

Interview with Sue Kensington

No Date Given

Location: Marquette, Michigan

Women's Center in Marquette

START OF INTERVIEW

Jane Ryan (JR): I'm introducing Sue Kensington who served as a director for the Women's Center during the 90s and she will be sharing her experiences both how she came toward the Women's Center and the women's movement, and then particularly about the development of the Women's Center during her tenure as director. Sue, welcome.

Sue Kensington (SK): Thanks. Thanks for having me here. It's going to be fun.

JR: You want to tell us a little bit about your personal background and?

SK: Sure. Back when the Women's Center started, I wasn't in a part of the Women's Center then but I was very much aware of it because I was a student, a part-time student at the university and working and I was a mom, and had gone to some presentations, some workshops that the Women's Center had. And so...that, so I knew about them at that time. Then I went to the work some years later for United Parcel Service, a very nontraditional job for a woman, I think I was the third women hired in the Upper Peninsula. It was tough. You know, it got better, but it was tough in the beginning and...

JR: In the sense of needing to prove that you could do the job?

SK: Had to prove. Yes. Sure. In fact the drivers and I became really good friends but you know, there was a trial by fire period for me and I remember my uncle calling me one day and congratulating me on getting this job with United Parcel Service which was...I mean, it was great pay and I was at that time then divorced and I had two young children to raise and being able to make that kind of money changed how my children and I lived. It was great salary, great benefits and as I said, I was part time, still making a lot more money than most of my friends did working full-time and then I can be on school as well. But my uncle said that I just wanted to let

you know that our neighbor came over, he says, we just heard that you would get job and he said our neighbor came over and was talking about that damn women they had just hired at UPS, Well, the neighbor was a driver, had not met me yet but I thought, ok, here we go. And that's kind of how was in the beginning because there was an assumption that I couldn't do the job. So...

JR: What had given you the courage, Sue, to apply for a non-traditional job?

SK: I had been a, I was respiratory therapy technician in Marquette General Hospital and my, one of my patients...I was working on an orthopedic floor, I happened to have a patient up on ortho, and he had a, he had fractured his femur in a skiing accident, and back in those days, man you fractured femur you got that heavy cast all the way up to your hip and they put him into a chair and he was uncomfortable and he wanted to get back to bed. And he turned the light, you know, the call light on and everybody's busy and they don't get to him right away. And I just happened to walk in and give him a breathing treatment and he says, "I want to go back to bed." I said, "Well, I'll help you." So I got down there and put him back to bed and he said, "You're really strong. You should work for UPS." And I said, "Who's UPS?" Well, he happened to be the Human Resources person for the state who was up here skiing and had broken his leg that way. So that stuck in my head and maybe eight-nine months later, something like that, I really needed to make more money, I think I was making three dollars and twenty-five cents an hour as a Respiratory Therapist. And so I went looking and I went to the local place to apply and I just kept going. I think that I think I got hired cause they got sick of me. You know, showing up. And that they were looking for Christmas help. So that's how I first got in the door.

JR: And then you proved you could do it.

SK: I proved I could do it and then I could, you know, it was hard. I mean, I had no upper-body strength at all, it was hard, nobody would help me. They just watch me and "Okay, I can do this." [Strains when speaking] But it was great. It was a wonderful place to work. And then, because I was just working part-time, that I only had to work part-time, and excuse me, and then go to school. I also wanted to do volunteer work and I volunteered for the Women's Center. It was an organization. I just wanted to be part of what they did. I...

JR: So you had some awareness that they were at work?

SK: I had awareness because I had been presentations, I remember Peggy Fraiser actually as a young pharmacist giving a presentation at Northern and I believe it was on women's equality or reproductive freedom. I can't tell you what it was but I was so impressed at that time by her and how she spoke of the Women's Center. All these little things added up and so that's...

JR: That was where your awareness of their activity?

SK: That's where my awareness of the Women's Center and then I had had, I'm gonna backup when my daughter was two and my son was seven, so that was in 1972 which was right around the time always conversations were going on to get Women's Center started.

JR: Consciousness raising?

SK: Consciousness raising. But I wasn't necessarily, you know, I'd read about it, I thought that's great. But it hadn't touched me viscerally yet until the day when my husband and I had agree to talk with an insurance person, neither one of us had life insurance and so. And it was somebody that I knew, he was a nice guy, a nice enough guy, and it was a really nice day and I remember we met on the porch. It was probably a hot day and nobody had air conditioning back then. So that's why we're outside. And we were on a front porch and kids were playing and we're having this conversation, he was asking questions, you know... and his recommendation then after looking at our questionnaire was that my husband get right around a hundred thousand dollars, he'd need right around hundred thousand dollars in life insurance which is, I mean it's a large sum of money now, but it was huge, you know, back then. And mine would only be three-four thousand dollars, just enough to bury me because, what I heard was that's what I was worth. And it was like someone punched me in the stomach. And when I recovered, I said, "You need to leave. You need to leave now, I can't believe that you said that." "What? What?" He was questioning. He wasn't a bad person, he just had never been questioned like that before. My husband was shocked at my behavior. I mean, I threw him off the porch. "You need to leave. Get off. No, nothing." And that was my visceral, my A-ha moment for, hrmm, this is wrong.

JR: The way women were viewed at that time in general.

SK: The way women reviewed by society at large. This is how we were viewed, this is...that was it. And so, that's when I became more personally involved in the women's movement. I educated myself. I read, I talked to other women and yes, so that was...

JR: What did you do as a volunteer? Do you recall?

SK: I was on the rape victim support team and I really, I carried a beeper. It was hard, meaningful work. I did it for, I can't remember how long, I do know that the only reason I stopped was because, I went into management with United Parcel Service which meant I was on the road or I traveled most of the weeks I had to give up the beeper. So that broke my heart. I really liked being involved and...so in management then I got transferred down to, my reward was being transferred down to corporate headquarters from the Michigan district that was in East Lansing. And, but I would still come back to visit, my kids were grown at this time and but I'd still come back to visit and, my friends in Marquette and one weekend I came back, a friend of mine called and said, "Why don't you come up for the weekend and there's great fundraiser going on at the Women's Center." And I think it was a fashion-show fundraiser for the Women's Center. So sure, why not? Let's go. Good time. And I get to see maybe people who I had on the team with her. And I was introduced to Geri Defant who was the then... I think she was the chair of the board directors and Geri just said, you know, because my friend was a friend of Geri's and she asked what I did for living and I told her, by that time, I had left United Parcel Service. I had awakened one morning, exhausted and worked very, very hard and I thought, probably out loud, "Why am I working this hard for something that doesn't, that I'm not passionate about?" So I quit. I'd had enough money put away, it was a very good job that I just needed to stop and so that lead me then, I went into helping out in the office of an insurance agency, the business end of it because I was the business-end at United Parcel Service.

