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Oral Interview of Susan Bradford by Marli Werner and Mazie Hough for the Feminist Oral History Project (Part #2)

Marli Werner

Mazie Hough

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Oral Interviews for the Feminist Oral History Project.

Interviewer: Marli Werner (MW), Mazie Hough (MH)

Interviewee: Susan Bradford (SB)

Date: 7/21/93

Recording number: MF223-BradfordS-T1b

Length of recording: 39:30

[Transcript begins]

MH: I want you to talk more about the image that you thought was important to get across.

SB: That's a hard one, 'cause at that point. I really was sort of an internal person. I didn't do a lot of public speaking and evolved through the years to be the Response Coordinator, like how the issue is portrayed is like it's in my cells. It's really hard to articulate that, and it's especially hard to articulate it in in the past. But I do know that the example that I gave before about this is not. This is not a situation where you should go and feel sorry for these people all the time. You need to respect battered women strengths, their power, you know, look at this. Look at how we all treat each other. Look at this is really a fundamental issue. It's not a matter of a black eye or a bloody nose that you get to weep over for a few minutes and then forget or to rush in and save. I mean, we're very much the you know with self-help. It's empowerment. We came up with the philosophical statement at the same time that we were doing this. That was part of the process too. Don't let me forget that. It's a really central part of that, and in fact that was a part that the Steering committee had a big piece of. I really did feel that we needed to do a philosophical statement too, and I'm going to back up just for another second. And I know that that came from a workshop that was given at the 1980. I believe NCDD conference on organizational structure and they gave this little sort of model for how to formulate your structure. So, there's an aside, but in terms of the image, I don't know what else to say about it, other than it was self-help, it was empowerment. Every strata of our culture needs to take responsibility for this issue. Which had to do with where we got our funding from. You know, we always wanted it to be fairly wide ranging. More that you wanted those memberships from the individual people, no matter how

much money they were, whether it was just a letter of support and you also wanted some from the state Maine and you want some from the federal government and you want some if there's something that's universal, we want some from them too, because you know everybody is involved in this. Everybody needs to take a piece of it, and everybody needs to pay for a piece of it. Everybody needs to pay attention to it, that kind of thing. So, that was a part of the image. I guess we just didn't want it sort of loaded up in a cute little box and saying OK, these are battered women. These are this part of the population. This is you. You take these ten people that there's something wrong with and you fix them, then you've done with the problem because it's not obviously how we viewed it. So, and it was always really important to us never to allow anybody to frame it that way. If we could change it, and we certainly wouldn't want our capital funds campaign people going out with this person name on it, making it out to be that kind of initiative.

MW: You mentioned a philosophical statement a moment ago. Can you tell us about that and how that fits with the image issue?

SB: Oh, I should probably have it friendly. I'm just sure that you have it in hanging on the wall at State Street. It basically said that we all as women and as kids share the experience of oppression and abuse for the most part that there's, I've read it, I'm sure there's an imbalance in power and it needs to be addressed all the time. Now. Maybe there always be this imbalance in power, but we need to keep addressing it only and the way in which we feel it's the best to address that is to empower the person who's rather than take power away, have more power and we're not like I couldn't give you power. I don't, you know, I can't like there's no pockets that I can hand out and hand to you now. Maybe I can show you where the power is, you know. Maybe I know the way through the maze, you know, and you can go put something in your pockets. It's heavy sometimes and sometimes it's hot and sometimes it feels radioactive. You know each person takes what they can handle and deals with it and I like to juggle myself but that's kind of how we looked at it. That empowerment really was the key.

MH: And you said the steering committee worked to develop this statement?

SB: The Steering Committee and the staff the whole organization, I mean everybody was invited, he could and there you know there are minutes from those meetings to they were part steering committee meetings. I think there's some long-range planning meetings that were in there and we all got together and sort of came up with this mission philosophy statement.

MH: And that felt good because you all agreed on it and it was in the right direction as far as the staff was concerned.

