

**Fitzroy History Society Oral History Project 2015-2017**

**Transcript of interview**

**Jenny Wills (Interview conducted by Meg Lee and Rosa Simonelli for Fitzroy History Society) Thursday 6 November 2019.**

**Fitzroy’s First Social Planner**

We are here with Jenny Wills, the first social planning officer of the City of Fitzroy So, Jenny can you tell us a bit about yourself? What brought you to Fitzroy?

Interviewee: I think at the time I became employed by council I think I was actually living in Fitzroy then and I had - I was a working-class girl from the western suburbs - but having gone to Melbourne University where I studied arts and social work. I, having left home at 17 or something, lived around the inner city and I was living in Fitzroy working at the Phillip Institute of Technology, which is now probably called something else…I studied social work Melbourne University as it was the only course in the State, closely safeguarded by the Professional Association. So, to commence a social work course a lot of accreditations for the course was needed, or a lot of preliminary work.

Phillip Institute started a course with Frances Donovan, who is now not with us anymore. Frances was the guru in social administration. So, I don't know where I was working at the time, I had previously worked at the Brotherhood of St Laurence and, anyway, I went to work at the Phillip Institute because I thought this was a great opportunity to work with someone who's the expert in the field with the new school of Social Work which was a terrific experience.

I did that for a couple of years and then the position came up at Fitzroy council. So, I thought, this is for me [laughs], and so I applied for the position and luckily, ha, was appointed.

Facilitator 2: Yes, what year was that?

Interviewee: That was in 1974 as a Social Planner.

Facilitator 2: So, what is your background to that?

Facilitator 2: We understand that this is perhaps the first social planning officer to be employed by a local council.

Interviewee: That's what people say, it was one of the first, if not the first. What had happened, particularly I think to Fitzroy, although there'd been an involvement with major agencies and all the communities’ groups like the Fitzroy Residents' Association which was started up in response to some of the major issues in the area, housing being one of them.

Although council itself had come from a period in the early days of rejecting paying any money into welfare, they were moving along by noticing that its population was changing. There were migrants moving into the area, which for a while it tried to ignore - this is going back early days. Then it decided that it would accept the situation- it appointed a social worker, Anita Joubert.

Then, I think the high-rise development in South Fitzroy, (current Atherton Gardens Estate) as council had been positive about that and had been working with the Housing Commission. In fact, I think they donated land or funds into it. But the impact of that, once they realised this was a housing area that probably had about 500 people in it was going to be four 20-storey tower blocks, with maybe 2000 people.

Interviewee: This was going to be a significant challenge. At the same time, talk was about the old guard and the new guard councillors as council was changing. The progressive young Labor people had moved into Fitzroy and were extremely attached to it. They bought homes and and ‘done up’ themselves. There was a great, positive feeling and the need to do things.

It was very interesting, I think, because what council decided to do with that happening was to say well, we need to do some planning because this is going to be a big impact. Not only that impact, but what do we do for the future with all sorts of things? Because at that time communities were almost bereft of services, it was not just Fitzroy.

Rosa Simonelli: They were. I mean, in the previous 30 years Fitzroy had nothing and nothing was happened, so it is interesting that it should happen at that particular point in time.

Interviewee: Yes.

Facilitator 2: Sort of an awakening of social conscious in some ways?

Interviewee: Yes. It was, it was. One of the interesting things about it, being the person that was appointed, was at that time council said that they would pay for this position. The other positions, there weren't many of them, employed by councils around the State, and Victoria was ahead of any other state in municipal work. Council had taken advantage of a subsidy that was paid from the State Health Department. Which meant that the person had to spend a certain amount of their time working with older people.

But council said ‘no’, we want the person to plan, and we do not want the person doing casework. Casework had got to mean, something negative. What also happened at the same time as my appointment was that the Brotherhood of St Laurence which previously had a social service bureau, was changing. There was a lot of change taking place in Fitzroy, a lot of innovation.

The Brotherhood in its wisdom decided it would close their social service bureau where people came not only from Fitzroy, but from all over Melbourne- not just around the inner city, but from places around the State - to seek assistance. They provided material aid and counselling services. So, at the time that they said we are not going to have anyone doing casework, neither was the Brotherhood. This meant there was a great big hole left, really.