JR: Still in Lower Michigan at that time?

SK: In Lower Michigan. So I was fine, I had good life. It was ok. I got to come up here all the time and so then Geri said to me, "You need to apply for the job. Why don't you turn in application for our executive director? That position has been vacated." I guess something was, just few days before and I said, "Stop." I still remember the conversation, I said, "Stop. Thank you but I'm..." You know, at Northern I started out in the School social work. Said, I'm in, that didn't last long. I said, I'm in business. I don't have a social work background, like a year, I think I went and for that. And I said my background is in business time, I don't have what you are looking for. She said, actually?

JR: We need business skills.

SK: Actually, they were going through a reorganization process of the Women's Center. And so they had taken that previous, that one position, the executive director and had pulled it apart and made two positions, one was program director, one was executive director. They wanted the social work aspect with the Program Director, business aspect with the Executive Director. That's what they needed at that time. And I said, "Okay, thanks." And I think we had, either something happened to my car or there was a storm. My, I didn't go back for an extra, it was an extra day, it was on a Monday and I thought, "I'm going to," and my friend who I'm staying with encouraged me to ___ [Inaudible, whispering]. So I went and got the application, I brought it back and the one of the things that interested me a lot is that you had to, one of the questions was to write about what feminism means to you and what are the ways in which your life has defined that or how do you live as a feminist? That fascinated me, I thought, "I say I'm a feminist so what do I do or what do I say, what have I done that indeed says that?" So that to me, and I love to write. That was interesting to me. And so I did it and I remember dropping off that application on my way out of town. And that was it. That was in, I can't remember when. I didn't hear from them and I figured, "Well there's going to be lots of applicants."

JR: How did you feel about coming to Marquette? Was that a draw or down?

SK: Oh, draw! When UPS transferred me out of Marquette, I thought I'd die. Oh, I can't live without Marquette. I love Marquette, I had love at home, I had wonderful job, wonderful friends, I had a good life.

JR: So it was a positive in terms?

SK: It was a positive but then I had also by you know, they wrenched me out of Marquette, out of the U.P. and downstate but then I made a fine life for myself there. So I thought, well, so it wasn't just... I had adjusted. So at the time, anyway so I got this call a couple month later, they were was still in the reorganization phase. They weren't giving any interviews at that time. So then I was surprised in July, when I got a call to come up and interview, which I did. And I got the offer, I remember Priscilla Burnham's voice on the phone. She was on the board directors. I got this phone call, I was house-sitting for a friend of mine that's in Marquette. That's how I came up for the weekend or the week to interview and I was at that person's house and this, I got this phone call. I still remember her voice offering me the job and I went 'Oh, my god.'" And it was cause I was sure I wasn't going to, I wasn't going to be offered. I hadn't think that my

background. I did not have my degree and I thought, "Now they're not going to want me." So I went back and went back to Kalamazoo and where I was living at the time. And my daughter was going to school at Western Michigan University. And I, it was really hard for a while but I'll be leaving her, leaving a life, kind of thing and what she said to me was so telling. I made the list of the reasons to not take the job, the reasons to stay and do just what I'm doing, and reasons to take the job. And she took one look at the list and she said, "You know, if you don't take this job," Well first, it was gonna cost. It's a huge decrease in money that Women's Center didn't have, couldn't pay. And she said "If you don't take this job, we were all be paying a price for very long time." So wise, but she said, you know, "I'm graduating college. I'm leaving. I'm not going to be here. I'm gone. Don't do it for me." She says "I'm fine." But she was absolutely right, it was my passion, it was my caring. I was trying to use my common sense, you know. What I would think is common sense. Well, no I can't afford it, "Da-da-da-da-da, "all these things that but it was my passion and my commitment and so that's why I did it, I figured it out. Figured it out somehow.

JR: I love it. So then you were hired.

SK: Uh-huh

JR: Was your steep learning curve? Or did you move in easily or?

SK: It was incredible learning curve. The Women's Center was in really bad place financially, you know, there have been funding cuts on the state level. And so I mean, I came in when so much up their, of the revenue came from grants you know, state and a federal grants or state grants that you know, federal pass-through money to the State. And they were losing the displaced homemaker program and it was a constant struggle financially. And when I came in, it's not that I came in when there was somebody... when I was hired, the board of directors had been forced because the previous director had vacated the position. They stepped in to the job to do staffing.

JR: The board was like a transition of executive?

SK: The board was transition, sure. And so that was tough. That was really, really hard. And so I came in my first day for training which lasted till lunch and the director or the board chair at that time was Geri Defant and she said, here are the contract books, here's this, here's that. I was

introduced to all of staff and were fabulous in helping me, and I had tremendous amount of reading and meetings to go to, but two hours into my so-called training, she stood in front of me, she put her, she was just physically a lot shorter than I was and I can still remember who looking up to me, she put her hands on my forearms arms or my upper arms and she said, “Sue, we need to take this place away from us and we’re going to fight you every step of the way.” And wow, I came to learn exactly how true that was. But what she was saying was that every, us met the board directors how passionately all of them cared about Women’s Center just like the Founding Mothers had they not been there at that time and go on through incredible things to keep that organization afloat. It wouldn’t be around. And so she also understood that it was going to be a hard time for her and others to let go of, in a way that would be healthy for the organization. So they were hiring a director, this is what the director supposed to do and this is what the board’s supposed to do and she knew what this struggle is going to be. So it was a shot across the bow. And it was a gift. It was an incredible gift because they come to pass.

JR: Was one of your strength knowing how to go after financial aid?

SK: Yes, yes.

JR: So they saw that and you and did you spend a lot of time on that aspect of it?

