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Oral Interview of Edgar Brown by Mazie Hough and Marli Werner for the Feminist Oral History Project (Part #1)

Mazie Hough

Marli Werner

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Oral Interviews for the Feminist Oral History Project.

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

Interviewee: Edgar Brown (EB)

Date: 08/03/1994

Recording number: MF223-BrownE-T1a

Length of recording: 44:11

[Transcript begins]

MW: This is Marli Werner, I'm here with Mazie Hough and we're about to interview Edgar Brown at his home on Allen Street in Bangor. We're going to talk about his experiences working with Bangor City Welfare. After we finish this, we're going to ask him to sign a release form so that we have permission to use this tape. Today's date is the 3rd of August 1994.

EB: Thank you for this opportunity. It was a pleasure to tell you about what the city of Bangor has done, Spruce Run, and how they were involved in the problem with domestic violence. The city of Bangor had operated shelters since the early 70s. We have not only been involved with the problem of domestic violence, we've been involved with the alcohol problem, single man family and finally the last of the probable left shoulder was that of, about the woman shelter. And with nerve wracking, I remember we opened the first one which was '70 or '71. In order to go further into this there are several things that happened in municipal welfare, which would be relevant. First off, they did away with the proper settlement and support law, which really restricted what you could do. And replace it with a state supervised program whereby each municipality, after spending so much money out in our case around \$12,000, they got 90% back of the ranking Bangor expenses. This made it possible to operate a shelter without having to send a legal settlement support notice to the town of Little Shelton. I don't know if you have heard of Little Shelton or not? So, in order to get a budget for a shelter, and the first shelter was a family shelter. And that was opened at three Down East Central. That will be the only address that you will hear from me today. And to do this, I had to convince the city manager that this is a desirable thing. I had to convince the Bangor public Housing Authority that it was a desirable thing, and I had to convince the Bangor Housing Authority

that it was appropriate to have one of their buildings as a shelter. I accomplished all of these things, plus I brought them to make a small apartment. So that was a shelter supervisor. The families shelter at Three Down East Central has been in operation since the early '70s. The purpose of the family shelter, in my judgment at that time, was to shelter families that were evicted for non-payment of rent. Fire victims, and those stranded in the city. I have since come to the conclusion that some of the people that were stranded were actually women that were battered, and at the time, I had absolutely no concept of this. How did I become aware that we had battered women? There are several reasons. Number one is that, about '72 or '73 I started talking with a lady by the name of Caroline Daw. This is her book. And also, the state was saying that I could hire welfare clients to help with the federal food program. The woman that I obtained to supervise, to supervise was a battered woman. So talking with her and Caroline, we found out in the fact that our family shelter was actually on occasion being used as a battered women shelter. The next thing, in reading and listening to TV ads and programs, we found out that the problem of domestic violence is a lot more serious than I would have thought, I'll put it that way. I've since got those strong feelings about what we should do to help battered women, but I'm talking about what I was thinking in the '70s. Well, what eventually happened was that, Callum agreed to take in these women that were in an abusive situation and there was a feeling that there might be a threat to the well-being of the woman or her children. And at that time, the only shelter that I had was with the family shelter and we had a combination. Carl had taken the abusive situations where she and her friends, I didn't know who her friends were actually. So we had that probably until late '76 early '77. In '77, and by the way, I'm pretty sure this date because I've called, I figured out, I reminded who the woman was, and '77 we started a battered women shelter. I again I got a person to supervise. And this person was not in our system, and we only had one apartment, and I'm going to call it 3FK. Another thing is that my contractor at Spruce Run was because Kyle and Don mentioned there was such an organization or existed, I was not aware of such a program. So, in around early '78, '77, I'm not exactly sure. Again, I had made the settler. There having to talk to the city manager, I had to talk to the police, and I had to convince the City Council that they should provide welfare money for having a battered women shelter. And again, I had to ask the Bangor Housing Authority to provide a unit. Initially one and later it was two. All these shelters were being operated when I retired in 1981. Now, another role I personally had played, I was on the Human Services Council launched by the state of Maine between about '73 to '82 or '83. The Maine Legislature has considered twice funding a battered women shelter first time, I think it was vetoed,

is that right? OK. As a member of the Human Services Council, we appeared for that, supported that program on both cases. Other than that, I have served on the Bangor City Council. I don't know what else you want to know about.