SB: And I don't, to tell the truth. I don't remember chronologically where that fit in. I've only fit in sort of before we move towards consensus, and it was in that time period as opposed to it, it was pre-Capital Fund's period.

MH: So, go on about the capital funds and what happened because they were used competing?

SB: It worked out. I mean people's feelings got hurt and you know we had fights and feathers. Got ruffled. We made a bunch of money and renovated the shelter. And I mean, I think that's public record. Who was? He was... He offered to do our capital funds campaign. Well immediately. Absolutely. We're talking about? this is some male figurehead to go get the money is the only one that is going to do that. What does that say about our organization? that so there was piece one and before that was doing first place how grassroots we are versus social change? I mean, that's another sort of way that plays itself out. Are you a grassroots organization? who's rooted in in the folks who call and the everyday citizens and the citizens of the community or only a social service agency with that kind of structure and that kind of image to maintain? Which sets up the separation sets up that we then between us and the folks who call. We don't want to do that, so I mean all of those things kept coming into play in every single conversation, whether it was the rug or whether how we are going to raise the money. Who keeps track of the money? All those things we're constantly trying to balance those.

MW: And you were deciding that's with a consensus model, yeah?

SB: Again, without underlying tension and, well, you know the steering committee, sort of, you know if you wanted to, we could just decide for you, you know.

MH: But, he did hire Bud Clancy, isn't that right?

SB: He was a consultant, yes. And we did some strange sort of amalgam I think, really.

MH: You worked out something that satisfied everybody.

SB: I wouldn't say that no, and to speak for myself, I was fairly satisfied really. I'm fairly easy going, you know, so I was pretty satisfied with whatever they wanted to do and the you know, fighting about the rug color and stuff like that, kind of. While I understood why that was, it made me sad that it

was. And I didn't put a lot of energy into that. And of course, the public image thing is different, but the way that played itself out in terms of which color rug? Why do we need to talk about it that way? That made me feel a little twisted.

MH: But the public image decision went the way that you had hoped it would?

SB: No, yes and no, I think that we forged a compromise. I think that we forged lots and lots of different kinds of compromises through that time. And other people may see that differently to answer it, they may see that differently Marian may see that differently. I know Marian and Anne in particular were people who right smack dab in the middle of those things and I was not so much.

MH: But you're suggesting that the solution was to forge compromises, so everybody gave a little bit to the final answer.

SB: That's, yeah, if you look at those leaning term. When I think about the meeting, it was like one meeting. You decide, you know, I get so many chips, next meeting I get more chips, and I mean it was more like it was kind of up and down. It wasn't a gentle curve. We were building a consensus together. There was some of that. It's not that there wasn't, but there was also some real back and forth negotiation.

MH: So, there was conflict in the meetings? And how did you deal with the conflicts in the meetings?

SB: About meetings, well, that would depend on which meetings you were in, but, well, we've dealt with in most groups do, I believe, having been a member of a lot of groups since then. Sometimes it was whoever talked loudest and fastest got their way. Sometimes if he had the flu he lost, sometimes it was very hard, well-thought-out compromise. I do think that most of the time, most of us were really cognizant operating with goodwill basically and assuming goodwill on other people's parts, which I think is the basic. I think there was some trashing of people's individual value systems, and that came out with whether it was rugs or wallpaper or paint or which building or how to portray ourselves and that you know when I'm not talking about after trashing. I'm not talking about a group of people in a room who are screaming at each other or calling each other names or even directly saying, why you upper-middle class tweak, I mean, that's not how it played itself out. We were all extremely civilized for the most part.

MW: So how did it play itself out? How would someone know they were being trashed?

SB: I think trash is too strong a word. I don't know that. I really am speaking for other people here, and sort of like my observation.

MW: Tell us what you thought and how you felt?