SK: Yes. A lot. And you know, one of the things that happened and that does happened with grassroots organizations is you get really used to being poor, and maybe not used to it but it becomes your reality and so it’s constant scramble. And one of the things that happened on the funding cuts came from the state is that you know, then we’re all cut-cut-cut-cut-cut without looking at...we were looking at the things at need to be cut rather than how we could raise revenue. Increase our revenue.

JR: What we could do it. And that’s a mindset.

SK: It’s a mindset. It is a mindset. But you know, lucky for, I was... I hadn’t been in that environment so I was a fresh set of eyes. So let’s go out here and get. You know, they had been in the trenches, they had been, they were keeping this place alive and it was not easy for anybody who worked there. And again, it was only because they cared so much about the Women’s Center and its mission.

JR: Now you were a director for eleven years?

SK: Eleven years.

JR: so could you highlight for us what you felt where the real wonderful things and then maybe some of the challenges you had, other than finance obviously.

SK: I think I had been in director for maybe a year and there was a project that was put together by the Michigan Women's Foundation and it was funded by Michigan Women's Foundation and University of Michigan Center for the Education of Women. And there was one other funder and I can't remember who that was. But the project was year-long, the pilot was year-long. It was called *Women in Leadership* and they reached out to all sorts of organizations whose mission had anything to do with women and girls. So for instance, the Director for Girl Scouts from the State. There was a program in Grand Rapids that had to do with non-traditional jobs for women I can't remember what it was. And then there were some directors of domestic violence, sexual assault programs. And so I was one of the, the Women's Center was one of the organizations chosen, they were being also very mindful and thoughtful of different sized organizations, geographic locations, and I think that we were rural and in the Upper Peninsula. So my board director was approached by them and asked if they would allow me to go to this, which was a big bite for them, because it would mean an absence, I'd say three four times a year where I would travel Ann Arbor for a few days and also there was homework. The board would have to... the project paid a certain amount of money but the board financed my, they paid for my travel. And so they agreed to do it. And before I left, they sent me this long questionnaire. And one of the... I remember that one of the questions, two of the question's where are two things I had to do was to name the strengths, what I thought the strengths of the organization were, and what I thought the weaknesses were. And I answered the same. One of my answers was identical on both sides. And I'd been their buddy, I think. And the answer was, for the strengths was the how many years, we had people on the board directors who had been there for many years. They had the history, they had everything. And...

JR: And the passion.

SK: Passion and all of that. And that was a strength, it was also weakness that I saw having been there awhile in that it was hard for any new ideas to come in because of that. Which was not

abnormal at all but I did see that and so part, I went through this program and I think was the second one, where we would get together and it was very structured a lot of presenters, a lot of questions, a lot of tests of all these different. I think they were probably 16, 18... it was around the State. You know, participants. And at one point, we were told that as a gift, a bonus to the boards of directors are all of our board directors that all of our boards were non-profit organizations but was that the project would give these each organizations something that they needed or something that would be helpful to them as on a consultation basis. So they sent Beverly Geier who had been the Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board Monitor for years. She was also someone who had started Every Women's Place down in Muskegon which was similar to the Women's Center Harbor House program, and she was a presenter and part of this project. And she came up and she did a, for free, a full strategic plan visioning session for the board directors. It was huge and then would come back with her recommendations, she was also attached to the Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment board. I'm remembering this 20 some years ago so I may not have alright. But it was huge. And my board directors was really excited about it. Well one other things that came from that, one of the recommendations that came from that retreat, from that questionnaire was the recommendation to institute term limits on the board of directors because we didn't have term limits. I remember Bev saying, telling me to shut up. I am to stand down on this one. She said, "You don't... This comes from me, this comes from the board. You don't have any say in this at all. This is very sensitive, you just be quite." She didn't actually say shut up, that's how I heard it. It's like, "Okay." And because it was such a delicate, touchy thing to do but something that had to be done, we were in the process of formalizing at that point, the Women's Center was becoming a more formalized organization and those are the kinds of changes that have to take place and are very, very difficult for that to happen. So I just...

JR: It was very healthy then that it could be an outside recommendation.

SK: Exactly.

JR: Had you not gone to that, it couldn't have happened?

SK: No. And I had no idea when I feel that out was like here's what I see, here's... you know, da-da-da-da. But I didn't understand that part of it but there was a paper actually that was presented at this project by a young woman at Northwest University, I think. Her name is

Stephanie Rieger and it was, I believe the name on the paper was the strength and challenges or something about feminist organizations, and it was all about going from grassroots up through the formalized structure and the challenges when you go from one stage to another. And as I read this, I thought, "Oh, this is wonderful," because it spoke to everything that had gone on at the Women's Center as well. So it was very normal and these were growing pains, folks. I loved the paper so much, I gave it to every board member... it was an "A-ha!" kind of thing. So everything that we're going through was very, very normal. So...

JR: So you were not only involved in funding issues but organizational and development of the organization which is probably still having an impact?

SK: Exactly. Right. Oh, and it is. Yes. It was time to move on and change and also during that time on the state level, we were very lucky. There was more money, there was more state agencies were able to institute more programming due to try out new projects that would benefit...

JR: So that was a like an upside of the thing because previous to that they've been cut back.

SK: It was an upside. We'd gone... we had come out of, we come out of horrible. It was awful. It was so awful. It was just that.

JR: Discouraging...

SK: It was very discouraging and it was hard for everybody. People were paying minimum wage. It was awful the way we had, and we had programs, grants that we only pay that and so I remember there was one person who was being paid to either run the program or be on assistant on the program who couldn't get off public assistance.

JR: Well I recall Sally May saying in her interview you were paid, she was for half-time but it was not a half-time job.

SK: No it wasn't, yeah. Yes. But it was hers and everybody else's commitment, you did. You just did what you had to do to get it done and you didn't think about any of that...

JR: Those strained us. Yeah. Were there any particular programs that evolved that during your time that you feel good about?