In response we decided to set up a Social Planning Office, we had social workers and nurses working so we decided to operate a system of sharing workloads with someone who would always be on duty, recording cases.

This meant that if anyone walked in off the street or was referred, someone with counselling training was able to assist them. That was a sensible move, it really was.

Facilitator 2: Can we unpack that a bit, Jenny?

Interviewee: Yes, sure.

Facilitator 2: What was the nature of change for the Brotherhood? I mean did high demand in services make them alter their services.

Interviewee: I think it was, they viewed what they were doing as very progressive with Corrie Benn. There is a building now, a centre, named after her in Fitzroy.

Interviewee: Connie led this innovation because the Brotherhood had been running material aid for years. When I worked for the Brotherhood - before I went to University, I worked for The Forgotten People appeal, terrible name.

The Brotherhood was consistently raising money for material aid, Connie decided with the Brotherhood, that if they could focus their energies on -not a select group, but a group of families who came from their caseload and work with them through a team of people. This was the opportunity to help lift those people out of whatever circumstances they found themselves perhaps even entrenched in.

The Brotherhood with their skilled staff, focussed on, I think, 60 families. The problem for them, as I see it, but good on them for trying, was the cost for professional staffing involved and the intensity of it, you couldn't really replicate it unless you had a lot of money. Therefore, other agencies around the State were not able to adopt it.

It was a good idea and I really do not know where the lessons of it were recorded and what came out of it.

Facilitator 2: Was this at about the time that the Brotherhood was starting to think about advocacy for change to look at the source of the problems of families? Like eradication of poverty.

Interviewee: It was probably leading into that. It was probably at the same stage as their program which was quite progressive, in childcare. Barbara Spalding, who became very well known in that area, was working for the Brotherhood then and piloted the family day care scheme. But the family day care scheme, as they ran it, was not just women looking after children in their own homes but at a base that the women could come to.

Women who might have three or four littlies could visit a centre where there were professional staff, so women and children were not isolated. But when the Commonwealth decided to fund this scheme, guess what went?

Facilitator 2: The women?

Interviewee: No, the Centre. Family day care schemes were not funded around the country because it was seen as being cheaper for women to look after children in their own homes. Fitzroy was without a centre that could support the women. Barbara had been instrumental in talking to council about childcare. When I was appointed one of the first things that I looked at first was the childcare needs of the area.

Facilitator 2: So, when you started as the social planner what was the nature of the services?

Interviewee: There were traditional kindergartens. There had been innovative steps taken, there had been a childcare centre which was going to cater for the needs of migrant families in the area. There was in the aged care area some domiciliary supports and housekeeping services for people. There was a meal service and counsellors were involved in a firewood service where they would all volunteer once a year to cut firewood to give to the pensioners.

So, we looked at good ideas and the sorts of services but there was no comprehensive overview looking at urgent needs and what was the best way to meet them.

Facilitator 2: Was that your starting point? What did you see as the needs of the community?

Interviewee: Well, it was interesting in the childcare area as the council service was a priority with all those families moving into the high rise. But it is interesting doing that research because people only know what they know, really. If you say to them, say to any of us, what do you think you need and they will say, ‘I'll have another one of them’.

So, I went and talked to the centres and families using the services, this was a nice inroad into different parts of the community. One of the key services that had started was the advisory service in Fitzroy. They had undertaken a lot of research in setting up this network advisory service. We did not have a citizen's advice bureau, but this network provided inroads into all parts of the community and those people were seen as being part of that network.

I talked to a lot of people and had them to reflect on what services were offered and how they could improve and what real gaps there were. Because we didn't have occasional care and anything in the after- school area and no emergency care. There was really a class divide, I think, to be fair, but people might disagree with me.

Although the ‘kinders’ had been established initially by organisations that wanted to cater for low-income families. Kindergartens had developed as something that met the needs of more affluent families. Because it was sessional care it was often the parents or, let's be honest, the mothers – who weren't in the workforce or were working part time. So, to summarise there was the kindergarten service, sessional care, trained kindergarten teachers.

