

Interview with Gail Griffith

Location: Marquette, MI

IN: This is Gail Griffith and she will be speaking to us about the early days of the Women's Center, as she was the first executive director in the 1970's. Gail currently lives in Marquette and has spent some time here, so she'll be telling us about that. Gail...

GG: Actually, we've been here in Marquette now for almost 50 years I guess, and we came in the early 1960's. Both my husband and I had been at Michigan State University, in the graduate school there. He was a post doc, and I was finishing up my doctorate in chemistry; and a job opened up at Northern Michigan University in the Chemistry Department and we thought "Well, maybe we can just go up there for a couple of years and see what it's like," but we liked it a lot. So we've been here all the time. My involvement with the Women's Center was kind of fortuitous, because we had been out at the University of California at Davis on sabbatical in 1971-72, and of course been involved on things going on out there, and was really not aware of what was going on in Marquette. But when we got back, all of a sudden I was hearing about all of these consciousness raising groups, and I was not in that milieu at all, and so I had a lot to learn. But, it was not something that I was adverse to because I was on that same page, I just hadn't gotten along in the chapter. So, the year we came back from California there was the first gathering of women on campus at Northern Michigan University gathered to see if there could not be some more programs and so forth, particularly for women. After the... I think that was a two-day conference... there was a nucleus of people who came together, any of whom you will in this series of interviews, who were very eager to set up a Women's Center for continuing education in the Continuing Education Department at Northern. And I happened to be working in the Department of Research and Development that particular year, and I was asked if I would be willing to be an interim director to get this new Women's Center for continuing education off the ground, and I thought "yes, I do like this opportunity." And so I was the interim director, and we had... as I said... a nucleus... a board that we had established for the Women's Center.

IN: Did that come from the group, or did Northern direct getting a board? Do you remember?

GG: I think we were self-organized. I think we were given the title of "Here you are," you are the Northern Michigan University Center for Women... continuing education for women. Just pick it up and go with it. So there were no appointments from anybody but the group itself. It was self-organized. And one of the first things we had to do... and we had an office on campus in the old Longyear building which has since been torn down... a nice office right on campus. One of the first things we had to do was find a director. A permanent director. And so we put out notices about two people who might be interested in that position, and we had a number of applicants, one of which was Holly Greer, who was a resident of Marquette at the time and had been Marquette's mayor. I can't remember if that was before or after she was the Women's Center Head. But she was the Mayor of Marquette, and there is if anybody is interested in Marquette, there is a Holly Greer bike path all the way through the city, and that's the very same Holly Greer who was our first Women's Center Director. Holly picked up the ball and got things rolling. She maintained the board and started to develop programs. Many of them were on campus. Also she went out for several grants for supporting the various programs we would have. At first, Northern was supporting the office...

IN: Actually financially contributing as well.

GG: Yes, financial contribution.

GG: And so we had our spot, but we had to create our programs. And that of course took a lot of work and there were many, many meetings. But, as I said, Holly took up the reins and did a wonderful job of putting it all together and laying out programs. The rest is history I guess.

IN: Did you work in parallel with Holly for some time or did you just hand over the reins? How did that transition go?

GG: Well, once Holly was appointed... then I was still on the Women's Center Board, so that was my connection with the Women's Center.

IN: Okay. What did you view the primary mission at that time if you can recollect? What were you personally hoping would come of this?

GG: Well, I could see that there was a lot of disparity in the way women were treated in their civil rights and et cetera, and the time was ripe for more support for women who needed that kind of support; whether it was educational, or other kinds of support, and this was a wonderful vehicle we were able to do that with.

IN: And did you... somebody mentioned a lead from Oakland University downstate. One of the universities had kind of a program. Maybe that was why you were gone. They went down and viewed it and got ideas?

GG: I'm not aware of that. That was the year we were gone.

IN: Gone, yeah. In a way it surprised me, that that... because evidently Marquette's program was pretty...

GG: One of the very first in the state of Michigan, yes. We were way ahead of the game.

IN: Yeah, wonderful.

IN: There were issues in terms of women's roles in job roles and non-traditional... I think that was one of the programs that came out of the Women's Center. But you yourself were not typical in that time, in that you were a scientist and had gotten a PhD. How did you come to that?

GG: Okay, I knew I wanted to be a chemist when I was in eighth grade, so that was just following my nose. This is what I wanted to do, and I went to Michigan Tech as an undergraduate and got a degree in medical technology. And so I did some work in a hospital laboratory, and as a matter of fact that kind of supported myself through graduate school, by working in a hospital laboratory. I then got in to a chemistry program at Michigan State. There I met my husband as a matter of fact. He was my very first laboratory instructor. It was very nice. We were in East Lansing for almost eight years by the time we finished up all of our business there, and we had two children by that time. And I was finishing up my degree while Tom was a post-doc there. So I would go in and do my research in the evenings and Tom was home with the kids during the day, which was kind of an unusual set-up I think, at the time. But things worked out very nicely for us.

IN: And I assume from what you said, he supported your career orientation. You continued to teach at Northern didn't you? You moved in as a faculty person...

GG: Yes, after that one year in the research and development program I went back to teaching part-time in the Chemistry Department. I was adjunct for a number of years, but then I finally had a full-time position. One of my aims was to retire as a full-time professor, and that I did do in 1989 I think it was. So I've been retired a number of years now. I retired early, but I highly recommend retirement.

IN: And I notice you aren't sitting back. You're still actively involved in community. Now have you reconnected with the Women's Center at all?

GG: I stayed on the board for a number of years. I've gone back a couple of times for just some gatherings of people who had been on the board in the past, and so on. I just remembered that one of the things that we did in the early Women's Center was to send out people who... Women who were in occupations that were to be role models for young women. And I was on that team as a matter of fact.

IN: Non-traditional, yeah...

GG: Non-traditional employment, yes. So I went to several schools and talked to young women.

IN: Did you get feedback on some of those kinds of things? That young women were ripe for... or do you think it was a long transition for them to consider some careers they might not have chosen?

GG: I think so, but I think I had probably more effect on women going into science and so on, as I was teaching at Northern, because I had taught the beginning chemistry course for all the nursing students, and we'd have at least 100 students every semester in that course. And I remember one particular person who was knocking the top off all of the exams, and if there was a question that she'd got wrong you'd have to look at the question to see if it was ambiguous. Anyways, she went on and got her degree in nursing, and she alleges that I told her that I told her that she really ought to be going on to medical school. And I don't remember that conversation, but now she's my personal physician, which is a wonderful story, I love it.

IN: That makes you feel good as a teacher.

GG: Yeah, you know. And also a lot of the courses that I taught, biochemistry and environmental toxicology and that kind of thing... we taught a lot of the pre-dental, pre-med students, so there are a lot of other students that I've had the pleasure of being with at Northern.

IN: And many have come back in a professional role then. That must be very satisfying.

GG: Yes.

IN: Do you, as a resident of the area, now feel... I know the Women's Center now is working hard to find some new directions and re-establish itself in ways. Do you have thoughts on the areas of need for women now, or have we solved all those problems?

GG: No, the problems will never all be solved. I think one of the most fruitful things that Women's Center has been doing, is establishing the Harbor House. I think that has been really one of the highlights of what has happened through the Women's Center, and they're doing a good job in helping a lot of families.

IN: Through tough times but also from what I understand, encouraging more women who are in those circumstances to look at more education and more...

GG: Yes, yes. That's always one of the thrusts, education.

IN: One of the interviewees, in fact maybe two have mentioned despite the struggle once the Women's Center left being under the umbrella of Northern, one of the advantages was that it seemed to draw in more women in the community who may have been intimidated, or put-off by the idea it was a university function, versus for every woman that might have aspired to take a look at her life and see how she could improve it.

GG: Yeah, I think that was kind of the perception, and being completely independent from the university people didn't have to come on campus and try to find their way around campus to find out what's happening. Everything was in the Women's Center building, or programs were out across the Upper Peninsula.

IN: One other comment, again it's kind of a thread through here, but I'd be interested in your feelings about it, is that somewhat parallel to the general civil rights movement, that we're far enough away from those early days of struggle, and recognition, and getting established, that young women in this case may take for granted, in this case, some of these things that are open to them, and not realize that it was a struggle for people in the early days. Do you get any sense of that?

GG: Yeah, I think young women at this point are really living in a very different world. It's a world of instant communication, it's a world of more equality. I won't say absolute equality, but a lot more equality, more opportunity, and most young women now can decide for themselves what they'd like to make of their lives. There's not just the one path of Sally Home-maker for them at this point. The world is very, very different.

IN: So, despite a struggle there's been forward motion to a great extent.

IN: Gail, are there any personal incidents, either involving directly with the Women's Center or in your own orientation to careers and women's roles that you'd be interested in sharing? Your own children... I think you have a daughter who is a scientist, do you not?

GG: Yes, yes. As a matter of fact we have two daughters and a son. Our son is still here in Marquette with us, and he bags groceries at Econo and has been there for 17 years now I think. Our older daughter went to MIT as an undergraduate, and she was thinking that she would maybe take a degree in economics and go law school, but it turns out that somehow she got shuffled into biology and chemistry. So she finished MIT and then went out to Stanford and got a PhD in pharmacology and an M.D. as well. But she's never practiced medicine, she always wanted to do the research, and this was one of the tickets you had to have punched in order to do the research. Our younger daughter went to the University of Michigan, and she was wondering about what she really wanted to do, and she didn't make up her mind until she was a junior and had to make some decisions. And she decided of the classes she liked the most, it was math. And so she decided to get a math major. And so she took her whole senior year taking math courses, and even the names of them I don't understand. But anyways, she got a master's degree from the University of Michigan in biostatistics, and while there she met and married a young Canadian man, and they live in Hamilton, Ontario now. He's a classical trumpet player. She after having three children... she had been working in the medical school at McMaster University in

Hamilton, and she had been a biostatistician. They had protocols for a lot of the research that was going on there and she decided that she really wanted to get her name made first on some of those papers, so she got her PhD at the University of Toronto in the epidemiology of biostatistics, and she now has a faculty job at McMaster University and is working very hard. And her kids, now two of them in college, and one of them is still in high-school. Our older daughter lives near Boston, Massachusetts, and she teaches at Brandeis University and she has two children.

IN: So there's a little DNA at work there (laughs). Parents and faculties and... that's wonderful though. It must be very gratifying for you to see your daughter's enjoying the same kind of career that you had.

GG: Oh yes, wonderful. We're very proud.

IN: Anything else that you'd like to share? I know it's hard just to pull something out, but you've had some really experiences. Otherwise we can wrap up.

GG: I can't think of anything. Unless you have some more questions.

IN: No, at this point I'm good, but I want to thank you and I have to do this with all the women who made the contributions that were needed. I know several of them have said, although these were jobs, part-time or paid, but they tended to turn in to full-time jobs even though they might be paid for half or a quarter time. So, you sense the passion and the real commitment that women had to making sure things improved for other young women.

GG: Oh, absolutely. It would never have happened without the commitment of all these women who put it together.

IN: Thank you for being one of them.

GG: Thank you.

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