SB: And that's why I'm saying or other people who were directly involved and how I felt was sad that we had to sort of feel that way, but, 'cause I can be really wishy washy. Sometimes it's easy going, and that's a good thing, you know, and sometimes it's well I can see both points, so you decide, you know. I mean it can go either way, and you know on some of those issues my basic sort of background and upbringing would say. Well, I remember feeling twisted by this, on the one hand, I didn't want gold chandeliers. Nobody else did either, but just you know, one end of the continuum. You don't want gold, chandeliers in battered women's shelter, because in fact, a lot of the folks who are going to come to the shelter, it's going to be, that's because that's the only option they have and so probably they don't have scads of money, so that might make more comfortable to be in a place that seems like some condominium somewhere. On the other hand, well we have a right to be comfortable, Just because it's a shelter, doesn't mean it has to have holes in the walls and be nothing but cots. Where in there is the happy medium? And I remember thinking, I remember having to struggle with that a whole lot and that had to do with that image thing too, which is why is it that there I got really frustrated and hurt and still do from time to time at folks who think that if you're going to go to a shelter then what you deserve is nothing.

MW: You said that you felt wishy washy about many of the issues, but what did you feel strongly personally, what did you feel strongly about?

SB: I felt far more strongly about the image that was portrayed than I did about some of the sort of, I guess that's a personal value, but more sort of tangible personal values like what kind of renovations would happen. I felt really strongly about the public image. And not because I cared so much about the image of the organization, but because I really realized talking to battered women that only made sense to me that you deserve to have a clean place to come, If you're talking about the shelter, you deserve respect. If you're talking about the hotline. And the black eye is not the only thing that's there. And the world needs to notice. If this is ever going to change, the world needs to know this. It needs to keep paying attention to it. Those were things I felt really strongly about and mostly I felt I also felt extremely strongly, and I still do with it in any of our conflicts. I'm a good adult child of an alcoholic, and I want conflict to be productive. I want it to

work out in the end and for us all to be friends. I really do. You don't have to yell at each other. You're not allowed to hurt each other's feelings gratuitously. You can speak hurtful things in an honest way and be direct and all those kinds of things, but those are the things that I felt the most strongly about the process it was used between individuals.

MH: I think we are at a good switching point actually. To talk about, what you all did together that made you, that allowed you to enjoy what you were doing? In other words, domestic violence is such a difficult question, and you are working out through some very difficult things, where there strategies that you used that made you feel good about the organization?

SB: I'd like to laugh, we like to hug, we did like to be direct. We did like consensus. We did also all work on the hotline. I mean, there were ways that we actually structured the work that we tried to share the work a whole lot so that it wasn't only one person responsibility. We were not always successful about that, and in fact, we're still not successful about that because the administrative coordinator, still holds an awful lot of pieces that nobody else will hold. And that's not true of any other, from the other job descriptions really, and so I don't know. I think it's an evolution and it's a never-ending evolution but that is, that's one of the strategies that you used for sure.

MH: You said that you all worked on the hotline. Is it important to work on the hotline?

SB: Yes, we feel so.

MH: Why?

SB: Well, for a whole bunch of reasons, for one, it keeps you rooted in, you know what's the core here? Why are we doing this? For another, it is probably, and I don't think you'd find anybody who wouldn't say this. It's one. It's probably the most rewarding aspects of the work. I think folks who don't do the work think, Oh my God, what a horrible, awful icky, must be horrible burnout work, but in fact it's the most, it's direct, it's person to person, It's a, you know. It's real core stuff and so it can be the most rewarding too. If I am a person who is writing up budgets, then I need to be in touch with the core. If I'm a person who's out there doing a lot of public speaking that I need to be in touch with the core, so maybe I only need to, you know I don't need to do necessarily an equal amount of hotline work, but I need to be in touch. Because none of us is immune from being sort of swayed in our inner visions and our thoughts by the environment that we're in. You know, if I work with the cops all the time, I'm going to start taking on those attitudes. That's where that came from.

MW: Was working on the hotline one of the things that helped you to relieve the stress and the tensions of working in an organization like Spruce Run?

