

Interview with Peggy Schwemin

No Date Given

Location: Marquette, Michigan

Women's Center in Marquette

START OF INTERVIEW

Jane Ryan (JR): I will be talking to Peggy Schwemin today, she will be sharing her experiences in the evolution of the Women's Center. Peggy lives in Marquette, and she will give us a little bit of her background and then her role and involvement with the Women's Center. Welcome, Peggy.

Peggy Schwemin (PS): Thank you. Well, I grew up in Marquette and lived here all my life. I come from a large family. I have an older brother and younger sisters and went to a Catholic school growing up. When I got into the high school, right before the high school, my father was injured. He was in the hospital for many years and so he wasn't around a lot, we had a lot of things to take care of on our own. And when I got into high school there was a couple of classes that I took that involved Mary Soper from the Women's Center. They were getting together a peer group and it seemed like something that I really needed. I needed that attention and that home it was hard that home taking care of my sisters. So this was all about me and I thought, oh, this would be great. And what they did was they did active listening and empathy training, and it was my first contact with the Women's Center.

JR: With this in the 70s then? When they were first getting started...

PS: It was in the 70s. It must have been '73...I think I was just about 16 at the time. And I can't remember everybody that was in the group. I remember Mary Soper, and I remember Scott Sadurland and there was another man and I think his name might have been Ken Bell or something like that. But it was a new group that they were joined and they were trying to get girls to be empowered to run groups and kind of an educational thing, and then they also brought in some type of dynamics for working and jobs and looking at projecting what you wanted to do

in the future, kind of bringing in different ideas, like not just being a nurse or going into health care.

JR: The traditional.

PS: Right. There were other things that you could do. It was a really nice program for me, I just felt a connection with Mary, I felt connection with women and that it was an important area to look at. I could do anything I wanted.

JR: Was it after school or was it integrated into the actual schedule in?

PS: It was integrated into the schedule. I remember correctly it was integrated. I want to say we almost went off-campus do it like we went over to Northern and did one of their rooms. And they did, I'm not sure what that group was called. But I know that I went downstate, at a seminar at downstate and talked in front of large group of that program. It was the first time I'd ever done anything like that. And I just, it really meant something to me. And as I went through high school, I started thinking about education and something that I would be interested in. Nobody in my family ever went to school, my mother was very smart, she had scholarship to go to Michigan Tech but decided to get married and have a family. And I wanted more than that. I didn't want to have to depend on somebody else I thought, myself be...I wanted to have my own responsibility of my life. So...

JR: And did you feel that before this programming or did they help you...?

PS: I think they helped me find the words for that. I knew there was something that I wanted, but I wasn't sure how to actually articulate it.

JR: Or if it was okay.

PS: If it was ok. You know in my family, they were so good about whatever I wanted, I could do. We never had a lot of money. So it would be something that have to work for. Nobody ever went to college, and so it something that I wanted to. My dad was a laborer, he was a plumber. I felt like I wanted to do something that teaching. So I did apply at Northern and I got in and I remember that first year being so scared from doing that. All my friends went away to college so I was here at Northern. I didn't have a support system. And the one thing I remembered is, during that time is Mary Soper. And I remember one time thinking, oh my god, I just don't feel

right, something are right. And I went to the Women's Center for support and that was at the Cohodas Building. I remember going in there and I opened up the door, it even brings tears to my eyes now, I looked at Mary, Mary looked at me, and I started crying. And she said "come on and sit down and close the door," and just let me...you know, cry. And it was really nothing about more than I think needing support. As the years went on, I don't think I was really involved with the Women's Center but women's movement was important to me, the right to make choices was important to be responsible for my choices were important. As I went through life, I did work with daycare. That was something that I wanted to do with the little babies. Later on, I started to do some volunteer work with the Women's Center as they moved around. And then once, I don't know, sometime...

JR: Was that when they were at the church; the Guild Hall, or South Front Street?