MW: What we'd like to do? With your permission is to ask you some questions that might give us some insights. First of all, tell me what your title was when you were working through the city?

EB: What?

MW: What was your title when you were working for the city?

EB: Welfare Director.

MW: Welfare Director, OK, and what happened when Spruce Run first began, how did you first hear, you said you heard about it through Carolyn Dow? Tell us a little bit about her actually, and then I want to ask you about Spruce Run, who was she?

EB: She was an activist, but she and I always had a good relationship and she often hit the nail right on the head on what you should do. And I trusted her judgment that's all.

MW: Did she work for the city?

EB: No. She was a private individual, she was a battered woman herself, I believe.

MW: A friend of yours.

EB: She really wanted to take in the women that were really beaten so.

MW: And did she take them into her own homes? And she got friends who took them into their home?

EB: Yeah, and that lasted about two years, I guess.

MW: And you didn't want to know about it probably?

EB: Exactly it, you got it.

MW: So, she came to you and said this is important, and this is good.

EB: Well, one of the problems that you have to deal with is, a woman that decides to move, doesn't always have time to do anything but take herself and oftentimes, sometimes it is a verbal abusive situation, they have only verbally abused. But you better take the time at any time of day, and the advantage in having a municipal apartment, having one is that you can have the police have a key

and put them in right then. I have talked about what we did at the shelter. So, Carol Dow was an activist. I don't know if she was in Spruce Run or not.

MW: How would she know about these women? How would you know?

EB: Well, the activist women were at Spruce Run, I found that out. But regardless we need battered women services and whether or not they can live with me had nothing to do with, it was still the program that they need.

MW: And we've heard stories of people having to call, I assumed you in the middle of the night if people were in danger and needed to go into the shelter. Can you tell us about that? Did you get calls in the middle of the night?

EB: I feel, and I always would get up. I always got in touch with the police, I wanted the police, I've only been threatened a couple of times, but.

MW: So, you would get the women out of their homes, out of the dangerous situation?

EB: If we needed to do that, we would do it. I don't remember descent doing that, but I remember the person, you see this is after I found out that the woman wasn't lying or that that she was death threatened, I believed them totally. I would just ask the policeman to be with me. In case the husband showed up, I'd rather have somebody with a protection with me than...and they would disappear in effect. There is some merit in doing it that way. A lot of merit I think, I wish we could do a system whereby you could just have the person disappear of course, they on occasion would get in touch with the batterer right off. But I don't know that you should make a phone available so they can, so...

MW: When you mentioned over the phone about a woman who had four kids who came to the, your first shelter, your family shelter I guess, and he said that that was a moment when you realized too, can you tell us a little bit more about her?

EB: Yeah, I don't remember where she was from, but she was I think Georgia, and I'm not sure that she was from this, I'm not sure that she physically lived in Bangor, when she went South. So, this woman came, this this is what it really dawned on me after talking with... but she showed up with four children, we put her on the battered woman shelter. I mean in the family shelter. Ultimately, she got a job as a waitress at the officer's club, at a drinking club at the base, the air force base. And eventually she even paid back all those who obviously got, see she wanted to do that, and at

that time I also have come to the conclusion that many of these women, even though they are battered, they are the stronger party of the marriage of the relationship. That is my best judgment today. They are very capable women and it's too bad they don't have a man that's decent.

MW: What happened after Spruce Run opened its shelter?

EB: Well, eventually they got a shelter and were on their own.

MW: Did you have any dealings with them after that at all, with the women?

EB: I don't know. They got, I only got approval from the city. You see, we still got a city situation. I want to protect the women in the city here, I was responsible for the city battered woman, not broad battered women.

MW: Right.

EB: You see, I'm not a model welfare director for the region, although I think I was as well known within the welfare directors that's ever existed in this city. That's why and I don't know whether she even still operating, but I wouldn't be surprised if it was today. I don't really know. I know the family shelter is because our church has a yard sale and if there's any dishes left after the yard sale down at the church, I ask permission to take them to the welfare, the current welfare director so that they will be available for the people in the shelters when they move out.

MW: In the family shelter?

EB: Yeah. And maybe it was for the other one, I don't know. You see, I've had a single man shelter, Alcohol shelter, and in each case some private agency got the whole power. We've got the shelter down on Cedar Street, right?

MW: When did you first commence director to the Bangor City welfare?

EB: 1966

MW: '66. Were you the first one of your peers to be concerned about battered women?

EB: Yeah I would say so, yes. I think it was under the rug before.

MW: And you said that you had quite a battle with the, as you said with the town, the City Council...

EB: No, I did not.

MW: Oh did not. Can you tell us a little bit about that going to, trying ot implement this?

EB: Well, I was elected to after I retired, in '81 I was elected to the Bangor City Council, that fall and the people that were on the Council while I was welfare director supported me. So, I did not, on the contrary I had a very good relationship. But if I frankly, it's not a glamorous position, and if anybody will do the work, it had to happen.

MW: You know why I said that, you didn't say battle over the phone. You said that you had a quite a Conservative Council, that you had to convince.

EB: Oh yes, when the battered women shelter... well, what I meant by that I was talking like people on television today. They were worried about expansion of the budget. Every Council is worried about that, and this was a new program. OK? and so you know I had to convince them that there ought to be the first Council in the state that passed that support for the battered women and not to laugh. And I think if you ask them today, they probably happy that they did. When we are talking today and this is when this was not well known when I was reporting even in mid 70s. Hey, let's have a big shelter!

MW: When you open that shelter, what services did you provide for the women who came there? The battered women shelter? What was the shelter like?

EB: OK, the first thing I did, I had a telephone in there that if you picked it up it rang in the police station. Whenever we had women in there I made sure that they know about it on the patrol, only between 12:00 and 12:30 at night was a very change of shift and there wouldn't be some policemen that could be there within two minutes. And even then it would only take 10 to 15, but I wanted to be sure that they had police protection if they wanted it. Other than that, if they needed help to get out of the shelter, I made arrangements for the police to go with them. I think I got the police to recognize that there was a problem.

MW: Do you know how you did that?

EB: Well, they could tell that I was convinced. I don't know. I hope I'm making that claim that I am convinced that a woman in this situation is, better get out sooner, the better. And society better make whatever they can available to them.

MW: Let us, meaby take it step by step, you would get a call from Spruce Run saying we have a woman that we think is battered.

EB: It wouldn't be from Spruce Run.

MW: Spruce Run didn't call you. So how did you find out? How did women come to you in the first place?

EB: Well, I was the welfare director and I was, it was known that I had shelters.

MW: OK.

EB: Believe me it was all the way up to Aroostook County, I had welfare people up there telling me come down here and call me when you get down here. So, and once Spruce Run, they were aware of the shelter and I had Jean across the street and we could interview the person to get out of necessary occupation while they were in the shelter, I did not take this application in the middle of night.

MW: Jean lived across the street from the shelter. And you had arranged for her to open it up and interview the people the next day.

EB: Well, no, I've had the woman that I hired for federal food at this time was with my shelter supervisor. Again, we had a woman that had been battered well, been choked.

MW: So, women would call Bangor city welfare, would call you at Bangor City Welfare.

EB: Yeah, welfare. I was out of the director, not a case worker, although I did know how to do casework.

MW: So, they would call a caseworker.

EB: Yeah, my case workers knew, all my case workers knew about the problem with battered women, and I only had only one male case worker and I tried to keep the males out of it. Now you cannot answer the question, but it will normally be a woman, I would take reports but not do the... All I was convinced was that this was necessary service, and I'm happy I did it. I'm glad that it's got an agency that's doing it in the city and all over the State and I think we need still need improvements, but. A major component of any problems with battered women is a shelter.

MW: Was dial health around when you were there?

EB: Yes, and they knew about it.

MW: They knew about it and people could call dial help?

EB: Yeah, and always run into problems that I was the welfare director of the City...

MW: Do you mind if I close this door so that we can not take your neighbors?

EB: Perfect.

MW: So, women could call dial help or they could call the welfare department directly and I guess the...

EB: As a matter of fact, I think that you see because I was in probably out of dealing with the problem with battered women probably before, five years before Spruce Run ever had a shelter. I don't know exactly how long.

MW: I think they didn't open their shelter until after you retired from being the director. Right around the same time, yeah.

EB: OK, I don't... I was getting tired by the time of '81. Well, it's a long struggle.

MW: When Spruce Run came along then and you had to deal with them as another place that women were coming from. What was your reaction to them?

EB: Well, I guess I would be thinking on it in terms of that, if they want to become involved with serving battered women, that would be a desirable service. And when they rolled up on agreement... that would effectively made it impossible for the city of Bangor to fulfill the requirements, I refused to sign it. But even solve this so that I was still, we're still the only shelter available.

MW: So you saw them as sort of troublemakers, or at least presenting problems for you?

EB: I can't say that.

MW: That's too strong a word, that's probably too strong a word. But, clearly they were problematic in some way.

EB: Well, I'm sure that they were serious about the needs of the battered women than anybody that read the books about it without being suspicious at least of social service agencies, and that's what I was. And that this book says that because I eliminated all the requirements that I could, but I did not could not eliminate with the application. It was that choice, to not sign what they presented but that doesn't mean they couldn't get them back and they didn't.

MW: What was it that they presented with?

EB: Well, I don't remember that but I to my way of thinking, I took our legal department and decided. We rolled out the... so that I could fulfill the responsibilities as a director.

MW: And that was filling out a form on the individuals, and they wanted to keep it anonymous, I guess. Is that it?

EB: No, they wanted to be able to admit people and they do all the applications.

MW: OK. And you wanted to have control over that yourself, right? You will need to have control over them.

EB: I had convinced the state. That's another thing I didn't mention, I had convinced the state that that we needed the shelters and that I could build them for the shelters separate from everything else and all I had to do was give a number. But when you wish with grocery order, you got to have an application. And you submit all of the billing to the state, everything you spent and to fill out a form to get some reinvestment.

MW: OK. I understand.

EB: You do?

MW: I think I do.

EB: And yeah, if you want to talk about the problem I did have a problem. When they moved into one of those shelters, then they put in a form other than the one I had in their name, and the first bill I saw was for \$300.00 and they wanted the ... and I wouldn't.

MW: We would, they wanted you to pay it and you wouldn't pay. Would not pay it?

EB: No. Because how were you going to bill it?

MW: How are you going to get reimbursed? So a lot of the struggles had to do with you needing to fulfill the requirements of billing and the state requirements in terms of being accountable and they didn't want to.

EB: My requirement of being able to at least take an application, be able to do a purchase order to an individual person, not to a group of people. If we didn't have an operation, we didn't know how many people are there. But it's great that they got their own shelter. I don't know how many people they get.

MW: I'm sure they have to turn people away sometime, you know. Well, I know in the past they have 'cause I was reading some old files and they had to turn people away. So, it's still a big problem and there's not enough dealing with it. So, if a woman came to the shelter, then to get food she'd also have to fill out these purchase orders and will Jean be able to do that for her?

EB: No, no, this would be Lee. Gee, well, at one point I had Gee or somebody in the shelter when I got, but this woman, the woman that I had to do that ultimately got married and moved out.

MW: I just turned it off. It's fine now. Your neighbor was spraying the porch or something and it was distracting, and the tape recorder picks up every sound.

EB: I don't need the model of who interviewed you. See I didn't recognize any of those names.

MW: Are there people you think we should interview besides you of course? People who could tell the story from the other side.

EB: You see, I don't know whether you're trying to find out, this city?

MW: This city, yeah. Well, I think our interest has been with Spruce Run because that was really started. But clearly, we're here today because we want to know more about how services for battered women were provided in general 20 years ago, roughly.

EB: Yeah, this will not be general. This should be one city.

MW: But no, I mean in this city.

EB: I mean not, I don't know any other Welfare Department even attempted this.

MW: OK. Is Carolyn Dow someone we could interview?

EB: Carolyn Dow is now in California.

MW: In California.

EB: Carolyn Dow came here for, I'm trying to get this book back to her, this is her belt, not mine. She came here for a funeral I'm assuming is one of the women that she used as another resource. I don't know. And she called me. And talking about the family and I asked her to come by and get the book. But she didn't. That's the only thing that's left. But she is doing great, and her children are doing great, and I hope she survived with the earthquake, and I don't know exactly where she is.

MW: Most people did survive, so I would assume that she is OK. You know part of the story that I'm getting from you too is that there are a lot of administrative systems that you have to work around in order to provide services that the whole system was sort of weighted against providing them with the services, like you were talking about the state you wanted to be able to get reimbursed for things without having to be able to provide. I guess for people.

EB: Yeah, you see the normal system would be that you would pay rent, provide food, provide heating oil and what have you. In this situation, you are providing shelter to a number of people and issuing grocery orders to individual grocery orders but only one refrigerator. You know you couldn't take a mass activation, really. So, what I had to do was to convince them that funding a shelter was a lot easier than funding a motel room plus meals, plus not being able to offer proper protection, any sch thing was necessary for these women. I have read in this book what the problem is with the social service agencies, and I tried to bypass as many as I could, some I couldn't, so I did not ask them to say to produce this this, and I didn't ask them to... there are all kinds of things that you, that in order to do it as a Municipality, you have to follow your own rules.

MW: Right. When women came into your shelter, about how long did they stay?

EB: Well, I didn't have any staying. I didn't have any long regulatory requirements. I think they should state, that they should be able to stay until they're able to get out. I'm not sure that every one of them should get out in three weeks with that.

MW: And so people could stay for varying amounts of time?

EB: No, you try to work with them on getting them out, but if I go into a hostile situation. We're talking about battered woman. There were in hostile situations. I did not approve of a longevity requirement, although I can understand why it might be necessary. I don't know that it's necessary, but I think if necessary, from source of numbers, not from needs.

MW: And so, what you would do when they were in the shelter was try to help them find a safe place to live and try to get them aid and support or even work so that they could be independent.

EB: If you looked at the battered women you can, you know all the problems they have, if they find work, if they find an apartment... we've got to get tough on the man that do that. And I will be the first to say so.

MW: Do you have any particular vivid memories of working with battered women and also with the women associated with Spruce Run?

EB: Well, I've already started the one lady, the women that worked for me have overcome the... Lee Conely she is not dead, deceased, she went to Florida. She had been severely chocked. I tried to convince her, I wanted to convince her to go to college. I wanted her to go to regular college, she bypassed that and went to Husson. Became a very capable secretary. It's my opinion that many, many, many of the women that become battered are very capable women and all they need is somebody's filter to support them in what they want to do.

MW: Did Lee Connely come to you through the welfare department?

EB: I don't know how I met Lee. She was one of the people receiving federal foods, and I just met her that's all because I was around and what, I didn't get her selected first off, I hired a whole bunch of people through federal food, what happened was that the state started paying the freight, but required us to spend the money on the program and I chose to help the low-income people have a job and I was able to hire Lee and I didn't pick up this, but I mean I didn't... but she eventually... my education came about the same way. Matter of fact, she went to get a diploma from Night School from Bangor High then went to Husson and eventually got a degree, and I tried to do that with anybody. My contract would have been... I was not a case worker; I was the director.

MW: But you might have had...

[End of transcript]