SB: Well, absolutely. It's weird that way, that I don't believe that people get burned out from doing the hotline work from working with the battered women. People get burned out from new organizational stresses. Not just within the organizations either, but from working within these organizations within a community within the culture. I mean, that's the stress. Not that you can't get burned out, I have been burned out several times doing hotline work. Listen when the bells ring and you salivate and if you're not in there, and you're not listening in your capacity to respond and summarize and do all those things as it's kind of shot, then you need to take a break but that's not that usually doesn't cause like your done kind of burnout. At least not from my observations.

MW: What about your experience?

SB: That too, when I say that's it, I want to quit, I want a new life, it's because of the organizational stuff, it's not because of the hotline.

MW: You mentioned a bit ago that you work with other organizations as well and their structures are different from Spruce Run's can you make some generalizations about and compare the kinds of experiences that you've had with Spruce Run with those or other organizations?

SB: Well, I don't know why I giggle. Is 'cause of course I want to leap immediately. The work that I've done the most of I think over the past few years anyhow, really is with the Criminal Justice system. A good boys department, you know, there's the guy at the top. And you know, there are various stratas. I mean I am not exactly sure what you wanted to hear from me about that? I do, in my hard part believe that consensus is the way to go, but you need to have the structure go along with the process, you can't just use the process and not have this structure, 'cause I'll be in trouble every time. But on the other hand, hierarchies work.

MW: I was thinking more in terms of other social change grassroots organizations, not the Police Department necessarily.

SB: Yeah, I've been to a few, for instance, Pine Tree Legal Boards over the years and they operate with Roberts rules of orders and there's nothing like consensus there. That's effective, I mean, if you put the animal into knowing what the agenda is and the agenda is clear from the start, and you

put it out there and everybody gets to have their say, and it's a tightly controlled thing and you sort of get business done. I really don't, I think consensus is really hard to use if you don't, if you're in a very large group, with a very wide range of focuses in a whole lot of work. I think in fact that's what Congress is trying to be. I think with the you know you as soon as you get too big and too wide then you start. You're working on representation and not consensus. Mostly I work with groups of women whom I think... on the Mabel Wadsworth Women's Health Center is one that I worked with briefly, and they operate basically by consensus. I mean it's not a conceptual structure, but it's small enough that it can be and the decisions are kind of loosely made in a consensual way. I think it works better than anything else. I think there are tricks to it. I think that it empowers... yeah, and I'm comparing and contrasting here. I think that for some people Roberts rules or a hierarchy. Whether that's because things are clear and so you know where to go. Maybe that's more empowering. But I think that it only takes you to a certain stage, and it's a certain kind of empowerment, whereas consensus, if you're going to use it, you kind of have to jump in there and be willing to spit out your voice and act like you're an equal partner and take responsibility for your words and, it can be a really empowering process. I do think, I really, I think I really have hard time not operating by consensus when I'm walking with a group of people and they're using some other kind of form of organizational decision making. I get really confused. I don't know when to talk and when not to talk. I tend to say like say my opinion, and people look at me shocked 'cause I voiced my opinion at that time. It can be a little disconcerting to try and move back and forth between the two, and certainly people who come to this organization and all of a sudden tried to work in consensus, get pretty flambeaux old too. I mean, the rules are sketchy and they're not as clear as with Roberts rules, and so that can be disconcerting, and you have to find your own rhythm with that.

SB: I wondered if Spruce Run had changed you, or changed your life?

SB: Oh, of course!

MW: How?

SB: Well, it certainly bought me a lot of groceries over the years, it's awful, kept me just above the poverty line. There's that. It's given me, an incredible number of friends. As I said, before I even knew Spruce Run existed, I really did want some hands-on way to change the world. I am a child of the 60s, and I also always wanted to do that, and it's given me the opportunity to do that in a way

that I think it really counts for something. It's probably made me really twitchy about issues around feminism. I mean, I probably really am quite, I really am a raving feminist. And I am shocked when people are bothered by that. So, I know that it skewed my perspective in that way. If you call it skewed, I don't mind it, I think it's fine.

MW: In other words, you were a feminist when you began, but this has made you... this has intensified your feminism.