PS: South Front Street a little bit I would refer people down there and bring people down there, I went on to work in other restaurants. I had girls that were in my care that had questions about things and I always went down to the Women's Center, looked at some type of counseling for them and went there down and there for some support. Always had some really great people there helping. And as far as you know, the whole aspect of a abuse and that, it was you know, families are important to me because my family has always been so supportive of me that I think that I'm blessed and that these people that do not have that... it's just so hard. So being on the outskirts of the Women's Center and doing that...it's my tie in during my 20s and 30s and using them as a resource.

JR: As a resource, and you share that with others, that's really...

PS: Yes. It worked for me. It was what can be seen in college and I just did the same thing for that. They can do it. They just need little support. Then later on, when they decide they were going to rebuild the shelter and move it over on Baraga Street, they asked me to help them raise money to be on the board and raise that awareness and I thought "what a great idea that is," because when you were in a shelter, you don't have necessary transportation, you don't have that... you were hidden all those years. Here it's out in the open, we have the police station right next door, and we have all social services right there. I thought "what a smart idea, whoever thought of that." And it didn't make them feel like they were doing anything, you know, that they should be embarrassed about that they were taking care of themselves.

JR: That was a major shift in philosophy.

PS: Yes.

JR: And you're right, I don't know that it one person, but they came to realize that the hidden part tended to reflect on the women or the families that we were going there. So that was a big shift.

PS: I think that that was so amazing to me to think that and we spent couple years on raising money and once my board was... I was unable to do anymore work with them but then I shifted over to the children's museum and I still think that the passion for me is women and family. Even now I have women that are still, you know, I've referred people to the shelter, I've taken them there. My dad and I always you know, I like to cook a little bit, so we go over there and cook when he was around. So at that point that's it, but you know what's funny is that we had talked and the board about bringing the mothers back together, and talking, and getting their history down. And I never got to meet Sally. I never worked with her. Greer, I never got to work with her. So Mary Soper really is my person that I worked with.

JR: So you were involved at that period where they... they've been their bumps in the road and getting the Founding Mothers together has pulled them over that bump. And I think it was Gary Walker in his interview recently, commented on... what he hope for the future was getting more younger women involved. That you need the new generation both to carry the burden but also to refresh and bring in the modern culture, the recent culture.

PS: Right. I think he know it was pretty clear what we needed back in the 70s. We needed to be responsible for ourselves, we needed to have an empowerment, we needed to know that our choices were good choices. Now I think it's a little, you know, where do we evolve to? Where do we find out what those statements are? Sometimes they're not clear right now. I think that's part of it, you know? Trying to identify what it is that we need. But as a resource, oh my god, it's just something to have, to know that we can go there and have people help us.

JR: Right. And then it's ok to need assistance. Now, do I recall quickly? You went through a period where you had your own business, which was a heavy responsibility. Was the Women's Center at all helpful in that regard? They weren't too involved in the economic things were they?

PS: They weren't involved in the economics, but that's where that I tie back in with fundraising and that. I had a little coffee shop and Gail Nelson...

JR: Was she the chair or executive director at that point? I haven't talked to Gail yet.

PS: Yes. She took over, I can't remember who had that before her.

JR: I think Sue Kensington.

PS: Sue Kensington. Right. And so Sue had a business and I had a business, we were right around the corner from each other. That was... it was fun to get to know her that way as a business person. So it was fun to get women together in business and talk about the trials that we go through. We don't have anybody necessarily to go home and cook for us all the time, or to do our laundry, or... We still had to go home and do those things. It was kind of interesting to have that conversation. Even though maybe Sue and I didn't have that burden, but there's still other burdens.

JR: That's sharing. That group support.

PS: It was fun. And then when Gail took over, I had known Gail, I did Locks of Love. I had really long hair when I had the coffee shop, so we got all that together. We do little programs for the Women's Center. And when Gail was leaving... at one point when I was on the board we talked a lot about "where is the Women's Center going to go to, what transitions..." I thought about maybe going down there to work but it's just when you have a business there is no time it seems like. So I tried to volunteer when I could.

JR: So you've stayed connected which is admirable, which as an interviewer here, I'm just hearing over and over this community is unique. Well, I think it's unique in this respect, that people give in whatever way they can and they see the value of this, having this.