SK: Yes, there were. One of them, in fact I was looking at that timeline, I'm not quite sure about that. There was a year on the timeline, I thought, it was little bit earlier than that. But we were chosen as a pilot project for a program, again, I think it's because, I mean we were a long standing organization and in the Upper Peninsula, geographically, you know, significant and I thought it was a families in transition but as I was reading this timeline I thought, well, maybe it wasn't. But I'm going to say that it was. Somebody wants to back and change that. And at that time, our funding or our salary levels. We just...you know, to the point it was so, they were so low there was a huge turnover, which cost us a whole lot of money. Somebody'd come in, they'd be really good and they'd be trained, but they couldn't make a living wage because we just did not have the money. So I believe it was the Families in Transition Program. We were awarded one of those grants and the state expected you to pay a good salary to those people that you were hiring. And it paid for a director and assistant in those positions.

JR: Do you recall who did that?

SK: Oh, yeah. I remember exactly who the director of the...you mean, who we chose?

JR: Yeah, yeah.

SK: It was a very highly competitive. Before I tell you that, this was the environment that we had people who loved their jobs and loved working there, they were highly affected they were wonderful and they weren't making squat. Now the state says, it may have been a federal program that was passed through. Here's the salary level and your level of expertise, and we had degree people, we had very qualified people. Here's what they need to be paid. Cause this is on a state level this is not okay, for your location or for blah blah, this is what this people make. So obviously so many people within the organization, because this was really good looking wage at the time. And they all applied for the job. And so we got together as a staff and said, here's the deal. This is what the State expects not just as staff, we have to talk about on board level too. Because you know, like I would build, I'm a program director and finance person. We build the budget for the year and the board had to approve. So we had to have a long discussion about, here's the salary. Here's this line-item and salary were. This particular program is going to pay two or three times more.

JR: You could call it real morale issues.

SK: Oh, it was huge. But here's the way you approached it. And it was wonderful and every single person stepped up to the plate. It's like, here's the beginning, this is the beginning. Everybody knows that this is going to be, whoever doesn't get the job is going to be working next to somebody who's going to be making two or three times amount of money that you are. But it's the foot in the door. There's a benchmark and then we go up like this, then go here. And by God, it worked. It was wonderful. Everybody signed on it was like, okay. We'll do it. Well, they did it. Julie Smith was and she is now working. She's at Harbor House. She came back to work for Women's Center in the Harbor House. But July Smith was the person who took that job. She had been the... I think she was the program manager for the rape victim support team at that time.

JR: Well, and it fits in what you said earlier about how easy it is to say, okay. The really is we can only pay minimum wage. Well, this was saying that maybe your reality but you need to work toward a higher level and that would motivate everybody to go for the money.

SK: So there was not excuse. Julie was the program manager for the sexual assault program. So she was promoted to that and we went from there. And it was a very skewed, but then we did we purposely we all set down and build an incremental, like here's the budget. Here's where we are, here's where we're going to be. And that's how we raised.

JR: And did that literally do what you expect that some people stayed on, who might have felt, I just they all did it.

SK: Nobody failed. Everybody rose to it. Every single person. So they were all ready. They knew it and it really worked. You expect that there will be a percentage that would say, "We'll do it," and when I happen would be I'm out of here. No. everybody. And so they all worked together. That was a unique thing about working at the Women's Center being surrounded by sometimes you got a bit too comfortable with this. Being surrounded and working with people who shared your values and your goals and not just personally but you know, for society. It's for the greater, good and wow, what a wonderful.

JR: My sense in hearing these interviews is that was kept things going through the down times in every organization has ups and downs...

SK: It's true. Absolutely true.

JR: Ok. Let's not leave this if there are any other particular highlights or what was your most challenging?

SK: I scared myself once really hard, I thought I was going to jail. In 1992, the fact that I was convinced I was going to. In 1992, we were subpoenaed by the Marquette County Circuit Court to turn over confidential records of a rape victim and we said, "Nope. We refuse to do it." The State Supreme Court had, it was already at the State Supreme Court level. The man had been convicted of rape and sentenced. He appealed the Court of Appeals, it was already up now to the State Supreme Court. It was on that level, State Supreme Court told Circuit Court to subpoena the records from us for in camera review by the Circuit Court and we refused. No.

JR: And you were grounded in that how, just gut-level or you'd had some...?

SK: No. As an organization, you come to us, we guarantee confidentiality. Whatever you say, is you know. The fact that you are even a client or a service-user is confidential...

JR: And as far as you knew that was within legal bounds to that time and affected whether people would come to you or not.

SK: Absolutely. Absolutely. And had we done that, which would have been just a repugnant thought even know, know to do that, nobody else will come to us. That would just, "Okay. Here's confidential except for when we are subpoenaed. So we refused to do it and the court could have, first thing that came to mind, and I had professionals in the community like, "Oh my god, you kidding me? You can't do that because," not just community but you know, throughout the state, we could have been, we could have received a fine that would have closed us down financially it was a very, very, very, scary time. So it was a fight that we waged and I think...

JR: Did you have to hire legal...?

SK: Hope. Yes. And Priscilla Burnham was...

JR: A lawyer herself

SK: A lawyer herself and she defined us to two other organizations who was convicted raped one after as well. So it was a...

JR: Join together?

SK: Join together kind of thing. But it took two years. It took two years and in 1994, it made case-law in 1994, the Supreme Court founded our favor, it was People v. Stanaway and it was huge but it was very, it shook the organization and it also strengthened the organization.

JR: Did you lose supporters in the community during that time?

SK: No, we gained them, we gained them

JR: That seems also to be the history in this community.

SK: It is absolutely you know. And of course you know, whenever you take a strong stand out in the public, you know. People are like “Oh, my God. You can’t do that because people are going to,” like, no. that isn’t what happened at all, it was the exact opposite. We gained a tremendous amount of support just in every way you can imagine. It was a very good thing so.

JR: You’ve had so exciting times. Now also, I understand, do the arithmetic there, but the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Women’s Center fell during your period? How was that? What was that all about?

SK: The 25th anniversary. Oh my god, that was so wonderful and yeah, to do a big celebration and one of the things we realized immediately was we needed to have everybody involved, I mean, 25 years is huge and so we started doing outreach to people who we knew who involved with the organization and asked them also to bring others along that perhaps, we didn’t want to leave anybody out. And so we met for, it was months on end to develop a program. One of the things that I thought was, that was really telling was... the Women’s Center began at Northern Michigan University and then in 1980, whenever the funding cuts came, they were let go and that caused a lot of hard feelings and the only place to hold, that would hold our celebration of its type was Northern Michigan University.

JR: So return to your past.

SK: And it was, and so people came in, they came in from all parts of the country for this dinner and presentation and program and it was so wonderful to meet so many Founding Mothers, people who had been employed at the Women’s Center in the very beginning, people who had volunteered who you only heard about but, oh my gosh, now they are all here under one roof and Dr. Judy Bailey who was president of the university at the time of the 25th spoke and I could still

see her at the top on the podium and her words were so powerful. She apologized. She said, "First of all I want to apologize to everyone for the Women's Center being discontinued program." You can see the tears around and just have that acknowledged she said, and she said something about, "That wouldn't happen now." Everybody laughed and then she said, that I thought was really important she said, "But I really believe that it was that one particular move that gave the Women's Center its legs," and she was right. If it had stayed under the umbrella of the university, it would not have gone on to do, provide the program and the services.

JR: Become as broad based in the community.

SK: Exactly. Exactly and be able make their own decisions in their, whatever directions they wanted to go in. Yeah. She was absolutely right. That was a huge moment. That was a huge moment for everybody. I will always be grateful for her.

JR: And setting that out. I mean...

SK: Setting it all up absolutely...

JR: That's come through in the all of these interviews people have felt it was very sad, very hard. And I think there was regret even at the time among many people at Northern, but whatever...

SK: It was, it was, it was. You know, just a little anecdotal thing, I was having lunch was somebody at the Vierling restaurant one day in the 90s and Dr. Ken Kelley who was in the social work program came up to my table and there was a woman with him and he said, he introduced me to her and he said, "I just wanted two of you to meet because she has to work at Northern," and so she started to tell me that she worked in the office across the hall from the original Women's Center. And when the programing got cut and the Women's Center office closed, she was working you know, like in eyesight of the Women's Center door and a janit... somebody in... on staff the university came along and unscrewed that plaque that said Women's Center and threw it in the waste basket. And it so offended her, she got up and she went got the plaque and put it in her purse and decided she had all those years and she would only give it back if she felt that it would always be...

JR: [Whispers] Be respected.

SK: Everything would be fine. She pulled it out of purse and gave it to me. After talk, she had some questions to ask me about, what our mission was now, she was tough. But she cared so much about organization, the Women's Center itself and that had touched her so personally that so...

JR: That is a wonderful thing that have on record.

SK: So she gave me the plaque, I brought back to the center, it's on the... we put it up in it's over the room, the large room where the board directors meets and staff have meetings too. So that's the original.

JR: That's something I didn't clarify with you either, you were there after the move to South Front Street. So you in the quote new building...

SK: I was in the new building. They moved in... '85? '82-3? I don't remember. I don't come on until '91. So when I came in, I don't remember what grant we got. It was, a part of the grant was to improve, to make some improvements in the building and so we went through and got new furniture for the front of the office, everything had been donated. It was... you operate on a shoestring, one of the downsides was you walking in, your feeling bad anyway, you walk in as a service user, and everything else is shabby. So you are feeling shabby and everything else looks, I mean, it was clean. But it was old and worn, and so one of the things we did was concentrate on that part, what's the first thing that somebody sees when they come in and that it's bright and it's hopeful all of that. Well, part of it was too, we divided up our offices we made some different spaces and that was to accommodate the additional programming that we had as well. And also some of the, as I remember the little offices didn't have like the wall didn't go all the way up to the ceiling, you know, and these were confidential...

JR: I would say that would be an area you'd need privacy.

SK: Yeah. Absolutely and so we made an improvement and some additions but...

JR: Was the back of it used then for the bingo? Was that still going on?

SK: That was going on, that provided a lot of revenue, you know, everything changes. Native American games then they started bingo that divided up, you have so much of a base and so our revenue started to decline and you know, you just have to... it's like this, as you said. And you

just have to adjust. That's when we started the Women's Center resale shop that helped not just our, we were always getting donations from the public, they were very, very, very, everybody's always been very generous for families, women, usually women and their children and so we were able to take those donations provide for our families but also anything leftover then would be sold to the public, turned out to be pretty good. So we did that to help, there have been times where we would rent space to other organizations within, you know, within the building to rent space to pull in revenue too. So we didn't want to just operate or just to rely upon grants that are, my god,

JR: One day

SK: It's one year to the next. It's do you? Don't you? So we were trying to, not trying to, we did. We made it much more of a stream of funding, or more solid revenue string.

JR: One of topics that I don't think it's come up into interviews today was, did you make concentrated efforts in terms of diversity reaching out to Native American in the community or the other students there might be traditional.

SK: Absolutely, absolutely, yeah. I remember clearly looking back I think wow, things have changed so much. But we wanted to make sure that gay and lesbian people would be comfortable coming to Women's Center that they, everybody. It's like, we sat down and we thought about what are the barriers? What are the barriers to anybody coming to the organization? Men wanting to be, needing out services. So what can we do differently so that how could we get the world out more than there for everybody? Everybody regardless of...So at one point, I remember we had a little sticker that was on one of the counselor's windows. It was rainbow, it was a rainbow triangle so that somebody could come in, it wasn't obvious but they would know that this is safe place for if you were lesbian or gay. It wasn't necessarily safe in this community or targets and so this is a safe place where you're safe.

JR: And would you do things like that let counseling staff at Northern know that? I mean, you were outreaching all the time.

SK: Absolutely. Absolutely.

JR: With social workers and counselors?

SK: Everybody. Yeah. You know, it's huge non-profit community as well. So we worked with so many other non-profits formally and informally, worked with law-enforcement, prosecution. Everybody, everybody.

JR: And that's where as interviewer, one of the common themes is how this community, you mention law-enforcement, in some areas, it took years for the law enforcement to be willing to work and look at that point of view, and it sounds like here as soon as people in the prosecutor's office and in the providers of law enforcement knew there was an issue and knew they needed help. They were willing to work with you.

SK: Right. Well, they were. And what are the other things that is so complex is we have these tight relationships that had already been established long before I came on.

JR: Okay, early on.

SK: Working with all the different law-enforcement agencies working with prosecution's office or prosecutor's office working with the Judiciary. But then so you have this strong relationships which is really helpful when at all goes upside-down. So for instance, let's say that the Women's Center is on the opposite side of a, let's say that women is being prosecuted for killing her abuser. We're advocating for her, that puts us on direct line of conflict with law enforcement. What was important was that we all understood each other's role in the process. And even when we...

JR: Respectful

SK: Respectfully, it got tight sometimes you know, we have some really sticky times but we were always able to come back together and make up and this is what we all do. This is what we all do. So in that vein, and it came from when I was part of that Michigan, *The Women in Leadership* project that let us then into another, I'm sure was the Families in Transition. I can be corrected. Where at the pilot program was to work, there had always been families in trans. There was a Families in Transition program, but had not included the domestic violence.

JR: Explain to me families and transition. What are you referring to? It's not clear to me.

SK: It's helping families get back on their feet and a lot of...

JR: After crisis situation?

SK: Yeah, a crisis situation but it didn't include the domestic violence piece. And here's when we got brought and it was great. It was a wonderful pilot. It was an experiment, working with the child welfare system. Historically, child welfare and domestic violence program people didn't get along because there was a mistrust and it was because of misunderstanding. Because we didn't communicate, where child welfare thought that domestic violence program were letting children that, for instance, if a mother was abusing children, neglecting children, we wouldn't report because blah blah blah...

JR: You were standing for the mother theoretically.

SK: Right. Likewise, same thing. We thought child welfare people by we I mean the Women's Center but that whole program, child welfare people were being punitive towards the mother who's protecting her children from the abuser. So it was a lot of clatter, a lot of chatter around that. So we were forced to sit at the table and it was wonderful. It was, it absolutely changed everything. That was a pilot. That was a pilot project then that. It was a wonderful learning experience and it built a lot of good relationships too with other organizations it was...

JR: Do you feel of that would be an example of our local community doing it? Or with those kind of conversations taking place all over the state out at the time to improve.

SK: It was all of the state. It was all of the state. But then our experience was on the local level. So that was funded, again, that was during a time where there was more money had been allocated. There was more money been allocated to the Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board to VOCA, the victims of crime act. You know, there was just more money to be had. So one of the relationships that was built out of that, it was tremendous amount of networking at that time because we could, and one of the relationships it came out one of the projects for us was with a researcher, a Michigan State researcher, who had been part of one of those programs and she contacted me and it was after we were approached by the state and, can't remember the exact year, I'd have to look, to consider taking over the administration of the domestic violence program in Iron Mountain they covered Dickinson and Iron Counties and my board agreed to do that. So I think we had been administering that program. That was huge. Had are a lot of work here and it was well-established program. It was very strong director I think the reason that it be, that it was successful that we were able to, all of succeed in that was a very strong director and very strong staff over there. It was tricky. Going into other community where

they don't want you really, the organization was fine but mixing two communities sometimes can be... Yeah. So, but it worked, it turned out really well because of the board of directors who had courage to step forward and say, yes. We will. The program was in danger of being closed. We weren't going to let that happen so again, it's everybody working together for the...you know for the greater good. So we got approached, got a phone call from somebody who I made contact with, formed a relationship with during one of the other projects and her name was Dr. Lori Post and she wanted to, wanted to know if we were interested in going after a grant from the CDC, Centers for Disease Control. It was huge. It was a one and a half million dollar grant and most people laughed at us that we'd even, but we knew her success rate, we had met her team, we had met members of our team, they were very professional, very good at what they did, and very committed to ending violence against women.

JR: What was the goal of this team?

SK: It then there, she was in the...she worked with intimate partner violence but the goal was a community-coordinated response domestic violence. We already had that, we'd done informally working together, this would give us the ability to have in more formalized structure and everybody sitting around the table. All points of view with the same goal. It would be a huge learning curve, would be prickly. As those things are, but if you have the same objective, the same goal, then you're okay.

JR: You will find a way.

SK: You figured it out. You figured it out. And one of our strength was we were administering two programs. The one for Marquette-Alger and one for the Dickinson-Iron County, so there could be a comparison, all confidential. Strictly confidential. And so that data being collected to compare what works. What's your best? You know. A formalized structure, what's the difference in the communities? What difference does it make to victims and their children when there is a formalized structure in place when you have a formalized, coordinated response to domestic violence as compared to not a formalized. We were formalized, the other program was not. So we think that was one of the reasons. First of all, brilliant proposal that they wrote out I'll tell ya. It was amazing...

JR: Did you have to do the paperwork?

SK: Oh, we all did it. We did a piece of it but it was really Dr. Post and her team who did that, I mean, everybody had little pieces they had to write. But it was her coordination and we were...

JR: Excuse me, so again the board made the decision

SK: They let us do it, yeah.

JR: To go ahead. I mean, I'm seeing this across the board. Oh my goodness.

SK: It's the courage of the board. You know, but also at that time, we had gone into not just term limits, that was, talked about that process. That was very painful and historic and wonderful to be part of when the board voted to do that. It was hard for everybody, involved and it felt like....

JR: But it produced results.

SK: Produced huge results. And then he went to, when they voted to do that took three years to do it because they divided up those number of people and then you know, and then was like two, two, and two and would cycle off. So it was more formalized that it became more formalized structure and we also adopted something, it's called the Carver Model of Governance Policy. So it was very pain in the neck to put together. It was hard, everybody worked really hard to it. But once it was in place, it gave clear guidelines as to what the board does and what the director does and does not do. So it was a wonderful way in which to operate. And so there were no, it made us more streamlined because you weren't held up with the minutia. It was like, here's what you can do and here's what you can't do. It was more like here's what you can't do. Anything else as long as it's within your, within the mission and goals, the values and the ethics of the organization, do it.

JR: And you were still operating on that strategic plan?

SK: And that the strategic plan was that the board went through, that planted the seed for these changes. One of the changes then was the Carver-model that became, that was down the line that we had found that and went with that. So by the time we, and that was really helpful and our, all of that, that formalization...

JR: To getting this,

SK: The fact that we're finally paying people professional wages, professional level of wages, all of those things. And the commitment of the board members who all those years, all of that came together, I believe, and us being chosen as one of the recipients for that for the CDC project. I remember when the call came through, I didn't believe it. I didn't believe it, like "No." Like Dr. Post come up, we had gone down there, Gail Nelson who was program director at the time then became executive director when I left. Mary K. Johnson who was our finance director, the three of us went down to East Lansing during that final push to get that proposal in, and we had to crawl practically under the door of UPS to next day air it, that's how tight it was. That's how tight it was. In the car, going to UPS, we're going so fast down to Lansing and the UPS at the airport and we had to get to the airport for next-day air. It was that tight and everybody worked hard, hard, hard on this proposal this thing. That we were going little bit too fast and hit those air, those train tracks and momentarily we were little bit airborne. And it was a big Buick, I remembered that, and came down like that. Oh my God! It was a ride for life. We got there and I mean, they're closing that overhead and we're....