SB: Yeah, and it's also given me a community that, I mean, we can get a little inbred about it, you know.

So, when I go out and talk to people who don't feel that same way, I really do get shocked by people not thinking that. Hey, they probably just don't understand what I'm saying. So, I have to sort of, it's done that to me, you know, although I like it. What else has it done? It's made me know Bangor, which I resent heartily, but I knew the tradeoffs when I did it. It wasn't the only thing, my son too. I was living in the woods, yeah! I loved living in the woods, even though it was an hour away and I had to drive both ways, but we didn't have electricity and it was too cold in January when all three of us were down here, in Bangor doing things. And the water would freeze, and the beds were cold, and we only had an hour before you went to bed, and that was grim. That was grim. So, we stopped that. And I resent it. I hate living in city. I like Bangor. Bangor is a wonderful town. It really is. I'm waiting until my son gets out of high school, and then I'm out of here. I don't know how I am out of here because I can't afford it. I'm not out of Spruce Run, but it would make it a lot easier to be out of the town. That's probably the biggest thing I would resent.

MW: Was it Spruce Run that encouraged you or pushed you to move into town?

SB: No, it was me.

MW: or your work with Spruce Run?

SB: It was a choice between, so I'm either gonna. I'm either going to find some other kind of work closer to home, or I'm going to keep the job and leave. I mean, it wasn't Spruce Run said you need to move.

MW: No, I didn't think so. I just made a connection when you were talking about your son.

SB: Those were the choices. Keep my job or live in the woods. Or make my partner Noel. Quit what he was doing. I mean those were my choices which was also in Bangor. So sometimes often for Spruce Run.

MW: What was he doing that was connected with Spruce Run?

SB: He's done renovations for the building and stuff.

MW: Spruce Run has survived for 20-21 years.

SB: Yes!

MW: And you've been part of it for a lot of that time.

SB: Yes.

MW: How would you explain it's survival? Particularly at the time when lots of other projects, lots of other feminist projects, lots of other grassroots projects have disappeared.

SB: Well, in fact I have several opinions about that. One, I believe is because we didn't start out fairly early. We really did start out with a bunch of volunteers and a lot of and gather community support and sort of knew what it was like to run a hotline. We didn't start out as a shelter with a bunch of seated employees and an awful lot of shelters across the country started out because they receive their money and they started out with a shelter focus, and then when they got defunded that was severe. So I think some of it was that I mean it was just plain environmental. The way the money flows, we were lucky. Certainly, a huge piece of it was the vision of the old founders. A huge piece of it. I mean, you've already gathered so much material that would show why that somehow, we stumbled on the right sort of philosophical way and simple every day to day methods of going on. I think, wide community support. I think consensus really has seen us through some really hard times. What else? Ask me a specific question.

MW: I just want to know where the wide community support came from?

SB: Well, that came from the vision, I think of the founding moms. That you got to go out there, we've always seen fund raising as being a piece of public education too. So you know why would want to let go of the bake sales and we have over the years for like going to the bake sales but we always wanted to do something that that keeps the word out there. You know, stick brochures. You know it's not just a matter of bringing in the money. It's a matter of taking the message out there too. And again, in the foundational belief that this is a cultural problem. This is, this is not a mental health issue. This is a cultural issue. And if it's a cultural issue, then you need to involve you know all of all of those segments of the community, and so we just kept doing that all the time, but

that's another thing often that shelters didn't do. They started out with shelters and see their money. They often did not start out with a with a community education focus either, and we've always had it. There's always been community education. I think in some part because we don't have a shelter 'cause we didn't. I mean 'cause they started out wanting to get the place in dress and they really have a shelter. You know if we've gone off in that way we might have gotten drawn in to that. This is a mental health and social service sort of thing and not had that sort of well. But we don't. We don't have enough money to do that. So what we're going to do is just keep spreading the word and negotiating with the community to change. There's always been sort of that sense of the community needs to change. We can't do it all. This is not our problem. We're working on it. You know we're yelling about it. Doing stuff, but it's not our problem. This is your problem. This is our problem altogether, so. I think that's a big reason. It's certainly one of the reasons that I've survived.