PS: Oh, absolutely. This community is, it is an interesting dichotomy. You can be whatever you wanted to be. You know, it's about being treat yourself. And I think in the 70s and high school, that's what they try to help me think about, you know, define who I am. What set some goals were, and try to achieve them and again, just articulate what they are. I think that the Women's Center did go through some bumps, but it's no different than any other organization.

JR: Right. And Mary was pointing out the non-profits have gone through this, and the thing that she regrets... and you certainly... you were lucky... is that they aren't getting into the schools now. The grants and the programs aren't there, and I think that she could wave a magic wand. That kind of thing would still be...

PS: But again, it you identify what are the needs... When I was in school, there was only a select group of girls that participated in sports. Now, there's much more participation. Now I almost think there should be more intramural sports than the varsity sports. I think that there are other avenues that these girls are getting for their identification, for their strength, and what I heard Mary talking about was how to get more education. We still have the media that is playing this role in objectifying women. The words that they use in the music industry, I think that they have a role, and I don't know if they're are being responsible in that role. The violence is there, yet they're all talking about not having guns and all this stuff, yet they're shooting them up in the movies or... In music I think there's something that they're not doing there that's still showing us as not being worthy.

JR: Right, and again the age I'm at it's difficult to embrace all of the other options for communication. But maybe at some point the Women's Center could reach some of these young women who still aren't quite sure or confident through the ways they go, you know? The communication they do.

PS: Right. As you know, in public school, it's hard to reach every child in that classroom. Everybody has different needs and there's a different word that they might connect to, or an action they might connect to. You can be one person to everybody. So maybe sports isn't it, but an educational program would be.

JR: If you had your magic wand are there things that you would like to see coming from the Women's Center or are you comfortable with the level they're working?

PS: No, I would like to see more money going in there and I'd like to see them doing more bringing people in for talks. I'd like to see them reaching out and looking at identifying some needs and trying to go after on for these girls. I think that it would be nice for them to get more programming.

JR: Ok, and I think of you as a younger person, do you have any thoughts in how they could be recruiting for their board? Because they are recycling their talents and getting...“tired” is the world.

PS: You know, how much more hours in the day... if we are all working and raising families, I don't know. I think they have to go in early and maybe do some internships with the couple of these girls in high school. Maybe to get them on the board would be a good way of doing it, bringing those internships in. Maybe looking at some other program in Northern. Maybe there's something there that they could come on the board and be on the support system... and getting credit for it... and just getting their feet wet in that program. Because... like I did... which I did as youth, and then came back over the years and we retouched. I think there's gotta be some way of connecting like that.

JR: Those are some good suggestions.

PS: Well, thank you.

JR: Anything else you would like to touch on or share?

PS: You know, I feel bad that the one of their big fundraisers was bingo, and then they got away from that. How do they fund themselves? I just wish that there was a something maybe part of the next step for these women and families that are in transition. I wish there was a job for them to work into to support themselves. I've gotten some ideas, you know, maybe in the future I wouldn't mind trying to do a little restaurant where they would work and get some experience in that. Maybe that would be some type of non-profit work. I think that would be a good thing, even if it wasn't just food-related. Maybe it could be something than the fabric industry, I don't know. Maybe they could do some of that step to raise money for their program.

JR: I hope you do pursue in suggesting, because I've read about those kind of activities going on in bigger cities, good ideas.

PS: Yes. Give him something to work towards to feel accomplished and...

JR: And I think their PakRatz program but that's very mini and it doesn't involve employing many people, but it's that kind of thing that's extending beyond...

PS: Well, the women there run there are just great and that's a great program, but there seems to be like you need more. So I think that purchasing that building was a good thing for them. It gives them an identity. You know, I think maybe we need to pull some people in from the Northern, these young ladies, and have them talk about marketing programs and stuff to maybe get some ideas.

JR: Very good, because that's where a lot of their energy is, 2015 is fundraisers, and like you said when bingo could no longer be... because that really did provide a significant amount... and then as Mary was talking about the grants aren't out there now, with the economic. So the things they used to rely on... and they never had a lot of money, but it's even more hand mouth now.

PS: Right.

JR: Well, thank you. This has been a good interview and I like your experience and staying connected in ways that you could manage with all the other things that you are doing.

PS: Well I appreciate this. It's nice to be part of it.

JR: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW