

Interview with June Easton

No date, location given

Women's Center in Marquette

Jane Ryan (JR): I'm delighted to have June Easton here to talk about her experiences with the Women's Center in Marquette, Michigan. We are putting her interview as a part of the series on the history of the Women's Center. Welcome, June. And if you can give us little bit of your background information and then we'll talk specifically about your role with the Women's Center.

June Easton (JE): Great, thank you, Jane. My background information, I got my masters at Northern. Right. Just prior to my involvement with the Women's Center. And became licensed as a psychologist, limited licensed psychologist. And I currently, I'm living in southern California and continue to work with women, volunteer in various places, and so the skills that I gained at the Women's Center have very much a part of my life of overall these years.

JR: Good. Were you here at the very beginning of the Women's Center in Marquette? When did you arrive at Marquette? And how did you happen to be here?

JE: Well, we moved here, I guess it was in '61...and yes. I was here at the very beginning. I was here when the first consciousness-raising groups were being organized, and that was in the late 60s, I think.

JR: And early 70s, yes.

JE: And early 70s. And so I was in one of the consciousness raising groups and there were four or five of us that met weekly for a couple of years.

JR: Do you recall how those got started? So many of the women who have been interviewed remember participating but they don't remember what initiated it.

JE: Well, I do remember being in a several large meetings, I think...one in Pat Micklow's home, and I think maybe another at Karlyn Rapport's, and so somehow these groups became, got organized, I believe through all gathering together and somehow...I was trying to remember that

myself. I don't know if we self-selected, you know, and created our own groups or if somehow somebody organized that, I don't recall.

JR: It seems to be a void in remembering.

JE: Yes.

JR: Alright. And then how did that led to actual involvement in the Women's Center? Did you help set it up? Did you use your, where you called upon to use your counseling skills, I seem to recall somebody said you were actually hired as a counselor.

JE: As a counselor. Right. No, I really wasn't involved in the initial organization and structuring of the Women's Center. I, the way that I became involved was... Judy Russell was first counselor there, and she created a paraprofessional program and I was one of that first group of para-pros where we, she provide trainings and then we let small groups like assertiveness training and other kinds of groups and so I was one of those first para-pros and it was because at that point, I had not gotten my Masters when I first started working with the paraprofessional group. And it was because of my involvement there and leading the groups. That I decided that I wanted to go back to college and get my masters and eventually graduate. So that had a profound impact on me. And I love the community of Women and leading those groups. It really was a shift and a change in my life.

JR: Excellent. Tell me a little bit more in detail about assertiveness straining. Again, many have mentioned that, but nobody's really described, I think maybe we take it for granted now-a-days. These what that is. But why was that on the necessary kind of group.

JE: Well, it was...at that time, just in our culture, in general, women's roles were somewhat to be more in the background, supportive of husbands, nurturing for children, and very important roles but very limited. And so these assertiveness training groups were helping women to learn to be aware of what they really wanted and then to ask for it. And we would do role-playing. And it could be about very small issues because that's where you start. We start with just small issues in the women's lives and we role-play and model it. I would model different possibilities of how to ask for, whatever they wanted to bring up. And then they would pick what fit for them and they would practice it themselves and it was pretty dramatic that kinds of changes that took place in people's lives. I think there were like seven-week workshops is what I recall.

JR: And how were the women who took part in those recruited? Did they just know that the Women's Center was offering these and sign up or did people go out into community and...?

JE: No. Judy Russell asked if I would be interested in being a paraprofessional. And then I was, then when Judy left, and I think that was in like the mid-late 70s that was when I applied for that position. And so then I was hired as the counselor. And the paraprofessional program was really a key part of that job. And I think when I was a counselor there, I think we had about 30 paraprofessionals. And it was important to have women from Marquette, from Ishpeming, and Negaunee. In all of the surrounding cities we were able to find women and so it would be women that we would, perhaps after we started to was women that were in some of our groups that we can see has some kind of, you know, had leadership skills and might be interested and then we would approach them and asked would you be interested in doing this?

JR: So it might have contributed to many people, like you mentioned, made a difference in your own career track and...

JE: Absolutely. And really when I was counselor, one of the things that I really wanted to do was to create sense of community with the paraprofessionals. And we would, I would set up ongoing training. So that once a month, we would get together, these thirty women, and I would guide them through, all sorts of various active-listening, a lot of the kinds of things that they might be interested in doing with groups of women that they would be leading so that they would have some of that experience. And so a really very strong community, a sense of connection. And caring and support, developed in this group of paraprofessionals.

JR: And because many of the women interviewed have mentioned how cutting-edge Marquette seemed to be throughout not just the area but the country. Where were the lessons coming from about active listening and assertiveness? Where, what were the sources that give you the skills to teach women?

JE: Right. Well...in some of that, would have been from a master's training in terms of the basic skills. In terms of the structure, various workshops, you know, I really can't remember where those came from.

JR: But there was structured ways of going about it.

JE: Yes. These were structured workshops. And most of them were seven-week. Weekly and we trying to make some evening, some during the day. And then there were also some that were one day, like all day Saturday for instance, and that could be perhaps for women maybe from Gwinn or some other community where we may not have some paraprofessionals offering groups but they could come in for day as opposed to it being more difficult for them to come.

JR: And how did these women find out about the availability of these classes? Again, was there advertising or pretty much word of mouth? How did you...

JE: No. that day, promoting and marketing essentially for these programs was a big part of my job too. And that was you know, I would do radio interviews and also in all of the local papers, each week there would be a listing of the workshops that were in the process that would be offered in their area. And there were a lot. You know, there was assertiveness training that was one of the key ones, assertiveness training. But there were also values-clarification workshops there were confidence-building workshops there were goal-setting workshops...I remember one of the day-long workshops which was on...I can't remember the name of it. But it was helping the women to become more aware of their strengths. And this was a very small group, it would be either probably about six women as opposed to the ongoing seven-week ones were mostly, maybe ten to twelve women. And in this one day workshop, women would each take a turn to talk for perhaps twenty minutes about their life and what they felt were some of the those things that they felt particularly good about and it could be small things. You know, that they grew this wonderful garden and did a lot of canning, but things that they had a sense of pride about or it could even be something that was challenging where maybe they had a child that some kind of illness and it really required them to be very present and advocate for. So it could be a lot of different things and so they would talk for twenty minutes and the last of the women would listen. And they each had little stickers. And as the women spoke, and they really heard what they felt where strengths of this woman, they would jot them down. And that after the woman finished speaking, each of the other women would share with her what they saw, the courage that she had presented that's maybe to really go to the school and really advocate for a child who they felt was not...was some problem than the school over. The persistence perhaps in working with this garden and with poor soil and so...and then as they said each thing they would put this sticker on this sheet of paper that the women had until eventually by the end of all this feedback

they would have what we called their strength wheel ... and it was so powerful, women would leave, feeling so energized and empowered and affirmed.

JR: And in this era, it's maybe overgeneralizing, it seemed that's what women really needed, that they were, as a part of our culture, not looking at their strength. But worrying about what they were being told they didn't do well or left out so that it seems from reports to have made a terrific difference. And then just the group interaction.

JE: It did, yeah. The support from, yes. And some of the seven-week workshops, you know, where woman would be coming back seven weeks in a row. They gave women an opportunity to connect and to share challenges in their lives and because for many women, there was a real sense of isolation and this challenge that I'm facing. I'm the only one and there sometimes could be a lot of shame around it and really not wanting anyone to know. And so, in big and small ways, these groups, the connection between the women became a real source of support and...

JR: And the "I'm not alone" factor. That I'm not the only one coping with that. It really is amazing.

JE: Yes, right.

JR: What do you see as an overall role that you and the Women's Center made, the impact in the community? Could you sense while you were doing this that it wasn't just individual women benefiting?

JR: Really it was a grass-roots movement that really, I think, touched all parts of the community. Because many, many, many, women were served in this workshops. And that was also individual counseling that was available and I also had a drop-in group once a week where you know, women could, could just drop in. And there was a lot of sharing about decisions that they were thinking about making or you know, just anything that they wanted to talk about. So you know, many. It would be hard for me to imagine the numbers, but there were many, many women who were touched by these workshops and the counseling. And those women then went out and it certainly affected their families in affected their friendships with other women and so I would say it had an enormous effect.

JR: The big picture. Did you personally in your work encounter any resistance to what the Women's Center was doing? Either individuals or agencies that you had to appeal to or did you feel in general there was active support there? We've heard from others there was amazing amount of support from people or agencies, they hadn't expected it. Did you sense that too or were there some core resistance?

JE: You know, I think there were pockets of resistance. But I didn't personally experience that. The radio stations were very open and willing to provide time for me to talk about what we were doing in our workshop program. The newspapers were very available to publish the workshops that were coming up. And my encounters with the women and the workshop, I mean. The women were very eager for this kind of connection and this kind of support and you know, I imagine there was some resistance from, at times from family members at home, but nothing that I recall that was really....

JR: Stood out. Yeah. Now, were you there, we've talked quite a bit with others about the transition from being headquartered at Northern and being moved to the Episcopal church and then eventually buying the Women's Center? What stage of that were you, where did you work?

JE: Well, I was, I moved from being counselor at the Women's Center to a position as counselor at the University Counseling Center just prior to the time that had move took place. So I wasn't in the center of that. I continued to be involved. Just I attended lot of meetings, I was involved.

JR: But it was no longer your actual job.

JE: Right. It was no longer my actual job.

JR: Okay. And when do you recall the approximate day of that is it, was..?

JE: Well, I was trying to remember and I think I made that shift the very end. I think it was probably 1979.

JR: And then how much longer were you in the Marquette area? Because you did move.

JE: Right. I was at the University Counseling Center working there and left in `87, Spring of `87.

JR: And as you've said, you continued in roles very similar to what you had done at the Women's Center. Did you stay in touch...I know you've come back into the community visit.

Did you stay in touch with any of those that you were working with or had worked to help after you left and did that continue...and were you aware, I guess of the continuing development of the Women's Center?

JE: I was very aware of it. I was not closely in touch with some of the people that were hired after Sarah Kayfer was I think, was the counselor after I left. So I was very, only very peripherally involved in there.

JR: From what you've heard and some of that from me, but do you feel the Women's Center is still trying to live up to its' mission? It did and I think that have been after you left. But it did expand into supporting the Women's Shelter, Harbor House, and then you may have been there during the time, where they did a lot of trying to help particularly younger women but women in general explore non-traditional job, consider, and get hired for...were you involved in any of that job expansion, or any of those other expansions? That was after...

JE: I was that was...it was actually, I think that was started during the time that I was there but I was not involved in that. And also another thing that was happening well, I was there. but also I was not involved in was the displaced homemaker program that Francis Lam, I think was charge of...you know, for women who have been married for many years and suddenly found that they were divorced and didn't have the job skills to really move directly into the job market and so Francis Lam was in charge of that program.

JR: And that was a goal was to literally help them develop, probably some assertiveness training but also actually train how to train for new jobs and take on ____?

JE: You know, I don't know all that that entailed. But it was to be a support for women who really needed a lot of support because of the major change that was happening in their life and the ways that which they were not really prepared for that. So that was Francis Lam's area. And I know she would refer many of those programs to some of the workshops that our para-pros were leading because certainly, like the assertiveness training and goal setting and life planning workshops would be helpful to them. But she helped them with a lot of very much more concrete things.

JR: Practical links.

JE: Yeah, right.

JR: And I know there were some specific groups for displaced homemakers. They actually had support groups organized which seems to have been one of the sort of underlying things that in that day and age and probably to this day women need to know they aren't alone

JE: Right.

JR: And that they have things in common and can help one another deal with those which I think goes across all venues for support in a lot of areas to know that you are not the only one, and that there others. June, are there other things that you recall just little vignettes or groups that you taught, or people that you particularly modeled yourself after or helped model?

JE: Well, just that...you know, I think what was happening with the Women's Center here was a reflection of the major women's movement that was happening across the country. And that the Women's Center here, was one of the first and probably one of the most expansive programs in terms of all the many different kinds of services that were offered. And when I look back to the 70s, the changes that have taken place in women's lives are enormous. I remember in one of the trainings for the paraprofessionals then I did was to lead a guided visualization. And it was the reversal of roles that were currently in existence in the 70s. But instead of all of the ways in which men were dominant in the world, it was shifting, and it was a visualization of women in those positions. And it was very dramatic, I mean, and it wasn't really what we were suggesting that we'd end up with a lack of equality. But just simply, experiencing and seeing women being dominant like that would help us help the women to see more clearly what was having at that time. For instance, there were essentially no women-announcers on TV, they were all men. And so often, when there something in our culture that is a certain way. We don't question it. We just think that's the way it is. So to have this visualization where we're visualizing, imagining a time when we turn on television all the announcers are women. And because of course, women have this, such a lovely voice and very knowledgeable about the world events, and so imagining a women as President which we still don't have. But the major scientists in the world are women and then also looking at attitudes toward raising girls and raising boys and I mean this was kind of humorous but imagining that girls are encouraged to climb trees and to be very athletic and boys are encouraged to be quieter because their genitals are on the exterior and so they are more vulnerable to harm and of course, girls, their genitals are on the inside and so they are protected

and so they are really encouraged. I mean, it was quite outrageous, but it did make a point and help women to really realize and see some other things that were in existence at that time.

JR: Well, in employ, now to contrast 40 years later, a lot of that has evolved, not again to the extreme which probably nobody would want, but a balance there that. That's a very great exercise.

JE: And now women are in the military. In ways that they never...in combat positions. So there have been major, major changes.

JR: Do you feel that given that what we would call a positive that the job is done. Now we've accomplished the goals that Women's Center might have. Or is this an ongoing issue at most levels, whether we're talking about women taking charge of their lives or abuse situations or whatever? Do you feel we can rest easy?

JE: No, certainly there's more work to be done. You know, and some of the things are quite obvious but many of them are very subtle. And I think even something as subtle as women's appearance, there's still a lot of pressure on women to look a certain way. And in particularly young girls now, you know, this is really a problem. So a lot of subtle things that women take on, attitudes and belief about themselves that really need to be addressed and shifted. And big things to. I mean, we still, if we look at congress, how many women are there in congress? It's not a very large percent. I mean, it is moving in that direction, but there is still a lot that needs to be done.

JR: So we encourage the Women's Center that continue its work, right?

JE: Yes, absolutely.

JR: And with decreased funding, again, we are talking about 2013. All of these organizations that support various needs are having to take a tough look at their essential mission and we can't help but applaud the women who are still working for those goals and trying to get funding because, and I think the acknowledgement at least recently in the community of the sex trafficking and the fact that there still are people showing up, women particularly although men sometimes in abusive situations needing help out of those situations. That, whether that all ever go away is

certainly a question. So we thank you for your role at that stage and we are going to keep working, it appears from the people we are interviewing.

JE: Thank you, Jane.

JR: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW