

Interview with Phyllis Loonsfoot

Marquette, MI

IN: Resume the conversation with Phyllis Loonsfoot, we had to record this on a new memory card. Phyllis was describing the situation with law enforcement and domestic assaults.

PL: Yes, and what that looked like back in the day, in the mid to late-80's, and even early 90's, as the domestic violence movement was getting off the ground and gaining some speed. I had gotten called in as an EVAC volunteer to transport a survivor of domestic violence to a local police department, to meet up the law enforcement officer who was then going to follow us and provide a standby, just as a peacekeeper so she could emergency belongings, clothing, medications, and things of that nature. This was a pretty common response back in that era of time. I walked into the law enforcement department with her and the officer at the front desk obviously recognized her, and he took one look at her and he said to her "What did you do to make him angry this time?" And that was pretty much the mindset back in that time frame. So, being the strong advocate and the feminist that I am... I believe I was born a feminist... I have to check myself before I respond sometimes, but what I did at that moment was I asked her just to wait outside by the car, and I spoke a few words to the officer at the desk about what my thoughts were about that comment to her, and informed him that I would be waiting outside with her. It was within a very short time span, maybe a minute or two, when another officer came out of the department and he wanted to apologize to me. And I said "You don't owe me an apology, you owe her an apology. So if you came out here to make an apology, my hope is that you would have this conversation with her." And so he did. So those are some of the things that was happening across the board. Not only with law enforcement, but at different junctures within that criminal justice system, because they weren't moving as progressively as the Women's Center was in this respect, so that was all part and parcel. And that was the beginning of the conversations of starting this whole collaborative effort and developing a community coordinated response, and believe me, that did not happen overnight. That took almost a decade.

IN: Do you give a lot of credit to the Women's Center and people in it for working that through and cooperating? And when you talk about a coordinated response what agencies might be included?

PL: Oh, a community coordinated response involves multiple agencies. You know sometimes the beginning point for addressing a domestic violence situation might happen at the emergency room at the hospital. So then they would be included in that coordinated effort, law enforcement absolutely and every juncture within the criminal justice system including the prosecutor's office, and the judges in the courtroom, and even probation officers, and other people throughout the whole entire justice system. It involves, because battered women have multiple needs, it involves establishing those types of working relationships with the department of human services, because they have financial needs and developing those relationships with local attorneys because there are obviously sometimes issues with needing a divorce, or child custody matters, or things of that nature.

IN: Did all of these folks get together around a table on occasions or did the Women's Center work with them in small groups?

PL: Well what happened in about 1995 or 1996, those conversations evolved to the degree... the Women's Center was really trying to put forth an effort to coordinate with the prosecutor's office at that point in time and the formation of the Marquette County Domestic Violence Coalition was the result of those conversations, which brought all those players to the table, and those were the beginning days of the conversations about working together cooperatively and collaboratively to keep survivors safe and hold offenders accountable... and what could we do as a team? Because none of these entities, not even the Women's Center, none of us could do this alone. It requires a community effort. The Women's Center is a community based program so we place significant value on establishing and maintaining those community relationships... they're so important.

IN: And to have some consistency among them in terms of the way they handle the situation of a woman, or a man being abused.

PL: Absolutely, the beginning of the process was a little bit rocky. The relationships were a little contentious because there were some steadfast belief systems within other organizations, and the Women's Center of course is very steadfast in their belief system. So that brought about some very intense conversations sometimes when we came to the table to try to work these things out, and it took a decade for it all to be ironed out and smooth. And today the collaborative partnerships that we have, what I can say about that is that we are looked at as a leader and a role model in that respect. Even to this day when I travel to go to meetings in Lansing or conferences or places, I hear other directors and other advocates talking about the non-existence of these types of working relationships even to this day. So, this organization... and I feel honored to be a part of that process, because I feel it's so important to... we have evolved to be one of the leaders in that respect.

IN: So people are looking to you and then... the success of it I think speaks for itself. Women's lives have been changed and saved.

PL: Oh absolutely. You know, back in the day, in the early 90's and even in the mid-90's, we weren't able to call up another organization and advocate as effectively on behalf of survivors as we are today.

IN: And it took a cultural shift. I think we've alluded to that in other interviews. Part of the reason it took 10 years is it takes that long for people to educate one another about the issues involved.

PL: Oh absolutely. I think it stems back to social norms, what was acceptable across the span of time, and you arrive at a certain juncture and, whoa, there's this new concept out there. And it takes a little time to bring that kind of change about, it just doesn't happen overnight. And I think it speaks to, if you live your life primarily with a certain core belief and a value, and all of a sudden you're being exposed to a whole different way of thinking, change is difficult. Change doesn't happen overnight. So...

IN: And my perception from these interviews is the Women's Center has been consistent, and a catalyst, sticking to core values, but willing to look at the other points of view and involve people changing...

PL: Absolutely, and if you look at the foundation of which the Women's Center was built on, it was all about equality and it was all about women's rights, and equality for all people, and propelling people forward and believing in justice and all of those things. That has been such a solid foundation to build upon and it's been what's propelled us forward. We believe in what we do to the core of our being and that's why we're here.

IN: Great.

IN: Now, could you discuss, here in 2014 how you operate? A little bit about the board, about your job, the various programs.

PL: I want to back that up just a couple years. The Women's Center has gone through some pretty tumultuous times with funding and in other respects, and it has a lot to do with the whole national climate, who's in office and what money's available. There are things that happen that divert monies in other directions. So, back in 2010 when I first sat in this seat, we were facing some significant budget cuts and at that point in time this organization laid-off about five staff members, which kind of changed how we operated at that point in time. There were some other things happening administratively and so many significant cuts had been made. I had been working as the shelter director and some other changes were happening over here administratively. The Women's Center board at that time consolidated the executive director position, the program director position, the shelter director position, and whatever other pieces from other lay-offs. Office manager pieces and things all got consolidated in to one position when I became the director of this organization as appointed by the board. The longtime finance director, who had been here for a long time, was due to retire. So, there was a lot of transition going on, and it was all about stabilizing at that point in time. Not even looking around about expanding programing.

IN: Surviving.

PL: Surviving, just getting our footing back on the ground and stabilizing. That definitely took some time, and in the meantime a couple of our grants had run their course, so we downsized a little bit, and we maintained that structure for a period of time; until... there were some things happening on various planes and we had a significant turnover with our board of directors in 2011. That's when our founding mothers... we were financially constrained because of some other things that were happening at that point in time. So, the founding mothers got together with some other concerned community members, and they came back and rolled up their sleeves and really went to work. And what I have to say about that time span is the dedication and commitment of this staff is so cohesive that it seemed like no matter what was going on during that tumultuous time, the service provision did not skip a beat. They were out there doing their jobs... and there was a new finance manager that came in and... bless his soul, him and I were stepping into landmines... here there and everywhere there were grants that hadn't been closed out. There was one grant that had been written that nobody even knew about, and you know all of these financial issues going on, and these needed to be cleaned up. So, I think that he and I at that point in time... we spent a whole entire year... I told him at one point "I feel like a firefighter." Like I need on my firefighting gear and hip-waiters and just get out the hose and just start putting out all these fires. But, once all of that started to dissipate and the new board members came onboard, there was again transformative change...

IN: Do you feel the networking that you have done with these other issues you've talked about helped show support community wise? Was that a positive factor that you had already reached out? Did that have any impact at all?

PL: I believe that it did. I believe that it had some impact. But the community, by and large, with all the things that were happening during that time frame before the new finance manager and I came on

board, I think I kind of rocked their confidence in the organization. And I think that they saw this organization somewhat as a listing ship.

IN: So the support of the founding mothers and you key staff people was what pulled through... got the ship back on course.

PL: Oh, absolutely. And that's a coordinated team effort in and of itself. When I say that they came in and rolled up their sleeves, that's exactly what they did; and they hit the ground running. At that point in time, the Women's Center, when I came in with the new finance director and the new board was coming on, the Women's Center was facing significant financial debt, and within a year's time, this board that came in was able to reduce that debt... I would say by two-thirds. And that trend has continued, and out of over \$100,000 worth of debt, today where we sit we have \$5,000 left in that realm. So, I think that speaks to the level of work and commitment that has gone on over the past couple of years.

IN: And I have to say, from the interviews... I'm interrupting, but that commitment comes from the belief in the mission.

PL: Oh absolutely.

IN: And the people out there that need a Women's Center and a Harbor House.

PL: Absolutely, I don't think that the community ever stepped away from believing that this was a valued service, but they lost confidence for a short period of time in the Women's Center ability to do that. But that's all been restored and support is coming out of the woodwork now and I think we're in a firmer standing now than we've been in a really long time.

IN: That's wonderful.

PL: So the programming we have... our domestic violence programming has been really strong over the course of time with taking over the administration of the Harbor House, and that funding stream has been very stable over the years. There is more of an emphasis now on sexual assault program services. The Women's Center has had some state grant funding for a couple of decades, and that has been our only source of sexual assault grant funding, and back in 2010 there was an opportunity to apply for a sexual assault comprehensive services grant and...

IN: Through the state again, or was this national?

PL: This was through the state, through the Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board. So I wrote that proposal, didn't know if we stood a chance of being awarded an allocation, but we were. So, since 2010 we have enhanced our sexual assault response programming, and our numbers have just about doubled in that respect. They have. When I think about this, domestic violence and sexual assault are of the most underreported crimes that you could possibly think of.

IN: Is that a cultural thing? Is that a law enforcement thing? Or the assault victims...

PL: I think it's a conglomeration of all of the above. With domestic violence, I'm a survivor myself, so I can speak from that perspective, there's shame involved in that whole thing. You feel inadequate, you feel like... why is this happening to me? Why do I let this happen to me? There must be something wrong with me. And survivors express that. And over the course of time when you're emotionally and

physically abused, and that abuse spans across multiple planes, you start... it's like a self-fulfilling prophecy comes about, because you have an offender telling you you're worthless. You mean absolutely nothing, and that type of verbal abuse just goes on and on and on, and they say horrible things and you start to believe that about yourself. So it really takes a lot of wherewithal to pick up the phone and make a phone call, because people don't believe it by and large. How could that be even possible?

IN: So women are living... and occasionally men... are living with that abuse, blaming themselves, and not wanting to open up.

PL: Yes, sure they are.

IN: So that would account for a lot of underreporting.

PL: It certainly would, and even within their own social structures, they may have family members who don't believe it, or buy into it, or make excuses for it because it's just been a way of life for such a long time within that family structure. And then you might reach out to another organization and might be talking to someone who doesn't understand the dynamics of domestic violence, and there again you're not believed, and it kind of shuts you down. When you reach out for help and you get shut down you retreat.

IN: So I guess... what's from your remarks... your role is working with victims, but also in educating the community. Does the Women's Center do that?

PL: Absolutely, we certainly do amongst the plethora of services we provide. We advocate on behalf of survivors all the time, which includes children as well. With systems that don't understand the dynamics of what they've been through... what they've experienced... we will sit next to them when they make a phone call. If they need to reach out for assistance and they have gotten that type of response before, we will sit next to them and guide them through the process. There have been times when in the beginning we may even make that call for them with them sitting next to us, and our mission is to empower them to be able to do this on their own eventually at the end of the process. So, it might start out we make the phone call and then the next time we're sitting next to them when they make that phone call. And then when they make the appointment we go with them and sit there with them while they're in the appointment. Then it just evolves from there, and our goal like I said is to empower them.

IN: And your networking with other agencies gives you the opportunity to educate, and I'm sure there's back and forth education...

PL: There is back and forth, and I'll share an experience that happened here the other day. I'll step back a little bit and then I'll talk about what happened the other day. Within the component of what happens at the Department of Human Services, Child Protective Services over the course of time... they have viewed domestic violence victims... back in the beginning of the process as failing to protect their children, when they themselves... we had a totally different perspective about that. When you are being victimized to the degree where you're so caught up in just trying to survive, you have no control over... survivors don't have any control over the abuse that's inflicted upon their children, because they get it twentyfold. And working with other types of systems, these are types of things that we really try to work on and focus on. Back in the day, women were literally being charged with failing to protect their children, there is still to this day, an actual failure to protect charge which would bring them in to the courtroom and their name would end up in some central registry as if they were inflicting the abuse

themselves. So, being the advocate that I am, and the feminist that I am, and the belief that survivors have rights, I contacted the Director of the Child Protective Services Department at that time, when this was in full fledge. And he and I began having conversations. And in the beginning of the conversations we were not on the same page; but, let that never be a deterrent. So the conversations evolved and the more I kept calling him and calling him, it evolved to the point where we sat down and had coffee about that, we talked about it and how is it that that can even come about, because I didn't understand it and I was trying to understand how they could even come to that conclusion, based on what I know/

IN: Failure to protect your children.

PL: Failure to protect your children, right. You have no control over that situation. So we sat down and he went through the elements with me about what they take a look at when they respond to a situation, and was gleaned from that situation was that they had a scoring system. It was a point scoring situation that gave the victim and the offender the exact same number of points when there was a domestic violence situation. It didn't matter if you were the victim and you were the one being assaulted, or if you were the perpetrator inflicting the assault. Well, I didn't understand the fairness in that at all. So we had a lot of conversations about that, and what that resulted in was is... I think a mind shift, because what other conclusion can you draw, right is right. Right?

IN: Right, when taken into consideration.

PL: Oh absolutely, so we're not seeing that happening in our community anymore, and we have a very solid relationship with the Child Protective Services Department here. I receive calls sometimes before the workers even go out on a complaint, wanting to get some input about "We think there's domestic violence here, what are your thoughts about this," and "Give us some input about that." And I think that just speaks to the working relationships that we have established at this point in time.

IN: Excellent.

IN: A little aside, are those philosophies and cultural shifts making their way into training of social workers and counselors and...

PL: Yes, yes they are, and what happened the other day is... there is a network of shelter programs in the UP, the directors of those programs get together on a quarterly basis, and one of the concerns that a couple of the other directors brought forth, was the fact that in their community there has been a resurgence of battered women being charged with failure to protect, and I said "Oh, but wait a minute. This conversation was had maybe 8-10 years ago in this community, and here's where we've evolved in this community." So, I picked up the phone and made a phone call to the Regional Director of the Department of Human Services for the UP and Upper Lower Michigan, and he got on the speakerphone and addressed their concerns, and we started talking about a region-wide training for Child Protective Services workers to address these types of issues. So our staff does go out there. We do rattle the bushes and the cages and we are always up for the challenge of providing that type of education.

IN: And the necessity of that gets through these types of interviews because people can't be expected to know, or have these attitude unless they've been enlightened to the changing culture.

PL: You know, and what happens, this resurges once and a while in our community as well, is you have your partnerships all established, and you're working really well together, and you provided the

educational pieces, and then there's a change of guard. And then the shift happens within another entity, and so then the training process starts over from square one. So it's an ongoing process and we're up for the challenge.

IN: Excellent.

IN: The other thing that's come through in the interviews is one of the reasons for the Women's Center doing the education, and one of the reasons for doing these interviews is the newer, younger folks may expect these more advanced and enlightened policies, but they don't know the history of how hard it's been to achieve, and how easy it could be to lose some of those advantages. Do you feel that way? That it's important that we get younger people.

JL: Oh absolutely, and I think that just speaks to... even in defining the word feminism, young women of today, even when we're out there talking to Northern students and student groups and conducting interviews if we have a position to fill. When we do ask that question, "What does the word feminist mean?" over the course of time, I myself have seen a change in how that's defined within the younger women coming up.

IN: What would be key in the difference you think?

JL: I think the whole women's movement and how that came about, and that really strong sense of what that word meant, interwoven with equality and all of those things, I think some of those elements have dissipated and fallen by the way side. So... and I think that... I don't know what they're teaching in history classes about that whole movement, but there seemed to be some sort of a negative connotation attached to the word "feminist" as being bra-burning, femi-nazis, and whatever have you. I even found that when we were... a colleague of mine and I were going around... we actually went to police departments to establish our collaborative network with them. We would just stop in and say "Hi, here we are, do you have a few minutes for a cup of coffee," and in transitioning through the process, it went from... in Marquette a police department said to us "Here's what we've operated for so many years," you know. "The women at the Women's Center are all part of that bra-burning movement, and a bunch of femi-nazis over there," and "You don't like men, do you?" Well of course we do! And I'm not out there burning my bra. That's now what that word means. So I think the younger women of today... there's a little bit of that. Like I said, I'm not quite sure of what's being taught in history classes, but they define being a feminist as a little bit of a different thing than I think some of us who have been around a bit longer.

IN: For the most part are they okay being associated, or do they use a different term?

JL: I don't know that they're as comfortable calling themselves a feminist as the older... those of us are. I think they would prefer to be called empowered. They're empowered women, which in essence it means the same thing.

IN: And if they're comfortable with that then...

JL: Absolutely.

IN: Right.

IN: Okay Phyllis, as we work towards the end of the interview, what would be your view into the future? Your hopes and wishes for our local Women's Center.

JL: The Women's Center has served in a leadership role in the progressive thinking realm for so many years, and I think our next task, I'm on a mission to bring about conversations about traditional hierarchy and whether or not that fits within our organizational structure and as it relates to what is our mission, and what is our vision, and what is our purpose here, and how does this all fit in?

IN: So you'd like to revisit this. The board and staff together. Do you think that's about to happen?

JL: I'm on a mission. I'm a little bit of a rebel and I have some personal feelings about traditional hierarchy and they're not really fitting with the progressiveness of what happens here. It doesn't really fit with our mission, it doesn't fit with our vision, and it doesn't fit with the services that we provide. And it just so happens I just completed a grant proposal and our grant funders are starting to take a look at this as well. You know, how does your organizational structure integrate with your mission, vision, service provision practices and policies, and all of that? So I think it's time to have that conversation.

IN: And we will be following this with you with great interest.

JL: Yes, I'm excited about that. I like change.

IN: Anything that we haven't had a chance to... or you haven't had a chance to discuss? Is there any topic that you don't want to go undiscussed?

JL: Nothing is really coming to mind. Thank you so much for taking this task on, because I think that the Women's Center's history is so rich and it needs to be preserved in some respect, and I think that all of these interviews are going to bring key elements about how things transition over the course of time.

IN: Thank you, and thank you for your contribution all along the way there.

PL: Thank you so much.

IN: Phyllis Loonsfoot, current CEO, is that the proper title?

PL: Director.

IN: Director of the Women's Center in Marquette, Michigan.

PL: Thanks so much.