JR: But you knew how to operate with UPS.

SK: We... begging too. Begging part of it and it was all those little things that came into play. The women who was the head of the...because it was after hours. I mean, this was like a squeak but I knew how they operate. So yeah, that was funny. I never thought about that.

JR: And it was a woman?

SK: I got that, "Uh-huh." And I sort of said, "Please!" And she had great sense of humor and also cared. And so she took it. She had to take that. So there were all those little pieces. At any rate, so we, everything that the Women's Center had done up until till that time was all part of why we got that.

JR: Why you got that. Now, as a citizen and following the news quite carefully, I don't remember knowing that you got that. Well, those kind of things within the Women's Center kind of downplayed, I mean, not within you but...

SK: No. it was, it was... I remember we did a, released it to the paper, I think there was something on TV.

JR: So you were proud enough and it was okay to share.

SK: We were very proud, yeah. It was, we were very, very proud of it. It was a tremendous amount of paperwork. I remember and then a lot of it failed to the finance director who said, "Oh my god." You know, it's federal. Federal grants. A whole lot of reporting but it was wonderful. It was well worth it.

JR: And how long and did you see this through in your own administration in it?

SK: It was for years. I left in the final year. So Gail Nelson is the one who was there when it closed out.

JR: So that was an easy, a good transition though because she was aware?

SK: It was a really good... Oh, sure. Sure.

JR: And what, I guess bringing this part to a close. What led to your leaving that job, moving on to some another?

SK: I was tired. I remember, I remember clearly in my head, thinking and cause I just absolutely loved what I did. Saying to whomever, whatever at, please let me know when it's time to go. May I see, whatever, because it's a very high burnout, very high rate of burnout that kind of work. You just work so hard until, you know, and it came on the heels of being in a meeting someplace and somebody said, somebody who is really good. "That's not going to work, we've already tried that." And I went, "Uh-oh! That's burnout." That's just, you know, [makes frustrated noise], kind of thing. And that was early on, and I remember clearly being at a meeting then, board meeting and somebody came up with...

JR: An interesting idea?

SK: Interesting idea and inside my head I thought [Whispering], "Oh for Christ's sakes, already did...uh-oh!" [Makes popping noise] So I took that as my answer of, "What, what?" You're not open. But I was tired. And it was just...

JR: It was time.

SK: It was time, but also you know, I think that certain people are in organizations with different steps, different, as you're revolving. So that was my time and we also knew that it was, our next

goal was a new shelter. We were bursting at the seams so the domestic violence, the shelter that we had, we needed the new shelter, there had been talk, serious talk about why are we keeping this place a secret? Why do we keep location of domestic violence shelter a secret? Who you are protecting? You're protecting the bad guys. This is community who, if somebody, the community should own and be proud of. You know, you're going out to the public and you're asking them for money to support the domestic violence shelter and it's a concept, because the only time you know what the location of the domestic violence shelter is if you need the services. So it was that whole philosophical difference too. A lot of times, you know, the location would be shelter. You as a community member can help keep it safe. You keep an eye out. You keep a watch. You help with the yard, you do this, you do that. All of that. And so all that was going on at the same time. So the philosophical changes, the fact that we needed a new structure, I was too tired. I mean, that was not going to be my...

JR: Your experience lead you to know what kind of energy it would take to move on.

SK: Yeah. Because I had seen other organizations go through it and that's great. And it takes years. It's nothing that happens in six months. Huge campaign, huge everything and you have to be hundred percent. And it wasn't hundred percent, I was tired. I wasn't a hundred percent

JR: So did you find yourself backing off entirely because I know you went into a new career mode. Have you maintained an interest in the Women's Center or you've been involved?

SK: Oh, yes. I'm still... so the way that I was best able to, you know. And it's new, well not new. Been doing it for now, for a little over ten years. I'm a business owner, and in fact, my experience in the Women's Center kind of let me to this too, I own a pottery and art studio and thing that I know is the all the time, I wasn't looking for it. But when I look back, when women and their families were in the shelter, who come out of horrible, horrible situations and it's not easy to live in, now they've left everything that they know and now they're in temporary shelter. That's hard in itself. That's stressful. When they were doing art projects or doing whatever, the stress left. I saw it over and over. I wasn't looking for it, I just saw it and I think, "Wow, look at this women who had physical, emotional injuries and the kids," you know. Same stress level.

JR: But the creativity issue.

SK: Right. And so they have family, family nights, family days, they'd do different projects as a group and I'd see it over and over again. And so part of the reason, one of the reasons that I started these business, I mean. I went looking for an industry, I didn't start this industry. This was an existing, but I want looking for something that everybody could, would be able to do that. So it's you come and you have fun and your body will not let you be stressed while you are doing this. It just, you do one or the other baby, you can't do to both, and so all of that led to, because I wasn't ready to stop working. I just needed to not...

JR: Shifted?

SK: Yeah. And the organization needed some new blood. The organization needed new energy. It was, it worked out the best. So every year we do a huge fundraiser for the Women's center

JR: Within your business?

SK: Within my business, we call it Diva Night for the Women's Center. And it was started by, the seed was planted in my brain by a performer. And NMU has the rich history of their drag show which is gone on for, oh gosh, I don't know how many years. I'm forgetting how many years. Many years it's up to, I think this last one that they had on campus, 15,000 people attended it. Campus, community, it was huge. Well, Joey Black, one of the performers and someone who'd been MC'd for years came into my shop one day and said, just kidding. There was a high-heeled shoe, a ceramic high-heeled shoes. Joey said, "I want that. I need to paint that." Well, he became one of our regular painters and we became friends and Joey Black is his stage name, said to me, "I really wanted to help the Women's Center. How about if we do this? I want to do something to help women and children. How about if we..." And I was like, "Oh my god, yes!" So on that night, I think we had just had our Eighth Annual. The, we sell tickets and all the money goes to the Women's Center. And I've already sold two tables out for next year. It doesn't happen till the end of November. And those two tables were sold that night. It's huge. It's bigger than, oh, this we had a three entertainers, Joey got...this is Joey, Tabby, Abby who were here this year, so we have entertainment, we have a pottery auction, everything's donated for the auction, and all the money and the food is donated by area restaurants and it's huge. It's huge. We just pack'em in and we have the best time and so then we give all that, give all that money to the Women's Center. And... [Speaking over eachother]

JR: It must be nice for you to have fun doing it, as it posed to having the issues that you had to deal with. It's a transition.

SK: And so it is. But although, when I was at the Women's Center, the one thing that we really found to be very important and supported was humor in the workplace. So that's having fun, stress-reliever, so you could do, it's important work. You don't have to be serious all the time. It's important work. And so that, all of that. So that was that transition. So there's...

JR: So you are still in the touch with a Women's Center.

SK: Yes. Sure. I am seed there and I was just recently on the board for year, went back on the board for...

JR: Are they still following that term limit issue?

SK: Yes, yes. Well, they come through a difficult period and but they, and they had to rebuild their term limits. Whole new board. Rebuilding the term limits but yes, very healthy way and progressive way run in the organization and Martha Parks is the chair the board again. So then she came back on, the Founding Mothers came back on during a time of need, and oh my gosh. That's gigantic!

JR: To me, and I've mentioned this in the other interviews because those have been Founding Mothers. It speaks to the passion, commitment, and that the mission is as important today in our community as it was 40 years ago.

SK: It is. And the, one of the...

JR: It takes different turns and different focus but,

SK: Well, and it wasn't just that. It was, I mean. In addition to that, the Founding Mothers became the new board and were members of the new board along with Martha Parks who had been an employee at the Women's Center years ago, who then had gone to, was on the board and provided very strong leadership and transitioning to more formalized structure and Matt Wiese who was at the prosecutor's office. So here we have again, these different people, organizations working together and...

JR: And I think again, I'm interjecting a personal opinion but the fact that they are back but they've had these breaks. It's not like you were describing a need for turnover which most...you know, they are bringing back their passion with some new focus. Cause they evolved themselves.

SK: It's together, their passion, their focus. They worked together, years ago, they maintain friendships they know how to, I mean some of the meetings that I attended as then a board member, which was a challenge for me to be a board member instead of the director and it was a good challenge to have, and so I learned something new but to watch them how [Snaps fingers] Boom-boom-boom... because they can move right along and they...

JR: Their experience?

SK: Their experience that they could, I thought, "Oh, this is wonderful. They can disagree then move on like, there you go." And because this is who they are, and this is how they operate. And those are the gifts that they gave to the organization. And for me, there were times I would sit in a meeting and I would look around, I'm like, "Oh my god, pinch me!" That I'm actually in the same room, at a table being part of discussions with people who were my, you know. That I looked up to for so many years for doing what they did in the way in which they did it and all of whom went on to do other wonderful things and help out. So yeah, pretty cool.

JR: It's pretty cool. Now in conclusion, is there anything we haven't touched on that you'd like to make sure is on the record?

SK: Sure, but I don't remember what those things are. There was something during the timeline but so much happened. You know, the Women's Center is a constantly changing organization. Oh, that's one thing I want to say was the mission statement, I was there during the time that they changed the mission statement which was challenging. But the Women's Center changed the mission to reflect the changing society. So they are always changing, growing, one of the discussions that we had was...Let me go back to, when I was in the part of *the Women and Leadership* project, when we talked about the feminist movement and we were challenged, the whole room was challenged by three of the women who were there or women of color and challenged us by saying, "Yeah. You know what? That was the white women's movement." I was so...oh boy. I mean they didn't say it like that, that's was how I heard it. That wasn't our

experience with that, that was a negative and that was huge. It was a watershed event for me personally. First I got mad, it's that whole thing about the truth will set you free, but first it'll really piss you off. That's what it was for me. How can anybody say that but it resonated, it was absolutely true. So now, so to be more inclusive and to understand what, you know. Everybody does the best that they can at a certain point time, and then you have to be open to change and maybe that wasn't, you know. You need to be doing things differently to be more inclusive which was along with what you were saying about, we talked about the gay and lesbian and men being what are we missing here? What are the wrong signals we're giving to people that they couldn't come for services? One of the latest ones was a topic about the word feminist, or about the issue of the word feminist, and so the board is talking about, okay. We need to have, at least when I was there, I'm pretty sure we are still doing it. We need to have, you know what you want younger, you want younger people. You want younger women involved in the organization? Well, let's... to recruit younger people and to make them feel that this is their place too. Then you have to listen to why, maybe some of them, and there's a... No, I'm not a feminist. Like it's the F word, you know, kind of thing. Where, and their values are all Feminist values but their experiences are different. They don't have the history. They didn't come into that time when we all did and they don't have the same.

JR: And we've talked about that part of the reason the Women's Center needs to be up front..

SK: Heck yeah!

JR: is to not take these things for granted.

SK: Nope, No! NO!

JR: Somebody had to get it so that you don't even know what's the big deal anymore.

SK: You know, this last election when all of these, when you know so-called real, War on Women you know, where some younger women were like "What are you upset about?" "What? Are you kidding me? It wasn't always like this!" So I think it became a re-involvement of women who had been through that to get a danger of being too complacent. You know, hey. It wasn't always was like this, wasn't always like this. And so to developed new friendships and connections and have those conversations with younger women and so you know, what's your point of view? What's your experience?

JR: And this is why I'm pleased that you and the Founding Mothers and others we're going to interview are willing to share. Because we need this on the record. The struggles, the ups and downs.

SK: You know, it's the, and as you and I talked about previously, some of it you can't talk about. It's not part of this because there were some struggles just don't go on, not to sound cryptic but some of the pain, the sacrifices, and the things that went on, that go on within any movement, you don't write that down, you don't write that down. It's just, but that's the real, that's also part of the real, the guts of what it took and what it takes to keep going.

JR: Exactly. Thank you, Sue Kensington, executive director and still active community partner with all of these. Thank you.

SK: Thank you, thanks! I love it!

END OF INTERVIEW