

Title: Interview with Martha Parks

No date, no location given

Women's Center in Marquette, MI

Jane Ryan (JR): I'm interviewing Martha Parks and she will be describing her role and the development of the Women's center in Marquette, Michigan. Martha, can give us little background and how you came to be where you are?

Martha Parks (MP): Yes, I have master's degree in counseling. And I'm currently a shop owner in downtown Marquette. I've actually been involved with the Women's Center from the beginning. But I didn't know it at the beginning. I was in college and taking some summer classes and the Rasmussen's were the professors there of that class, and one day we were at their house during the summertime. I can't recall why. But she had, they had, a coffee table in the living room with all these envelopes and invitations and so they recruited some of us to stuff the envelopes and lick the stamps, lick the envelopes. And that was all I knew at the time. I graduated from Northern, I got married and I had three little kids and in 1983 or so, I came back to Marquette, was leaving that marriage and trying to get resettled with my children. So I was referred to the Women's Center and I met with Barb Belew, who was a counselor there that time. She referred me to the displaced homemaker program which was at the Intermediate School District at that time and all of those resources started to help me kind of pull things together and get back in school, and get established in this place to bring my children.

JR: Was the displaced homemakers program basically counseling and helping be aware of resources? What exactly happened there?

MP: It was, there was back in the glory days, when we had a Department Women in Work at the State level, and they developed this program for women who had the traditional kind of marriage, they got married right out of high school or right out of college and devoted their career to raising their families. And then were displaced either through death or divorce and did not have the job skills that they needed to then be self-sufficient and get a job. There were some qualifiers to be involved in that I don't quite recall, but they did do a lot of resume building, skill building and referral to job training programs, and things like that. Mostly though it was often very much a support group because most of women didn't see it coming and they needed a lot of support to kind of just get through and get on with things.

JR: And didn't know they had skills?

MP: Right. Right. A lot of the people, later on, when I started running that program ended it up back to the Women's Center. A lot of women really blossomed after that. And we had many success stories. They started to feel better about themselves and that's the first step I think it getting a job, whatever job might be.

JR: Indeed quite a large number of women go through that? I don't know a few or dozens?

MP: I'm not sure I would know over time but it was a steady, it was a full time position to have somebody assigned to that program. And we were allowed to help people they didn't actually qualify too, so lot of times maybe a younger person, in kind of same situation would come in and we would help and refer, and assist them with getting their needs met.

JR: Well, I interrupted your train of thought it was that the ISD? Then the Women's Center took it on?

MP: Eventually it came to the Women's Center. When, I wanted to say that when I met Barb, it was just kind of deja-vu thing. She knew I was trying to come up here, my kids were staying with my parents in Manistique and I was trying to come up here and find an apartment and all that kind of stuff, and she knew I was going to come up one time, but she was going to be out of town and she offered me to stay at her house. And so I got the directions to her house and when I went there, I went, "Oh my goodness, that's the Rasmussen's old house." So where I was stuffing envelopes at roofs is the first place I stopped when I came back to Marquette!

JR: And did you ever find out the purpose of those envelopes?

MP: I did eventually, but it took a long time. That was envelopes for being stuffed for and mailed for that Call To Action conference that they had, that eventually started the Women's Center. So, I went back to school and I got my master's degree. Worked at raising the three kids. Had to be on welfare, had to meet the requirements of that, and one of those things was a job club. And back in the mid-80s, they had job clubs everywhere. And it was basically, the premise was that if you weren't now working, then your job is to get a job. So we had to spend so many hours a week in a job search, you had to document your job search. We had to spend time in class, building your resume, practicing interviews and all of those kind of things. Learning interests tests and things like that. So I was assigned to the job club at the Women's Center during that time.

JR: And you say assigned. Who, what agency?

MP: It was Department of Social Services now, it's not that but.

JR: So, yes. It's gone through many transformation. So it was a state program?

MP: Yep.

JR: Do you view that, looking back as a positive that approach to getting women back in the workforce? Was that helpful?

MP: Well, it was women and men. And of course when you're forced to go, it doesn't feel very positive. There was a lot of things. I learned a lot of things. It wasn't...it was always too bad that they can't individualize things. I had just come from five years working in the employment industry with the, what was then the CETA program, and helping people to get back to work and

building resumes and, I kind of new all this stuff. So, but, you know, you kind of have to, you have to do what you're told when you were in that kind of situation. So I completed that assignment there. And like I said, finished my degree and at some point, I ran into Barb Belew again at a grocery store. And she told me that were some openings at the Women's Center. I think I almost done with my degree and I applied then to run the job clubs with kind of co-lead the job clubs. And

JR: I like that because you've then could critique your own running of it based on your experience going through it.

MP: I did. Yeah, I did, I did. And I think I've...no one ever, I've not confessed this before, but I didn't really know what I would be like in front of whole class room full of people. I've never done anything like that. And I didn't know how that we go but I needed a job and so I talked myself into getting that job. And it went well, I think. When I was working with Carol Fischer, I think we both kind ahead some of the same mindset and you can do all those things. Run, you can have pretty resume, you can have...you can practice interviewing, night and day. But unless you really feel good about yourself, it doesn't come across any better. And so, what we did was I remember one time helping a woman get her teeth fixed. She couldn't smile. And so we found somebody who would get her teeth fixed. And once she had teeth fixed, she was smiling and she was feeling so good about herself. So in a lot of cases, in especially, even the men who came to class, they were angry and was back in the time when a lot of the mines were shutting down and that was not just a job, that was who they were. That was who they were, you know, their families did that and it was who they were. So they had to get over that kind of trauma, I guess, in order to be able to really see their way clear to be able to do something else.

JR: So your counseling skills really fit into helping in that realm.

MP: Yeah, yeah. There was nothing like watching the peer group work with each other and support each other and tell each other the truth even if they didn't like it and it was a real interesting, interesting time. And that time we were still at the basement of the church. And sometime, during that time, the displaced homemaker program on the state level came up as open bid process. So the women's center wrote the grant and got the program, and so it moved from the Intermediate School District to the Women's Center. And while that was going on we were working for another place, Sally May was the director, she then went a few places looking for land and looking for houses, and looking for...she just kind of let me tag her along. And eventually they found the Whittock building and I wasn't involved in the creative way they managed to acquire that building, but it was amazing. You know, and we all painted and...

JR: That's come through in so many of the interviews the working together, the community support, the donation of unions, and volunteers like yourself. They made it happened. It must have been fun to watch that evolution.

MP: It was fun. And we were doing the programming at the same time. And I also got to re-propose an idea to the Department Social Services that instead of job club we, I think we called it Project Self-Sufficiency or something where we would exclusively deal with women who were on welfare, who had very young children, not in school yet. And we would, the goal then was not to get a job but to get a plan. And know what they would, where they would be going once their kids went to school.

JR: Was there quite a number of people that fit that category?

MP: There were. There were, the classes were full all the time and we tried to keep the classes, you know, under twenty. Because of the dynamics of it, and what we wanted to accomplish there. And what's interesting is that we didn't talk about resumes or interviews or job skills or anything. We talked about positive thinking and finding yourself and quit focusing on all that bad stuff that happened. I mean I literally had a woman who, she was so angry at her husband, she had two or three little kids and her husband literally went out, "I'm going out for pack a cigarettes," and never came back. Never came back. And you know, she was so angry about that. And so instead of, it was a lot of that kind of...theory of...don't look at where you've been, look a way you wanted to go, don't look at that rock in the road, look away, around the rock in the road and find where you need to be and it was interesting because they were always impressed if at the end of a four week job club. If a third of the people got a job, that was successful. The first time we ran the project self-sufficiency, or I don't know what we called it. It was a three-week program and fifty percent of people got a job before the end of the program which only proves to me that it's how you feel about yourself and how you project yourself that is what is really telling. And that same woman whose husband left and bought a pack of cigarettes got the job that she's still at today. And she's very successful, met a new husband through that job. And it all turned out very well for her.

JR: Life goes on.

MP: Life goes on.

JR: Alright. So we've got you doing those programs. Did you stay with the Women's Center then? Or moved to another position?

MP: I stayed until 1988. We did other things too. I mean, we still did the assertive training classes and we did some special workshops around different... codependency and different issues like that.

JR: Did those serve mostly local Marquette women? I know there was a point of expansion to other areas in the county...

MP: At that time I was still...

JR: Marquette.

MP: Mostly Marquette yeah. In fact, we also started the first lesbian support group at during that time.