MW: I think we are ready to stop.

SB: We're done?

MH: For the moment.

MW: Well actually let me ask you one last quick question. Is there something that we didn't ask that you think we should have asked you? That you want to say?

SB: Probably, but to tell you the truth, I really don't know what it was.

MW: You may be kind. OK, now I have one other very specific question which is, are there other people that we didn't include in the Founders Day and that you haven't mentioned today that you think we should interview?

SB: You know I've thought of somebody. I didn't write the name down. But I will try to dig that name up again, and I'll let you know who that is. Mary MacPherson is a friend of mine, and apparently you chose not to interview her.

MW: No!

SB: She didn't get her letter or whatever.

MW: She didn't?

SB: No.

MW: I must have a different address for her. Maybe I sent it to her old work address.

SB: Oh, that might have been.

MW: No, absolutely she is on our list so, if you think of another person as well, please let Mazie know.

SB: I do have one story about the yellow notebooks to tell somewhere and I don't know if I told it on the videotape or not, but I have to tell that, OK, you asked for high points. There's a 1980 National Coalition against Domestic violence conference, and that was in Milwaukee, and that's where Nancy and Marian and Connie and I all got in this car and like drove for a million hours to Milwaukee, right? We drove back, and all of the conference proceedings were in these yellow plastic, really obnoxious binders, that had personal lines on it and then they were donated by an insurance company to the conference.

So OK, so we drive back from the conference, which is another whole story in itself, but, Nancy got a call from the people who put the conference on. Gosh, we have a whole lot of like leftover binders and you should you know really should have these. They're free, do you think you could use them?

Nancy, unfortunately, she was one of those folks who, like really, could not resist a bargain. If free, let me at it. And they gave her a choice of numbers to pick from. How many binders she wanted, and I guess she picked a number, you know?

And so there we were, and we just sort of, we've gotten a shelter and I don't believe it was opened yet, no it wasn't, and arrived at State Street so it was quite a while after. We were all doing something, I don't know what and I looked out the window and a tractor trailer, a tractor trailer pull up. This guy got out of the tractor trailer ringed the bell and said yeah, well we got a bunch of binders, binders? And I looked at the truck. Nancyyy! And there began the saga of the yellow binders, and it's really important that people throughout Spruce Run's history to know about these yellow binders because nobody knows where really where they came from, and they're everywhere, ten years anyway now. So she came out yes indeed, and he started unloading with a little Dolly, carton after carton, after carton, after carton after carton, of yellow binders. And we put them on the second floor and then when we had to renovate, we hauled them into the cellar, and now we hold them on the third floor, which we hadn't renovated it yet. So, and after we were done with the second floor and we had this successful campaign, we had to haul them down to the cellar to do the third floor. We have been hauling them around ever since. And we use them for everything, to put some proceedings in, yes and use them for all of our training manuals, and just

everything else you could think of. All our steering committee meeting minutes and all everything and we've tried to give it away, so that's where they came from and I think actually we still have a few boxes left. And I don't know what we are going to do! But that was one of the funniest things.

MW: That's a wonderful story.

SB: They're totally indestructible. Jump up and down on them, you can try and print the rings., nothing their indestructible. So that's the only story I just absolutely had to tell.

MW: I'm glad you did.

MH: Right! This is amazing Mazie Hough and Marli Werner and it's the end of our interview with Susan Bradford. This is our tape 93-1.

SB: One of my one of my responses and high points for me was that concert and the and the little video tapes and the way everything was all set up and the way people got invited. So, which I worked on, but, my experience there, I think, was a little bit unique in being still a staff person and having been connected for so many years, watching their faces go by. It was just like years and errors walking by years and arrows walking by with faces and personalities and stuff. And it was also like this 4-hour hug, it was just the sweetest thing, just sweet. It's the stuff that keeps folks going. It really is. Thank you.

[End of transcript]