

Interview with Holly Greer

Interviewed by Jane Ryan

Jane Ryan (JR): We will be interviewing Holly Greer this afternoon, and Holly, again is one of the Founding Mothers, the term that we are using to describe the women who were so influential in getting a Women's Center in Marquette. Holly will describe some of the earliest days as she was Director almost from the get-go. Holly?

Holly Greer (HG): Thanks, Jane but I think in my case you should say founding Grandmothers, been a long time. We came, Bill and I and our four children, our dog, and our cat came to Marquette in 1965, I think, I'm not quite sure. But anyway, you know, I said, "Don't you think we should get some reservations?" Because we can't get into our house yet, and Bill said, "Oh no, not in Marquette, there will be plenty of vacancies." Well we went all over the place, couldn't find a vacancy. So all six of us and the dog and the cat ended up in one room for the night, so that was our introduction in Marquette. But Bill was the rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church and we had come from Grand Rapids where he had been for almost ten years, or we have been for almost ten years. And I had been busy raising children, I had four children within six years, and that was a lot of kids. But I can remember feeling when I was in Marquette, really frustrated. I loved my kids, I just adored them, but I kept thinking, "Is this all there is? Is this really all there is? I'm going to end up just talking baby-talk for the rest of my life...couldn't." I had graduated from Smith College in 1953 and Bill and I were married in 1955, I had worked for a couple of years for the Episcopal Church and then when Billy was born in New York City in 1956, and after that we moved to Grand Rapids. I had taken some courses in Grand Rapids, I wasn't sure what I wanted. I had been a History Major, but there wasn't a great call for History Majors. So I thought, maybe I should get into Library Science, so I started taking courses in Poetry and Library Sciences. Then we decided, or Bill had a call to come to Marquette. George Hill was a good friend of ours and George has lived up here, he had been in Grand Rapids and he lived up here. Anyway, so we came up to see Marquette and I remember that first time it was in January. It was cold, but it was beautiful and we walked out on the break-water and there were the tremendous northern lights and it was just, they were in Technicolor, they were just gorgeous. Then George says, "Not a bad view for a small town, is it?" Anyway we ended up coming here, and living on College Ave., and as I say I had this feeling about, "There must be more to life than that", so I started taking some courses, I got, ended up getting a Master's Degree in History, but...and then I. I was a Graduate Assistant in the History Department, but I did not teach history. I was teaching kind of...actually I was teaching out of the English Department and it was kind of an all-overview kind of course, can't remember the name of it but that was fun. But I knew that I had no future in, at the University unless I had a Ph.D. and the closest I could get Ph.D. would have been either Lansing or Ann Arbor and I had all these little kids, I couldn't very well just leave them. So I did not do that, but so I was teaching in the, I was teaching after I had finished my Graduate Assistance-ship I had at least a year of teaching. And during that year was when we began talking about what, I can't remember the first meeting but we had a Women's meeting, and we broke up into small groups, Consciousness Raising groups and met at different times and different places. Out of that, some of us decided really what we needed to do was to have a conference and to see what women in the Upper Peninsula really wanted, what was it that we really needed? Mary Soper who had come from downstate

had, had invited us to come to her house and go to a conference at, I think it was Oakland College, which had a Women's Center there. And so we did that and it was very impressive, and so when we came back, we convinced Northern to put on a conference for us. And we had a conference called, I think it was called "The Changing Role of Women."

JR: And so it was initiated by the women, versus Northern suggesting? Okay

HG: Oh yeah, oh it was absolutely initiated by the women. I don't think Northern would have thought about it. Not at all. No the women were the ones that. Out of that conference came this um real I shouldn't say "Demand", whether it's really a demand but a real interest in having a Women's Center at Northern. And so we petitioned, we worked hard to institute one and after a lot of meetings and begging and so on, they agreed to have one. Well Gail Griffiths was appointed the first Director, she was interim because she was faculty at the time and she knew she couldn't put in a whole lot of time into it. And then after Gail I was appointed and Judy, was it Judy Russell? No, June, I guess it was June.

JR: Judy Russel I understand was the first counselor and then June

HG: Yeah, okay. Judy was, then June

JR: followed her. Yeah.

HG: Then June. So Judy and I moved into, we had this little office in the old main building, if that is was that what it was called? And that building was torn down. And I can remember we bought some red burlap and put up curtains in the windows! Anyway we started the Women's Center and we'd get lots of ideas, of things that people wanted, women wanted courses in finance, they wanted courses in, there's just a myriad of things

JR: So the goal there was to offer educational program under the roof, not necessarily for credit but?

HG: Right well the goal was, really to have women fulfill their potential, whatever it may be. And so in doing that we started a whole lot of different kinds of activities. One was workshops, and we had a number of workshops which were run by volunteers. But the volunteers were all trained, and we worked closely with the counseling center. And we also decided that we needed to do a lot of public education. The public really didn't know what this was all about, had a bad idea of what Women's Liberations was. And so we had a speaker's bureau, and we went all across the U.P. talking to groups. A lot of them were Men's groups, at that time groups like the Lion's Club and Kiwanis and all of those were strictly male, they were not female. And so we went and educated them

JR: What kind of reception?

HG: We had a....I think we had a fairly good reception.

JR: Reception, at least courtesy?

HG: Well they were polite, I don't know what they were thinking behind their backs but they were not rude to us anyway. I mean, you know that was a time when women couldn't get credit in their own name. You couldn't get a loan, you couldn't even get a library card in your own name, you had to have your husband or your mother or your father. And so it was just a lot to do. And women knew very little about their own health and we worked with Northern's Health Department to help educate women about their own bodies. I don't know if you remember the book *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. That was the

basis for some of them. And the other thing we, one of the other workshops that was pretty popular was a workshop which was called Assertiveness Training. And Assertiveness Training was really to help women be able to say "No" when they really meant no, and not always to say "Yes" and I don't mean just in sexual things, I mean in whatever it was they wanted to do. That they ought to be able to stand up for themselves.

JR: I recall that as a buzz word and it was contrasted to being aggressive...

HG: Right, absolutely.

JR: That if some fine points but some very important things for working your way into an executive position

HG: Exactly, you know I'll tell you a funny story about that. When I was, I ran for the common council and I won a seat on the commission. And after a year or two it really would have been my time to be Mayor, but there never had been a women on the city commission and the men looked askance at that. And there were only seven of us, I think, on the commission. So when it came time to vote for mayor, which was voted on by the commissioners themselves, there were three people who were running for mayor and I was one of them. And the voting, vote after vote after vote, and finally I thought to myself, "This is really ridiculous, I don't care that much about it." And then I thought, "Holly you are teaching Assertiveness Training don't you dare step down." So I didn't, and they had to run out and get some more ballots because they had run out of ballots. All of this was on T.V. at the time, it was really crazy. So finally, after I think thirty-six ballots, some, one of the gentlemen backed down and I was elected. And so I said, "Gentlemen, thank you for your overwhelming support." [laughs] But anyway we got along pretty well and it was an interesting experience.

JR: And you were a first and then one of the other founding mothers became the first chair I think, of the County Commission, Sally May. So this was an era of....

HG: Yeah, yeah. Well it was, it was the first time women got elected to a lot of those positions and it really was a break-through. This was in '72 and that was a breakthrough year for us.

JR: Were you on the council parallel to your serving as the Director of the Women's Center?

HG: Yes, I was. Uh-huh.

JR: Pretty heavy agenda then?

HG: It was. Well, the...as Director as the Women's Center, I was part time. Our budget never exceeded \$18,000 and that included the counselor and myself. But of course it was part-time but it was full-time. And we did get a lot of other grants for various things. We got a grant on displaced homemakers, which Frances Vandermill ran that for a while. And then we had a grant for Women in Non-Traditional roles where we went out with women who were in non-traditional positions like maybe a telephone line-person, or a miner, or an executive would go out in the schools and talk about their jobs and what it meant and how women could break through, and that was a funded position.

JR: And that must have been a little difficult to find those women in those times. I mean they would be atypical.

HG: Right. It was atypical and hopefully they inspired some younger women to look at those things because at that time women were mostly either secretaries, teachers, nurses. And that was really about the extent of the roles at that time, so it was a big thing. We did a lot of counseling, we did a lot of...what else. Oh we also began, at that time, Pat Micklow and her cohort at Ann Arbor had written a paper on spousal abuse and it had become quite well known. And we began a program then whereby we had a hotline people could call if they want. We didn't have a shelter as they have now but we would answer the calls and these women would come stay in our homes. And we weren't looking for a shelter, but we had to have funding for it. While I was there we did not have a shelter, but we did answer the calls and we did some really stupid things. And I can remember one time I answered a call and I went to somebody's house. And you should never, ever do that!

JR: In the midst of a situation?

HG: I got there before the police did and the guy had a gun. Yeah. It was not a smart thing to do, but we learned the hard way, but nobody got shot. Another thing we started was a half-way house for women. We had a grant for that from the Episcopal Church and it was called the Joan Curto House. And...

JR: Was part of your particular job to go for grants or how did the grant process go?

HG: I don't know. It just happens.

JR: No? Things happen?

HG: The idea was that we started these things that the women needed and then spun them off on their own, so that the spouse abuse project, this shelter, became its own thing and so did the half-way house. I don't know what ever happened to the half-way house.

JR: It's, it evolved and continued. Now there is Great Lakes Recovery which is an umbrella over a lot of these.

HG: Well there were a lot of, this was just a half-way house for women.

JR: Women, yeah but I think it's, I don't know the detail either.

HG: Well anyway

JR: But there's still that kind of...

HG: So we really started a lot of various things. And then at some point we had moved into the new administration building by then. But at some point in all of this, funds were cut for Northern, and they decided that they had to cut out some of their continuing education functions. So they appointed a Blue-Ribbon Committee which was to come up with recommendations. And, because Continuing Education at that time included a lot; it included conferences, it included public television and radio, it included...I don't know what else. But a whole lot of different functions [coughs]. Excuse me. Their recommendations were: first of all, don't lose public radio, second of all, don't lose the women's center and then so on down the list. Well at that point we had, unfortunately, some of the women who were married to top-ranking men at the university had become very interested in the Total Woman concept, if you remember what that was. They were very much against what we were doing, and they had become quite interested in fundamentalism and so on. They did not at all like what we were doing. So

anyway, I blame it. It may not be the whole thing. So the first thing to go out of Continuing Education was the Women's Center.

JR: Despite the recommendation? That's interesting.

HG: Yeah, yeah. And it wasn't costing them that much money. Actually, one of the things that we did at the Women's Center was to raise money for scholarships for women returning to the university.

JR: Sort of win-win for the university?

HG: We didn't...well anyway. So that was the end of the Women's Center for Continuing Education. What we did do at the time, Bill had decided that it was time for him to move on, and we were going to move to Courtland, New York. But before that happened, we got the okay to use the basement of the St. Paul's Episcopal Church for a temporary place for the Women's center to meet. And I think that's when Sally became the...

JR: The Director

HG: The Director. So that was kind of the end of my involvement. I kept in touch with some of the women who were in our Consciousness Raising group and Karlyn and Pat, Mary-Anne Kublin, and Lillian Heldreth, Sarah McClellan, Carolyn MacDonald bought a time-share [laughs], and so, once a year we go someplace hopefully warm, and have a great time together.

JR: Still? You still?

HG: Yeah

JR: Oh that's wonderful!

HG: And, but I think this year we'll probably go out and see Sarah, whose been ill. So we may do that this year, but it's been a great way to keep tabs.

JR: Right, did you carry your interest in this kind of project with you when you moved or did you switch gears in your new location?

HG: No, I absolutely did and when I moved to Courtland, not right away but after a couple of years, I became the Executive Director of the YWCA, so we were doing a lot of the same kinds of things.

JR: You could draw on that. Now, could we go back a little now?

HG: Sure.

JR: To the specifics of the governance. When you were under Northern, how did you decide what programs, how was the decision making for things that you would do? Was that the Executive Director's decision, was that Northern people...

HG: No, we had a board.

JR: You had a board.

HG: We had a board, yeah.

JR: And did Northern have control over that board or were you pretty much on your own?

HG: We were pretty much on our own, I mean they could've kicked us out at any time.

JR: Your own, yeah

HG: I'll tell you one person who was really helpful was Jack Rambaults. I don't know if you remember him, he was Vice-President at the time. And also Don Jackson was helpful. I don't...I don't know that. Well I don't know, let's just leave it at that.

JR: Yeah, so there was support, and basically they were giving you a roof over your head and...

HG: Support services, I mean sure, we had use of the...

JR: Facilities

HG: Facilities and the furniture and the, and materials.

JR: And then you would interconnect if you were going to plan some sort of a meeting that might involve. Did faculty ever get involved in any of the programs or _____?

HG: Well they did in the sense that some of them really gave us help in leading our programs. The Counseling Department was really helpful, and we had small group counseling sessions and the health, I can remember Barb....I can't remember. And I remember Jenna Grundstrom, we wanted to start a Children's Center, and Jenna Grundstrom was very helpful in that. And of course, Gail was always very helpful. There were women on the board who were faculty members so.

JR: And I remember one of the people we've talked to saying, while they were sad to leave Northern because that had been a supportive environment, they also realized that if you got out into the community, you would be attracting women who might not feel they belonged in an academic setting.

HG: I think that's true

JR: So there was an up-side?

HG: I think there was something that was a little off-putting about Northern for some women who felt that somehow they couldn't....

JR: They didn't have a degree or.....

HG: incompatible with a college campus. Yeah, and I think that was true and I think it was probably good that we got out in the community. I, however, I guess I won't say that. I was taken aback when I heard they were raising their money by bingo. I just thought, that's a stupid way to raise money.

JR: Other people have commented on that. That was hard to take, it was one of those like born-of-necessity cause we don't want to die, but that shouldn't be the way.

HG: Right, exactly, exactly. And I understand this. Stood them in good stead for a long time.

JR: Absolutely, got them over it.

HG: So I guess I, but I have had the feeling that gambling is taking advantage of the least of our people well.

JR: The other issue that I did hear about was when smoking, no-smoking in places like bingo parlors became an issue, because many people realized if there's no smoking, we lose a lot of participants and therefore we lose money.

HG: Oh, oh I didn't hear about that.

JR: So, do we support this or don't we? And of course, most of the folks would not feel smoking was a good idea. But gee...

HG: [laughs]

JR: So it was balanced out

HG: Money-money!

JR: Yeah, you know you're faced with political realities

HG: That's right, that's right anything you do has a political reality, absolutely.

JR: So you probably left right about the time then they left Northern, so you're not as aware of how they governed. Did governing the Women's Center or decision making change much when they just?

HG: No, I don't think so. I think it was the board pretty much

JR: Now you've returned to Marquette and we're delighted by that. And I think, as an observer I'm so impressed with women that were in the original group coming back and wanting to be involved during a challenging time. What drew you back in? Your pals or the concepts?

HG: Well of course I never really lost interest in the Women's Center and, my good friends Pat and Karlyn and other people, Sally May. You know, it was good to be working with them again too. And yeah, there are a lot of challenges, just a lot of challenges. But I've been amazed at how well this group of women are doing. I think we need to add more women to the board and I'm astounded at how much money they've been able to raise and how well things seem to be going. So I'd like to see us, I'd like to see the Center expand its role. Pretty much now it is focused on women who are, women and their children who are in abusive situations. And they house them, give them counseling, shelter, food, whatever. They also do rape crisis counseling, and some other things. I would like to see our role expanded, not the same way that we had it thirty years ago or forty years ago because, I think, times have changed a lot. But I think there are things the Women's Center could be doing that aren't being done in the community. However, I have been amazed at the changes in Marquette, it's just amazing. Of course, I came back summers, almost every summer.

JR: You have a daughter still in the community don't you now?

HG: Well, yeah. She wasn't always there but even before she moved back here, we came back every summer. We've rented a place on the highway, on 28 there. And then we used to have family reunions at the Episcopal camp on Little Lake and now we have family reunions at the Ford Bungalow down at Pequaming. So yeah, actually our family, my family grew up here, my kids all grew up here. They consider this home, they don't consider Courtland home, they were all gone by that time so yeah it was a place to come back to.

JR: Well we're lucky that you've maintained that. Now go a little further with what you'd like to see. You said not quite like before but do you have particular programs in mind or just exploring?

HG: No I don't. I think you have to find out what people want. But I think, I think there are needs that aren't being met but I've kind of segued into that saying how much Marquette has changed. And I think a lot of the things that we saw, the needs that we saw have been met or are being met by other agencies or organizations. So I think we have to look very and see what it is that we should be doing. I think, at the heart of it I think we must continue to be advocates for women who are in violent situations, and men too, actually. I don't think we'll ever come to the point where we're going to house men but I think working with Social Services and the Police to...

JR: And support, counseling, guidance.

HG: Right, absolutely. But I see there is a future here for it, and I like the feeling, I like the spirit of the women who are involved, and it boggles my mind to see the dedication of the staff that is working with these women. I mean, there are just, there are so many needs, and things have changed a great deal. Today we were in a meeting and we were talking about how the clients have changed so much that now we see all so many women coming who have lost their children, I mean that Harbor Social Services has taken their children away from them. Maybe they have drug use and maybe don't have any money what-so-ever. It's very sad. So there are just so many things to fight, but there's such a need to coordinate services, and I think they do a wonderful job of coordinating

JR: That I have heard reinforced, to coordinate. And your description of spinning off, it's like you're a brain-trust that gets ideas, makes them possible, and then sees that there are other....

HG: Well it turns out as a matter of fact even though Harbor House when that whole program had been spun off, they just couldn't make it. So they petitioned the Women's center to come back in, so the Women's Center did take it over. It's become a major project for them.

JR: Well it's exciting and I think, again the fact that women who were in the beginning still see and recognize the needs and are willing to devote time, speaks to the value. And it also speaks to the community about the need to stick with it.

HG: That's right, that's right.

JR: They've seen it. You know, you've seen the end, I think it was Karlyn, maybe Sally too who commented that this community has supported in so many ways from the unions helping with remodeling to individuals committing significant time and money, as Marquette seems to do with everything that's valuable.

HG: I know it's wonderful, it really is. But you know Jane, it would be like having a baby and then not supporting that baby. So if you have a baby, then you're going to love and support that babe for the rest of your life.

JR: Forever. Yeah.

HG: And so I think that's kind of what the Women's Center means to the founding mothers.

JR: Has meant...Excellent. And that's where_____ the title. Anything that we haven't touched on, or any again, a personal experience that kind of highlights for you the Women's Center?

HG: Um, trying to think. One of the exciting things that happened to me while I was at the Women's Center was I attended the, well I've attended two really exciting conferences, well one but the two exciting. I went to Mexico City to attend the International Women's Year and Bob and Sarah McClellan and my husband Bill and I, and the four of us went to this conference. It was so exciting to see women from all over the world, and they were all just so excited about what the possibilities were. And now you see these terrible things that are still happening, especially in Africa and Asia as to how women are being treated and raped, and just trafficked. Just unbelievable, of course it happens in this country too. And then the other exciting thing was when the United States had their conference for women and that was in '77, I believe. And there were women there from all over the United States, from every state, but that was exciting. And it was fun too because my sister was there from Iowa at the time so that was an exciting time. There was just lots of just really exciting times and lots of wonderful people we worked with and it was a really good time in my life.

JR: You feel you've reached a potential there that you, way back in the early days were wondering, "What am I supposed to be doing with my time?" Right?

HG: Well I don't know Jane, I was trying to think, now about what...if I had to relive my life, what would I, what would I do that I would do differently? _____ maybe it's just because the Inauguration was just on or what, but I think I would love to be an Historian that could make history come alive. I think you're doing this with this project and I think that's wonderful.

JR: Well, I hope so because it's so much fun, with you folks, to look back on it.

HG: One of the people I just really admire is Doris Turns Goodwin

JR: Yes! It's her comments

HG: She's, I just love her. She's just great. Well it's hard sometimes to make history interesting, but she does. And she writes so well and it's just fascinating stuff.

JR: As a retired history teacher myself, although I ended up teaching some other subjects, I think of just the media now. I don't know if you watched The Abolitionists last night on public T.V.

HG: Yah, I didn't last night but...

JR: To have had those tools, to... because the visuals really do help a lot but. Well, we can wrap this up and chat on...

HG: Okay.

JR: But this has been wonderful

HG: Well thank you, and thank you for the tea!

JR: And I think our community is grateful to all of you gals, ladies, and the men who supported you for the contribution it's made to our community

HG: Thank you

JR: Thank you

END OF INTERVIEW