JR: Way ahead of some areas.

MP: Yes. So in 1988, a job I couldn't refuse came open at the Air Force Base as Director the Family Support Center. So I got that job and accepted that job and worked there for 5 years or so until the base closed. But during that time, Sue Kensington became the Executive Director. I still felt attached to Women's Center and I got to know her and I kind of helped her bridge into the Air Force Base, because that was always connection that seemed difficult, so me being the Family Support Center Director I'm kind of helping people and referring people to the Women's Center too.

JR: It's a good collaboration there.

MP: Yes, it was good to collaboration exactly. So then the base closed, and I got a job. I was Director of Lutheran Social Services. And that, part of that job involved the Voices for Youth Program, a homeless program, so I got back into the homeless and the domestic violence shelter, it was part of that working group in the community. And I was back on the board and I...

JR: So you it was hard or didn't make sense to disconnect, everything joined?

MP: Yes. It is. I just kept coming back home kind of I guess

JR: And I found that to be through these interviews and other's life in Marquette people do tend to develop loyalties. Obviously you were attached to the Women's Center and its programs.

MP: Yeah. And then, my job over the social services ended and I decided to kind of lay-low for a bit and I got into doing some consulting work partly with the Great Lakes Center for Youth Development and now Gail Nelson was the Director and through that connection, I hooked up and became a Technical Assistant-cum-provider for Michigan Department of Housing, Michigan Housing Development Authority, MICHDA. And my first client was the Women's Center. I was a consultant paid by MICHDA to help the Women's Center right policies and procedures and assist the board with strategic planning and things like that. So I did other things other places too but that was my primary involvement during that time.

JR: And again, those long-term commitments pay off. Because you knew how the Women's Center evolved and where they need to push their strength and deal with their weaknesses, I guess.

MP: Yes. It's like finding a therapist, you don't have to start from when you were born. They know the whole thing already and so they can fill in and move on.

JR: And then what came next?

MP: Then we came next? I think I was away for a while, not connected as a board member or anything. And a few years ago, it sounded like there were some challenges and I was concerned and so were some other people and we kind of got together and tried to help resolve some of those concerns and challenges. And then here I am back on the board again.

JR: Now they talked about the Founding Mothers, who we've, you'd referred to Sally May and some of those, but it sounds like you are Founding Daughter, you came in at a certain point and have stayed the loyal.

MP: Yes. I like that.

JR: What is your vision now of the Women's Center? Well, how do you think they are and how they ...because several people have mentioned the period of declining funding for a lot of practical reasons but so some of the programs have either gotten smaller or disappeared, is there a project, projected plan for those or are we still working out the...

MP: Well, it's interesting because as a board, a very dedicated people, we have this conversation often about the shelter. The shelter is a very important program but it isn't the only thing the Women's Center is about. And we know in this day and age that the work is not done. You can see it. You watch the news, you can see it, every day. And so I'm always advocating to be, for us to be flexible and open to developing new things and adding new programs as we can. And to continue to be that beacon that, that's probably the only place in Marquette that really advocates for women, and women and children really. So I think we have still plenty of work to do and I think women's center is probably the only real agency to do that. We have these conversations sometimes and any other agency could run a shelter. People know how to run a shelter.

JR: So perhaps out there, shift?

MP: But people don't know run a shelter that helps women get back on their feet. It's just not the same.

JR: So funding is probably the main issue despite all this community support, trying to get enough funding to hire more staff and develop...

MP: Right. The years of finding grants for things you know, is gone. Pretty much gone.

JR: So it's taking creativity and as outside the Women's Center I see, the board a lot of people. We've got a creative crew at work there.

MP: Oh it's amazing, yeah. It's an amazing group of women to be working with, and back working with Sally and she's got some great ideas about making the center self-sufficient. You know people have said, there's a lot of good agencies in town. There's a lot of agencies, non-profit agencies that do wonderful work. But there are hard pressed to think about what are community, some of them, if they folded, it would be sad. But the community would probably be able to pick it up. If the Women's Center folded, that would be tragic. They cannot imagine what are

community would be like if there wasn't Women's Center. So we've come that far at least that people are seeing the value of us.

JR: And the passion behind, I think that's what drew people like yourself. Sally, Pat, all of whom we've interviewed back into the...

MP: Yeah, I didn't become a feminist the way that Sally, Holly, and Pat did.

JR: Tell a little about that!

MP: Or maybe you.

JR: Yeah, tell a little about that. That it's generational, age related to a degree, and your own personal circumstances. So explain how you did get drawn into thinking.

MP: Yeah. Well, I do say that I had Dr. McClellan when, as professor when I was going to Northern. And I'm sure he's probably the first male feminist that I knew and he just... it's like I think it was always in me, I mean, always kind of questioning the very traditional family that I had growing up and why is it fall to me to make dinner when there's four other capable hands in this room who could make dinner when mom's sick ...that kind of thing was kind of always floating out there. Anyway, Dr. McClellan kind of put it in some context for me occasionally and I think that played some seeds that when, and I know that he was always kind of frustrated because he couldn't see people my age becoming feminists. But he did plant a seed and I thought at the time, "Maybe we don't until we are actually out in the real world. Where you are experiencing discrimination on the job or sexual harassment or people want to stick you in very traditional roles and responsibilities. Not getting paid as much as the guys. You know.

JR: Was this in a history class? How did the topic come up? Because he was a history professor.

MP: I think it was maybe the first Women's Studies class...I don't...or Minority History. That's what it was, Minority History. And I think that's probably why, that's probably part of it because he would probably say, "Well this is a Minority History, but this is not a minority." You know, but this is the only place that lets us talk about women's issues and so that's what we're doing you know. So that...and then of course some other things I started reading at that time also made a difference.

JR: And so when you became a single parent and raising your children, did it really kick in that or again just evolve...?

MP: I think it just evolved. When you're were raising, my kids are like three and twins of one, and all this... I don't know that I thought about much outside of getting through every day. I think it just evolved and getting back in the Women's Center was part of that too.

JR: As you were speaking, it makes me a little curious if you hadn't been directed to, or quote forced to go to some of these programs, do you think your life would have been different? Or do you think you had that core of I've got to support myself or was it a combo of..?

MP: I think I had that core. Because during that, yeah, the Women's Center just maybe feel like I was supported in that.

JR: And it was the right thing to do?

MP: Yeah. And it was the right thing to do. Because during that time, yeah, you get all kinds of questions and how do you, how can you manage going to work with your three little children? What will you do with your three little children? And I used to just be a real smarty-pants and say, I would just lie, "Oh, just tie them to their beds and bread and water, they're fine." [Chuckles] You know, you do what you got to do. And those questions, kind of make you feel guilty in some ways and those...

JR: And you're dealing with the hand you were dealt with.

MP: Yeah, yeah! And those questions, those are the questions coming from the people who love you. And there's underlying tone of how dare you, kind of, almost with it. And I didn't like that. The Women's Center heightened that for me. And when I was involved in directing programming, we always went out into the community and had conversations with people and I don't know if I should say this but I went to a meeting of some clergy back then and explained about domestic violence and sexual violence and what the programs were. And why it was important. And they invited me. So it's like I told them and there was a... I had to be some place for lunch. I think it was something at my kids' school. But they invited me to stay for lunch and I said no, I have to go. And this guy came following me out to my car and said, "I think this is a really, really important issue. And I think women need to know that children of divorced parents are more likely to become juvenile delinquents and involved in the crime and crime and not finish high-school. And if they knew that, then they would stay with their spouse because you know, they would learn to do the right thing for their children." And I just looked at him and I said, "Excuse me, I need to go. I'm going to go have lunch with my future juvenile delinquent dropout criminal children."

JR: So you do have that core.

MP: I do have that core. Yeah, yeah.

JR: And those ideas were prevalent, there still are some but that's the role that you were playing. Is there anything we haven't touched on that you'd like to share?

MP: Well yeah, there so much. It's just you know, it's just an awesome organization. I'm really proud to be part of it.

JR: Well, we are pleased to have you sharing your thoughts and I thank you very much for doing so. Martha Parks, Marquette resident who has evolved with Women's Center. One more thing. How did you end up in this lovely shop?



MP: Crossroads again, it was time to do something different. My first grandchild was born a year ago, just found out I'm going to be grandma again. And I had a breast cancer scare and I just decided I guess it's time for me to do little quitters, a little more fun.

JR: I like your creative strength show it's lovely. Well, thank you again, Martha. I appreciate your time.

MP: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW