics and things that people were facing. In the end, the YWCA got her home and, you know, they took responsibility for that and what have you but it was something we would never have heard of. And I know,

speaking to my friends that I'm still in contact with, they still keep in contact with people that they met all across the world.

Interviewer: Oh, that's brilliant, that's really good. In terms of the other connections, you mentioned the YMCA and kind of working with them, you did the kind of joint training, what else was the sort of connection with them?

Interviewee: So we used to have, myself and the director used to meet with the director or the chief executive of the YMCA every three months and we would talk about the shared responsibility for the joint units, as we called them at the time the joint units, and then we would just talk about was there anything we wanted to do together. So often it was quite practical, a lot of it was related to buildings or staff and training and things like that and sometimes it was just about sharing ideas because they were slightly different. Every YMCA was completely autonomous, whereas the YWCA at the time was, for example, all the local units in Scotland didn't produce their own accounts, we produced one set of accounts. So it was more of a federal structure within the YWCA than the YMCA. A lot of times we would just be comparing notes, you know, how does that work? How could that work? And just pinching ideas, so it was more of a support thing and they were only five minutes away at the west end of Edinburgh, so that was quite easy.

Interviewer: So did they have, you mentioned that you kind of brought in the first sort of national strategy. Is that something that they had or were they fully keeping them locally and individually?

Interviewee: I think they must have been people doing things individually because I remember when we were negotiating our strategic plan, we had a bit of pushback from the joint associations who were saying, what does this mean for us? And, what we did was we compromised with them and said, you've got other things to do from the YMCA side and the local community side, but we'd like you to bring in, draw down some of the objectives that are relevant to women in your area and deliver on those. So it was more of a negotiation, to be fair, they always had things like, it was a real peak time for girls' pubs. Even things like girls' groups and teenage mums' groups and all of that kind of stuff were really popular in most of the units.

Interviewer: So, in terms of outside Scotland, were England and Wales and things like that, were they sort of trying to do things nationally as well or was that something that Scotland were kind of ahead on?

Interviewee: I'm not so sure what Wales were doing. England, was interesting, they still delivered a lot of housing so historically, the YWCA ran accommodation, hostels and accommodation. And the YWCA in Scotland had passed that over to a different organisation, it's called Blue Triangle and so they didn't run housing anymore. SO, in England, it felt quite different when we came together, because they were still running housing projects, accommodation, alongside some of the community-based work but we had a stronger focus, I think, on the local community-based work. I remember, and I found, as I say, I found a piece of work that I did around the strategic plan and some of the things I've written into that, which was an academic book at the time, recognised the tensions. Because not only were we in Scotland saying that we wanted a common picture and some common goals in Scotland, but we also had YWCA of Great Britain trying to influence us and so interestingly, we were saying, no, no, no, you can't do that. So, it was a bit ironic sometimes, if you think about it, what we were trying to do nationally in Scotland and then what they were trying to do.

Interviewer: What was the Great Britain one, were they still focused on all age groups or were they also moving to focus more on young women?

Interviewee: They were starting to focus more on young women, is my understanding but then I lost touch when I left, so I don't know what they've done now.

Interviewer: So you mentioned the housing aspect and it moved over to the triangle. Was that something that happened before you joined, do you know when that happened?

Interviewee: Yeah, I think that happened, I think if you look back at round about the time when Glasgow changed some of its housing approach, because the bulk of the housing was in Glasgow and run by Glasgow YWCA for a while, they still had some things and then it got handed over, I think that may have been early 90s, but it was before my time.

Interviewer: Yeah, no, I recognise Blue Triangle is still a charity that operates.

Interviewee: Yeah, there was a bit of a tail end when I arrived, things were still being wrapped up, handed over, etc. There was still some involvement, but it came to an end.

Interviewer: Yeah, no, it's just interesting to see that elements of that are still continuing. So, at the time over the six years, what were some of the key differences from when you came in to when you left? Both in terms of, I know we've mentioned the strategy and things like that, but just sort of overall, what did it look like at the time?

Interviewee: So I think in some ways it became a bit more professional over that time. So the director had been appointed, I don't know, before, maybe a year, a year and a half, two years before and she came in and things were volunteer led and that was great, but there were some things that just needed to be tightened up. I think one of the things she really did was brought in, you know, no, no, let's set a clear vision, let's set some objectives, not to constrain people, but to help us achieve what we're trying to achieve. So, you know, that notion that if you've got some common goals and you're all working towards them, you're more likely to get there and I think what Isabel did and the team at the time was just make things a bit more professional and that was probably needed in order to secure some of the funding and deliver on things. Performance management became a bit of an issue as we started to monitor and evaluate our work, particularly because of things like lottery funding and whilst that had happened before, it probably hadn't happened quite in the way that we were doing it now. So, I think we left it in a place that, well certainly when I left, it felt as though things had moved on a wee bit in that way and there were plans in place, there were reports in place, and people knew what they were there to do. But hopefully not too rigid and I have no idea what happened afterwards.

Interviewer: In terms of staff, the staff that were working at the national level, like you were, what was the staffing like? Did you have a director, how many staff were sort of part of that?

Interviewee: So I remember, I can see the accommodation, because you used to go in downstairs in the basement and there was a big office, just a big old room that had the director and the deputy, that was me, in it and then next door was another big room and there were four people in that. So you had a finance officer, a training officer, two administrators, and then there was a receptionist, that was it, it wasn't a big team. And then there was a couple of projects, for example there was a project called 'Play in Scottish Hospitals' that was established by the YWCA, there's probably spin-offs of that still in hospitals across Scotland and it's probably called something different, but it was through the YWCA to begin with. So, those staff were a little project and they used to be based in the head office as well because they didn't have any other accommodation. Then there was a big boardroom, quite austere, a boardroom for everybody to sit around when the board meetings took place, so it's really small when you think about it.

Interviewer: Do you know roughly how many different local groups were then being managed by that small team centre?

Interviewee: So, I think when I was reading my report earlier, I think there were 14 or 15 local units that we were responsible for. So I was brought in specifically, that post of deputy was created specifically to provide line management support to the people running the local

projects. Because up until then they were being supported, line managed, by the chairs of the management committee who didn't always have the skills to do that. It was quite an odd one for me because I was very young and to come in as a manager and I look back now and think just how inexperienced I was.

Interviewer: I was going to say, is that something you'd had any, I think obviously working with people but managing people, had you had any background in that or was that totally new?

Interviewee: I'd worked in the council for three years previously and I had a team of 15 so at least I had some management experience, but you know, that notion that I would just be able to learn things as I went was one thing but the YWCA of Great Britain had a management training programme quite ahead of its time. You had to complete them and they were four or five two day courses on different things so, one was on providing supervision, proper supervision, one was on financial management, one was on employment. So, I had to go down to Oxford to the YWCA of Great Britain for that training and all the managers across the UK, you know, if you were a manager you had to complete it and it was mandatory. So that really helped.

Interviewer: Were there any other training courses available through the connection with Great Britain?

Interviewee: Yes, there was lots of training. I would be in London every couple of months, London or Oxford. So, for the head office or we used to use a training venue called St Catherine's down in London and there were always training opportunities and we were always encouraged to go, which was great. You think about it now, you know, the travel and the expense and things for quite a small organisation but I think they were quite good at training volunteers and therefore they were also good at providing training for staff.

Interviewer: Were those training opportunities available to the managers of those local groups or was that something that you would go to and then you would pass that training back to them?

Interviewee: It would vary. So we had a training officer in YWCA Scotland, Laurie, who used to provide a training programme across the year, some for volunteers, some for staff, some mixed and that was her job. She was full time and that's what she did. Then some of the other training that was provided nationally, as in in England, but for the UK, was more for probably staff who had a management responsibility in more than one place.

Interviewer: So you mentioned that one programme, the Play in Scottish Hospitals. What do you know about that? I know you weren't the one running it, but how was that set up? What did it aim to do?

Interviewee: So, I used to manage the manager of that project and basically it started with volunteers going into hospitals to play with children whilst they were in hospital or while they were coming in for an outpatient appointment. They would set up in a corner of a waiting room with a bunch of toys and they would play with kids. They ended up moving, they extended and went into other parts of Scotland to do this and it was run by volunteers. Then they got some money so two of the volunteers were employed as members of staff. And they became, I guess you would say it was a bit of a, I'm not saying they were trailblazing because probably people did it anyway but they started to do things like set standards for Play in Hospitals and set out what they did and they started to recruit a whole bunch of other volunteers. So, whilst we had what I would call geographical YWCA's, we also had Play in Hospitals as this little project that was part of that too.

Interviewer: Yeah, is that something, I know that sort of child focused in healthcare and things like that is kind of normal now but was that something that wasn't really thought of in healthcare? And was that something that was quite trailblazing for?

Interviewee: It probably was unique at the time because they started, they were in place before I joined in 1995 so, they must have been in place a wee while before that. They did get some money from trusts, because it was trusts at the time, not health boards and I don't think it was something that healthcare staff necessarily saw as part of their remit to deliver or healthcare managers. So, they were grateful to have the volunteers coming in. So yes, it'd be interesting to, I know they turned into something else, but I'm just not quite sure what it was, I might have to go find out.

Interviewer: Are there any other projects like that, that you were aware of that are either still running, like Blue Triangle, or that have evolved into something else?

Interviewee: Well, I guess the YWCA in Lochend is now the Ripple project. That's a youth and community project run by, initially by St Margaret's Church but they then took over the YWCA building when YWCA decided they didn't need it anymore. I'm not sure I can think of any other specifics, might come to me later.

Interviewer: Yeah. No, it's just, it's interesting because I think what we've noticed within the archives and things like that is, that it does feel like it's gotten, I think, maybe more focused in

on the kind of activism stuff. It's good to see that there's, you know what I mean, that the offshoots are still their own things and they've grown from there.

Interviewee: Yes. I mean, if you speak to Susan England from the Roundabout Centre, I think some of the organisations that are around now that support women, particularly from minority ethnic groups, emerged from the Roundabout Centre.

Interviewer: In terms of like what support, like what were the projects, what were the aims that maybe have grown?

Interviewee: Well, I'm trying to think of some of the organisations and I'm a wee bit out of touch, so don't quote me but I remember the Roundabout Centre always had volunteer groups of women who then became quite active. And I think they, it's not that they split off, but I think they were encouraged to take on new things. I had thought that a couple of them became organisations in their own right so it'd be worth trying to track down to see if that is the case.

Interviewer: Yeah, no, that's interesting.

Interviewee: I might do that for you.

Interviewer: That would be great.

Interviewee: I've got some contact, I've got contact.

Interviewer: So as part of you, how much contact did you have with like the people that were using the services?

Interviewee: So it varied. I used to attend the AGM of all of the local projects so I would get to meet the local volunteers and people who use the projects at the AGM. I would go along to other events if they had them. As I said, the Roundabout and Lochend, because they were local, I was there more frequently and the other one was probably Kirkcaldy because that was quite close as well, I would go to events there too. So, it gave me a good chance to just chat to people who were using the services, people coming along to groups but particularly, I guess my feedback came from the volunteers who were involved in each of those. And once a year, we used to have a bit of a, I'm not sure if we called it a conference or what we called it, but we had something that was for Scotland and we invited everybody and they would come along to that. I remember us having a big one down at Carberry Tower in Musselburgh, and you just got to hear about what was important to folk and what they thought were the priorities, what they

wanted to do. And then you start to think about, right, OK, so that's five of you now said that, and that's where the violence against women stuff came from so, all of you have identified that as a priority so that has to be one for the national organisation.

Interviewer: So was that happening anywhere or was that done deliberately as part of the strategy development?

Interviewee: So it kind of happened informally, just by going to things and chatting to people. So you'd gather and come back and go, oh I heard about this and somebody else would say, oh I was at their group and I heard about that too. But the strategy was the way of formally doing some proper consultation, analysing feedback from the surveys or from the focus groups and that felt a bit more robust than it just being based on, I had a chat with them over a cup of tea which is still valuable and actually informed some of the questions that we then asked.

Interviewer: How long was the strategy planned for? Was it like a three year strategy or a five year strategy?

Interviewee: I can't remember if it was three years or five years. It certainly wasn't any more than three years or five years.

Interviewer: So were you involved in, did you do two rounds of strategy or did you just do the first one and then?

Interviewee: I just did the one and I left in 2001. One of the things I guess you have to recognise at some point is, so when the strategy came on board, as I said earlier, some of the YWCAs decided they didn't want to do that, they wanted to stay doing what they were doing, so they left. Some members of staff left or were made redundant because we were shifting the focus away from some things to do other things and they didn't want to stay. So once you've done that, it's quite difficult to then be the person to move it forward, so I really had to leave and give it to somebody else to take over.

Interviewer: So, is that, that was kind of the reason for you moving on was to let somebody else do the next phase?

Interviewee: Well two things, the Health and Respect Project came up which was just married. I was volunteering in the world of HIV at the time and it was all about young women and teenage pregnancy and sexual health, so it just seemed like such a unique opportunity. But there was

also that feeling that maybe once you've done some of the difficult stuff, fresh enthusiasm would be better to take it forward, so the timing was good.

Interviewer: So how did the involvement with YWCA interact with your everyday life, with the volunteering projects and things like that?

Interviewee: So because you worked, you worked quite on social hours with the YW group, so I would work at least two nights a week. I was used to that anyway because I used to be a youth worker, so I'd spend a couple of nights a week driving to different groups or meeting with people and that gave me a wee bit of flexibility during the day. My other voluntary work, I used to volunteer at Milestone House which is the HIV hospice up the road, was a Thursday afternoon, so I was able to not go to work on a Thursday afternoon so I could do my volunteering on the basis that I was doing two nights a week of work. So, working for a women's organisation, and I had a young family at the same time, they understood the need for you to have that flexibility in order to manage everything that was going on and as long as you did your work and you were around for core things, you got to manage your time. So that was, I think that worked really well, it worked really well for me and I hope it worked really well for others.

Interviewer: And is that something that you found was quite unique to that sort of women's based organisation was the kind of flexibility you found?

Interviewee: Yes, I used to work for the council before that and it wasn't quite as flexible in terms of saying I'm going to take some time off because I want to do volunteering. Although maybe it would have been if I'd specifically asked them, it just didn't feel like the done thing at the time.

Interviewer: So I guess like, what did working for the organisation mean to you? Have I already asked you that?

Interviewee: I'm not sure. I was wary of working for the organisation because I thought I had to be a Christian and then I discovered that I didn't have to be a Christian, that was its history. But in fact, what was at the core of its history was supporting women and that's what I wanted to do. So, I really enjoyed working for the YWCA. As I said before, it was good fun and you were just surrounded by these women who had done amazing things, whether it was a local thing or whether it was national or international. And it was often I would just think about it and think, wow, how did you manage to do that? And like I say, the reason I enjoyed it most was because

you just got to try things, I don't very often remember being told no, which was good. It suited me at the time.

Interviewer: So what do you remember feeling about the experience at the organisation at the time?

Interviewee: I just remember a bit of a buzz. And I guess I'm focusing on the good things, so I remember a bit of a buzz about some of the things that we could do. I remember a bit of a buzz about, wow, this is worldwide and I remember I used to go places on holiday and I'd look for the local YWCA and think, there's a YWCA here. And I was just fascinated by that, that there was these young women everywhere that were doing similar things. On the other hand, the period of change that we went through was quite difficult and that's because the organisation had lost its way, it had become an organisation predominantly for older people and it was a bit tricky to try and bring it back on track. So, it wasn't always the easiest of negotiations. I remember mostly I have fond memories of trying to do all these exciting things but other times I do remember bashing my head off a wall thinking, we're in 2000 now, folks and we need to do something different.

Interviewer: I don't know how much you keep up with the organisation in terms of what's happening now but how do you feel about the kind of path that it's taken since, obviously it dropped the Christian from the name, it's just the YWM. How do you feel about that, the kind of changes that it's taken since?

Interviewee: So I really like it. I tend to keep up a wee bit with what's going on. I think, was it Jenny?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: Who was there before?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: So I used to keep up with what Jenny was doing and I did come along and meet with a couple of folk when they were in an office at the West End. So I really like the movement, like the notion of having a young women's movement in Scotland. I like the fact that you're no longer relying on buildings, because you don't always need them, they were a huge weight around our neck at times, trying to keep these old buildings warm and waterproof. So, getting rid of all of that and having a focus on opportunities for young women to come

together and do things that are important to them, to gather life skills, to share things with each other, yeah, it sounds really good.

Interviewer: That's good. I think I've just got a couple of final questions for you, and I guess they're a bit more reflective. So what would you say was the greatest achievement or milestone when you were involved, either professionally or your professional involvement?

Interviewee: So I think there's probably a few things. You know, when you think back to what did I do in that job? So the things that stick with me are the Lochend YWCA building still remaining, that feels like a good contribution to an area of deprivation and the YWCA did that, which is excellent. It might not still be there, but the building's still there and still doing local work. I think the work with Zero Tolerance at the end of the 90s around gender-based violence and the Respect Programme, the legacy of that continues, I mean, Health and Respect have taken some of that work forward in primary schools and secondary schools and still use some of that. So that's, you know, 25 years ago, and it still had a bit of an influence on that. So, working to look at how we teach boys and girls about gender roles is still prominent in some of that work, and I can see, I can trace it right back to that original Respect Programme that was produced between YWCA and Zero Tolerance. So that feels really positive as well.

Interviewer: I think that project came up in one of our other interviews, it's something that is still running. How did that go about getting established? Were you starting from any sort of existing work or were you sort of just building with this or was it a new project that was just kind of up and coming?

Interviewee: It started through a conversation between myself and a woman called Evelyn Gillen. Evelyn was the co-director of Zero Tolerance and she had this idea to do this work in primary schools, and that's what we wanted to focus on but she didn't have any money. And then, as I said earlier, the Portlethen YWCA was folding because all of their members were over 70 and what they said was, we're going to give you the money that we have left in our bank and we want you to use it for something to do with violence against women and girls. So Zero Tolerance had the expertise and we had the young women who were keen to do something and we also, by chance, got this donation. So, when Evelyn and I were chatting about this, we got super excited about this project and then we were like, where are we going to get the money from? And then this offer came in. So, we had the money and we just agreed, literally, the next day we agreed to give it £10,000.

Interviewer: So that's kind of one of the ones you can tie back directly to the aim of shifting focus to the younger age group.

Interviewee: Definitely.

Interviewer: As a result, unfortunately, the other organisation folded because their members were older, but then that directly benefits something that's still around.

Interviewee: And they were really clear that they wanted it used for something to do with the activism around violence against women.

Interviewer: That's really interesting, I think because that was the one that the community centre was built for, that's one that, at least one that's kinda known for putting on the map for that. I guess just as well, I've got one more question. I don't know if you've got any that have come up as we've been going, so my final question is just if there's anything else that you would like to share with us. Anything else that's stood out that you would want recorded? Any other projects, any other places, anything that you want to pop down for the archive?

Interviewee: It's really hard to think of something. I think we've probably covered everything.

Interviewer: Yeah, the answer can surely be no. It's just if there's anything else that we've not kind of came across that you think is particularly relevant or exciting.

Interviewee: No, I think I'm fine. I do have a list of people though that I might just message Lauren about to check that we've asked them for things because they've probably got things lying around.

Interviewer: Yeah, absolutely. Apart from that, that's everything from me. Thank you, that's been brilliant.

Interviewee: Great, thank you.