Then we had full day care which came with the pressure of the migrant families needing the service but often the staffing was not the same. They were carers rather than educators. That was a problem, there were two levels of service people were getting. Why were working class migrant families missing out? That was one of the big questions. These were the sorts of issues.

So, we all pooled that together. The good thing about Fitzroy and what council wanted and what I was interested in, was working with the community. We did not do anything without being with the community. Participation and empowerment were the way we operated.

Facilitator 2: Did that go the other way as well? Working with council and working with all powers that will be supporting in the community?

Interviewee: Yes, it was particularly good. I think Fitzroy was quite a unique development in that you had very strong connection between the Council and the Councillors, staff and in our case the people working in the social policy/human services area, and the community. There were always exchanges going on.

The residents began to think, this is a good council it was able to develop the local democracy and were feeling very positive that council was listening to them, that the people, that staff, were listening to them, and with the idea that we could do things together. I think that collaboration was important.

So, to break the mould of the the traditional services (although the childcare cooperative was different because that was run by the families), we had representatives from the migrant families on the steering committee.

Facilitator 2: Was Winsome McCaughey involved?

Interviewee: No, she was involved in community childcare, and I was on the committee for that.

Facilitator 2: They established childcare centres that had parental input, which was an innovation, correct?

Interviewee: Winsome returned to Australia from living in the United States and came back to witness a Labor Government had been elected and there was a chance to think new things. It was one of our influences. Saying, if we are going to work with people and people are going to control their own services then we need to have a model that will enable them to do that. So, the cooperative model we proposed and advocated was community childcare, based in Fitzroy.

The parents were fully supportive with the submission - we didn't get funded for everything we asked for, you never do, but we got funding for a centre, one in each of the Wards, and the idea was that they would be developed and registered as cooperatives and the parents would be the operating committee. But the beauty of it all was that we said in the submission - and this was funded - that what we wanted a team of people, professional people, to work with the parents and to work with other centres.

Because some centres, like Isabel Henderson, or the ‘kinders’ organisation would have access to a social worker, but other centres would not, so it was inequitable for the people. We decided that a social worker would be in our team, a nurse and two trained kindergarten staff - one of whom was bilingual which was especially useful. Mario was Chilean and Spanish speaking - and would work with all the centres.

Fitzroy Council said they not only want things planned they also want them coordinated. This was a part of my job. So, we set up a whole lot of structures that brought everybody together. I must have been to a million meetings in my life, I am still doing it, I'm retired![Laughter]

Interviewee: There was a committee for everything, but people were cooperative. They collaborated; they came together with people with lots of expertise. The worker in charge of the Brotherhood Centre was a highly trained and experienced kindergarten staff member who was great mates with one of the kindergarten teachers on our team.

People gave a lot of their own time, really, to make things work for the city, which was really interesting. Those structures continued; they may not be there now, but they operated for quite a few years.

Facilitator 1: Some of the childcare centres continue to work this way?

Interviewee: Oh, right. So it was that sense of you can do it together and do not set anybody up, because that is the hard thing. If I had been a parent and someone said, ‘I am going to give you this childcare centre and here are the keys, go to it’. I would've said ‘Oh!’ It's a lot when you're working all day and then you have to come to get your kids.’

Facilitator 2: Yes, that's right.

Interviewee: But to have people you could call upon was beneficial. So that team, worked revolving and rotating around the city, worked really, really well. The other thing that happened which assisted was that at some stage the Labor Government introduced this scheme called the Regional Employment Development Scheme, RED Scheme, and you were able to apply to get funding for these workers. I cannot remember the number - people used to laugh at us, I'm laughing myself now in that we got about 20 workers, some of them had training, some of them did not. A lot of them were bilingual and they worked on the various projects around the city. Half a dozen of them were working for the Advisory Service and I think at that stage we had them working on a multilingual community paper. Others were working with childcare.

On the high-rise estate, Atherton Gardens, we had the most skilled community development worker I have ever known, Marg Welsh. She was employed, it must have been through the Housing Commission, and was working on the estate in the recreational area. She started working with us once I met her and brought her on to work with the women living on the high-rise estate because we wanted them included in everything.

Marg worked with a group of them who then undertook to talk to other women, and they talked to other women, so we could bring them together. They become responsive if someone interested in them was reaching out. So, there were all sorts of initiatives.

Any time there was a scent of money somewhere we would say to council, ‘Can we put in for this?’ Council became very strong in that it wasn't paying for everything. They said we'll pay your wages, but everything else, anything that you develop, had to be funded by the State or the Commonwealth. We do not want to be double charging the people of Fitzroy paying for things which our central government should be providing.

It didn't always work out like that, but it was a good position, for council to take as it meant there was lots of advocacy around for appropriate funding for services.

Facilitator 2: How did the social policy development occur? Who were the players in that?

Interviewee: The need for the policies came from the way in which we were working. We were trying to operate a very progressive model in Fitzroy, and this developed as we worked. We tried to extrapolate from what was happening on the ground to broader policies and then to influence those policies at the State and at the Federal level. So, there was a lot of social action and advocacy that went with that, they meshed in a way.

Our staff were of a very high calibre as people were seen as being in the forefront in their professions. Derryn Wilson, was our social worker for aged services was seen for many years as probably the number one worker in aged care policy in local government in Victoria. Derryn's retired now, but she went on to work for the Municipal Association of Victoria and was involved in advising the State Government and Commonwealth Government.

So, if you're going to end ad hockery and just say, ‘Ok let's do this next week’ you must look at the appropriate policies that we should be following through as we develop and plan for new services within the area? So, it really sorts of underpinned all that we did. We consciously worked in reflecting what we were doing, and that stemmed from the beginning.

When the office was set up, council in its wisdom said, ‘Well we're on about planning and we're on about coordination.’ Fitzroy was seen as a bit of an experiment for agencies in that way. For example, someone at the State level would get an idea, or someone in a government organisation and we will test that out in Fitzroy. It was a bit of the attitude.

So, council said, ‘What we'll do is operate the social planning office as, a ‘one stop shop’ -we'll bring agencies together. I mean at this stage the Commonwealth - this is how long ago it was - the Commonwealth Department of Social Security, I think it was, was keen to get its services information out to migrant communities.

They thought that they could work with Fitzroy to do that. So, council invited them to be based at the social planning office. Not fulltime, but they accepted that and thought it was a good idea and they worked closely with the advisory service in getting appropriate multilingual information out to the area.

Agencies, like the Commonwealth was one, the Clarendon Clinic - in East Melbourne was interested about how it could serve the people of Fitzroy in a better way. It was the mental health clinic for the area with psychiatrists and psychologists and social workers and so they came and were part of the social planning office. Things that grew from that was our work in the high- rise estate with low- income women with low morale and not many skills, and how do you move out of that?

So, we said, ‘Well, why don't we look at, individual casework is not the answer in this social context, ‘Why don't we bring the women together as a group and let them design a program, and we'll run it and support them’. Again, with a team of - it a bit of a pattern now that I am talking about it, with a team of professionals around them. Clarendon Clinic was part of that.

Facilitator 1: This requires an enormous amount of energy and motivation, Jenny.

Interviewee: There really was an energy in the place.

Facilitator 1: What kept your inspiration going? What kept you positive and creative?

Interviewee: Well, I think everyone reinforced everyone else because there was a sense that you could do things. Once we got funding from the Commonwealth for the children's services -away we went, you could do something and then you got on board. If you just talked to people about things over and over, they say, ‘Nothing's ever going to change around here!’.

Facilitator 2: Yeah, and it was not run by people who kind of billed by the hour.

Interviewee: No. [Laughter]

Interviewee: Because ‘Shelter’ had got funding, it was a National Housing organisation, for a worker we (I was on the Shelter committee) - asked council, ‘Can Shelter be based here?’ All these things had benefit for Fitzroy, I mean they served broader areas, but they benefitted us. The wonderful local architects and builders operated a free service for Fitzroy residents, out of the social planning office, all pro bono work.

Facilitator 1: That was in part a response to helping people to stay in their homes when there was a counterargument from the State Government that these homes should be demolished. We're talking about a mixture of happenings here, aren't we? The reaction to the Housing Commission wanting slum clearance and yet a reaction on the ground within community to make the homes more structurally safer and higher sanitary standards.

Interviewee: Because people moved in and bought homes, that's after they're saved, I think it was called a ‘windscreen survey’, where assessors travel the streets in cars saying, “that house can go and that can go and that can go like Laurie O'Brien's house! (i.e., 35 Hanover Street)

A lot of the housing was saved, thank God! But so many people were moving in and buying up and people often didn't know how to restore a Victorian terrace.

Facilitator 2: Was that a service where they also leant out tools for free?

Interviewee: Yes, there was a tool service, and these are now well known - the Peter Elliotts and the Sue Dances of the world, and they rostered themselves on to offer the service once a week. I think they would be there every week. People would come in. Peter renovated the social planning office as it was an old supermarket. Peter made the changes, there wasn't a lot to design, but we said what we wanted.

We said at that time that with all the comings and goings with the community we want it to be something that the community can use for meetings after hours because there were not many places. So, we said to Peter, ‘Can you design the locking system so that people can come and book with us during the day and pick up the key and they can just let themselves in.

Interviewee: Lots of community groups used that system. It was an active place, really. What we decided to do in the name of coordination was that we had to work together. It wasn't just a physical base; it was to get the most out of everybody. So, within the social planning office we had a whole lot of teams, and my job as social planner was to be involved with all the teams, so there was cross over of information.

Facilitator 2: Did each team work on a specific project or a specific case?

Interviewee: There would be a team within the early childhood services and aged services and information services, but there might be a project which involved people out of the office. So they'd come together as a new team for that project. But it did get to the stage where, because we all had lots of ideas and councillors had lots of ideas and the community had lots of ideas, where we were at meetings every night of the week and you weren't paid for that, of course!

I nearly had a fit at one stage when I discovered at a council meeting that the engineering staff were being paid overtime! I said listen, none of us get paid. None of my staff are getting paid overtime.[Laughter]

Facilitator 1: Educators were doing similar things at around the same time.

Interviewee: Yes. So we decided that if anyone wanted to do something new they had to bring it to our staff meeting and we'd have a look at it and see what was involved. Because you could probably drown in the work there was so much. But in the main people could see what was coming from it and were working with the community which was a big difference.

If you are just sitting behind a desk or organising something yourself, you would not get these outcomes. We could have a public meeting like we did on health and 400 people would come. I mean that just does not happen by accident. I think it was all those linkages that made it really interesting.

Facilitator 2: You mention in the book, Jenny, how important it was to offer integrated services, not just sole solitary services for a particular case study.

Interviewee: I can remember that part of the design is coordinated so that your provision is actually integrated for the people on the receiving end of those services. I do recall that one morning we got a call from a rather distressed father, his wife had been hospitalised and they had young children and he was due at work. There was a question of day care, then there was a question of what's going to happen at the end of the day and what time was dad finishing work, what's the situation with the mother? I am not sure how it was solved, but the early childhood system was mobilised and for that family, their needs were catered for. So, what could have been a real crisis, because all that good will and coordination was there and people trusted each other we or the community, the agencies were able to assist them.

Lots of things came in through the so called ‘duty work’ where you needed to mobilise all the services within the community. I suppose it was working with the community, working with individuals out there, that it was working with them as whole people. There's no point in just giving someone some food if they're desperate, where's the roof over their head? So that sort of questioning always led to doing something else.

The State had brought in - and so they should - regulations which meant the rooming houses needed to be upgraded. But you needed to give the landlords a bit of time to do that, so council decided it would have some leeway. The people who lived in rooming houses, had that need for integration because we were losing rooming houses at a rapid rate.

Council had a good policy in that the health inspectorial staff had to follow their policy rather than going around saying, “you are being closed up tomorrow, mate!’. Having contact with people who were coming into the office saying, ‘We are losing our houses, where can we go?’ We said, ‘Well something's funny here, because we know there are vacancies somewhere else, but these people don't know about it.’ We obviously needed a point for which people can come to find out where the vacancies are, even though they're diminishing. So, that grew a new service, the ‘Housing Advice for Lodgers in Fitzroy’, (HALF), and a worker was employer. It became a really important service in the local area. We were thinking laterally all the time and connecting.

Facilitator 2: It was bonding, too, issues and problems in real time.

Interviewee: Yes, rather than just being there, for that's today's issue and fix that one.

Facilitator 1: Were you exemplars in the State?

Interviewee: We possibly were, in the sense of the whole range of agencies that were working together. That wasn't what happened usually. I think the Commonwealth, or the State set up some ‘one stop shops’, I think it was the Commonwealth, and they did one in each State, but they were just for their own services. Whereas we were Commonwealth, State, community services, our own council services. I think that was probably the difference.

It is interesting, too, because at this time all these fights were going on about whether local government should be involved in any of this. It was insanity really. The Commonwealth and State got into a position at one stage where, - and Labor Government was doing this as well - they had decided regional approaches were the way to go. We had the Australian Assistance Plan and then we had the Regional Development Plan. They thought, because local governments were all different, they could not all do the same thing and therefore it was hopeless working with them, regions would be the way to go.

Interviewee: So, while we are developing this sort of quite sophisticated local planning and coordination and service innovation and everything, they are sort of humming and hawing, almost saying no, you can't do that. Meanwhile, across Victoria, municipal welfare work was mushrooming because councils were saying, ‘We need to do this’. One thing about our federal system is that it does not get its act together around roles and responsibilities. It is very hard for local government now we've got rate capping and since it's supposed to do this and do that.

I went later to work for the Municipal Association of Victoria, a state-wide responsibility, so I was still involved with all these issues. But subsidies -councils would get involved because there'd be a two for one subsidy and then it wouldn't be a two for one subsidy it'd be a Commonwealth or the State program and would cut their funds by half or just get out of it. So, like council, we are left holding the baby. It was really, really quite difficult, in terms of being developmental and trying to be progressive.

Facilitator 2: Jenny, you said you left in 1991?

Interviewee: Oh no, 1974 - 1981. I think the role was really important. A couple of the innovative services had started not long before I began work. There was the Advisory service and the Housing service. There was also a really innovative youth services the Fitzroy Community Youth Centre and the Fitzroy Legal Service. But when I started, I saw in the housing and the advisory service, the two latest services, I found that the workers weren't being supported and the structures weren't really there. I am a great one for structures and teams. We had to formalise the arrangements around them and as we were right into cooperatives, the housing service ended up being a cooperative and we made sure that councillors and the community were represented as those workers needed support. The housing worker at that stage, there weren't many housing services around the place, was Judy Dance, based initially in Fitzroy Community Youth Centre. I don't know whether the Centre's still there, is it?

Facilitator 2: There is a youth centre just opposite the Atherton Gardens.

Interviewee: Because of young people's homelessness it started in that way and then there would be all these families arriving who had been living out of their cars. Just arriving, homeless. So, there was pressure on any worker was day in, day out. People needed to be supported and there needed to be a structure and there needed to be solutions. Which is why all that development work occurred and why we were then pushing for government changes.

One of the things that we did in - which I can't believe we did it now along with all the other things – because there was a huge demand for housing and emergency housing, but we were hitting brick walls with the State over emergency housing demands. I think this happened - council agreed to buy some properties and offer them to families, which was great.

Interviewee: So that helped meet the need it was short term emergency housing. Eventually we could get families moved into the public housing system. But the State kept denying it was - well it was Fitzroy and Collingwood, and this isn't a real problem! So, at this stage we had Shelter at the social planning office, but we were all going bonkers because we could not get any improvements. Someone said, I hope it wasn't me, ‘Why don't we do a state-wide survey on the demand for emergency housing? That'll teach them!’ [Laughter]

They said, ‘yeah, why don't we?’ I mean this was the attitude all the time. Graham Birrool was the research worker with The Brotherhood of St Laurence at that time and we got some social work students to come on board. I think it was Jane Harrington who ended up our housing officer and ended up working at a high level in housing.

Interviewee: Fran O'Brien was the housing advisor for lodgers in Fitzroy, she is a barrister now. So, Graham said he'd help design it and we said, ’OK’! I think we did it for a couple of weeks across the State. We put the feelers out locally, sub-regionally and regionally - to monitor the demand for emergency housing. We produced a report, and we were able to go to the State and say, ‘You can't say it's not there, here it is’.

Facilitator 2: What year was that?

Interviewee: In the late '70s. Housing was a very big thing in Fitzroy. We had the history of the Housing Commission, but council argued for change. As things changed, families would have the nomination rights for going into Brookes Crescent. It was going to be high rise and then ended as a low-rise development with nomination rights. The social planning office was responsible for that. We would interview people for housing.

The Ministry of Housing provided us with a model of Brookes Crescent for the front of the office (only because I don't think they could fit it in at Myer House!) and people would come in wanting to live in Brookes Crescent. We were able to nominate them. The social planning office got heavily involved in the whole housing scene and then of course at the Commonwealth level and intergovernmental stuff. A Commonwealth/ State housing agreement was made in which funds were made available to local government housing. That grew and they have expanded that now. So, councils had developed quite heavy roles in public housing.

Facilitator 1: Jenny, thank you so much for your time. Would you like to tell us about some of the incidences, the people, the characters, you met in Fitzroy?

Interviewee: Well, there were a lot of people who you would describe as characters. I don't come across them these days and I don't meet them in my community. Fitzroy seemed to have a lot of characters. Derryn, as a social worker, had come from working in Queensland, luckily for us, to Fitzroy. One day she was walking down the street in Fitzroy and this man was rather agitated and started to harangue her. Anyway, it turns out that she knew him from Queensland. What had happened was that he had been in a psychiatric hospital in Queensland with repeated admissions. The story goes that one day the psychiatrist or someone there asked, ‘How much money does he have?’ Someone said, ‘There's enough money to put him on a plane to Victoria!’ which is what had happened. Derryn had known him from when she worked there.

This is the skill of Derryn, as somehow or other he landed in Fitzroy, whether he was looking for Derryn or not I am not sure. He was a chap who would get agitated very, very easily and he would come into the office screaming at the receptionists to see Derryn. If she wasn't there, he would be very perturbed and I'd say, ‘Well come back, in half an hour or an hour or she'll be in at three’ or whatever it was. She laughs now, as one day she came back and there he was sleeping under her desk! [Laughter]

But she and a couple of others, I couldn’t do it, were the only people that could really console him, talk with him and calm him down. He was an extreme character, but there were a lot of the older people that had been homeless, at some stage, they now had permanent accommodation and were quite settled. The community used to come into the office to talk to us about all sorts of things. It was a place that was full of characters, and we were probably characters along with them, I suppose!

One day we had the Shelter meeting at the office with Tom Uren who was then the Federal Minister - I think - for Urban Development with housing was part of his portfolio. He had come to talk with Victorians about housing issues. We were all in a big circle in the centre of the social planning office listening to Tom giving him ideas and having a good conversation when this older lady came through the office with her jeep, right through the centre of the meeting!

Interviewee: Apparently the office was involved in helping her declutter and some of her goodies were stored in our back room where she disappeared into. Tom did not blink, she came out 10 minutes later pushing the jeep in front of her, straight through the middle again, and out. It was just gorgeous the way people reacted, or did not react really, to that resident.

Facilitator 2: Were you involved with the Indigenous community in Fitzroy at the time? Or did you coordinate with the Indigenous services that were springing up?

Interviewee: There wasn't a lot of contact, I'm really sad to say. I think at that stage, I mean we did do some work. One of the areas that we were going to be working with the Aboriginal community was around childcare. They were getting separate funding for a childcare centre, but something happened and that fell through. I was quite looking forward to that because we would have been able to develop some really good links. Because they had the health service and the legal service they operated quite autonomously, I think.

One of the programs that council instituted was a grant scheme for ethnic organisations. Councillor, Barb Gayler suggested that council do this, and I thought it could help certain organisations with what they want to do to get people off the ground. I think there were a couple of Indigenous grants under that too, not for the workers, but to buy whatever they needed at that time.

It's interesting, because there wasn't a lot of contact, and I don't think there was at the councillor level either. There might not have been more contact because a lot of the Aboriginal people congregated in Smith Street and (we were in Brunswick Street)

Facilitator 2: Pastor Nicholls and his wife who had a shop on Smith Street and the church behind In Gore Street and they did establish child services on Gertrude Street at one stage?

Interviewee: Collingwood Council might have had more involvement, I cannot remember. But I suppose in terms of the characters it was really the older people as they had had such fantastic life experiences, not necessarily always good, but they'd survived it. There was a lot of resilience there. Because we were receptive to them, they decided we were all right, I think, and we had regular visits.

Facilitator 1: Jenny, we have asked you a lot of things, but for the record, what is it that you want to say?

Interviewee: I've been reflecting on this because I've done some work about redesigning local democracy and have published on that. I am interested in my local council as I now live in the City of Greater Geelong and am looking at how local government works or doesn't work. But in doing that work, around redesigning local democracy one of the things that we came up with was a model informed by experiences in Fitzroy. Only in recent thinking about Fitzroy that it has come to the fore. We have a model which we call the Gem Model which says that if democracy is going to work effectively for local government the governance arm and the management arm of councils need to work with the citizenry, so that you have engagement of the citizens with the governance and management. Unless the three are working together it won't be able to really function effectively. That was probably as a result of working at the Municipal Association Victoria, MAV, for 15 years and looking at what's happening in local government and looking at it now from where I live, I think that's really true. and that's what worked in Fitzroy, actually.

We would not have called it like that then, but I think that is what it was then, the three arms coming together. If one arm is not there then it is going to be dysfunctional, it won't work properly, it won't be as effective.

After I lived in Fitzroy, I lived in Clifton Hill still part of the City of Yarra and one of the interesting groups I was involved with was when council became active in Timor-Leste initiatives. We had a Friends of Baucau group. It was people from the community working with council, councillors, and council officers, in this friends’ group.

We weren't actually a council group, but the community involved with council and linking with Timor Leste. I thought that was an interesting model because that's the sort of thing that had happened in the past. I don't know whether that still operates.

Interviewee: One of the things I'm involved in now is women's participation in local government as elected representatives, in the Geelong group. Again, it's that model where we work with council. Some of the other initiatives that are taking place around the State are council advisory committees. We have got our autonomy, yet we work with councillors and council officers, but we're separate. I think that it is in my blood now! [Laughter]

That's the way to go because councils are so big now, they can become quite bureaucratic. I mean I'm the first to talk up local government, I think it's really important, but unless the citizens are active and having their say then it's easy to be dominated by a strong bureaucracy, I think.

One of the important initiatives taken in Fitzroy was worked on by the Council of Social Service. Again, this must've been because things needed to be done in Fitzroy. There was a study done by Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS) and one of the things that came from that was was pressure to set up a group to look at what the needs were in Fitzroy and how they could be tackled. There was a group set up and then the group came out of that was the Resident's Association, is the way that I recall it.

The Resident's Association was quite important in pushing for change within the city. Some of the councillors and some of the people who came onto council, members of the new guard, were active within the Resident's Association.

Interviewee: The Resident's Association had, on a number of issues, made representation to council, who usually used to operate behind closed doors where there were no minutes and notices available to anybody, it was their business! But the Resident's Association raised issues with them, and indicated to them that things were going to be done differently in the future. We are opening up and we want to be part of what's happening.

I think that very much as people came onto council, the activists from the Resident's Association, then set the scene for council moving into saying, ‘yes, we've got to be more proactive, really look at what the needs of our area are’. So, it was a very important and significant in terms of the campaigns. But it was also that attribute or flavour about social and political action which was a legitimate part.

Facilitator 1: Well, your book talks about social development too?

Interviewee: Yes, yes. So, it's interesting because it probably was unique in terms of the role of council officers, comparing Fitzroy with others. The whole issue of social action was built into the social planner's role and the role of the social planning office. We were expected to be on about change and council was, and we were too.

I mean I had colleagues on other councils who used to say how come you're doing that? How did you get away with that? It was like I was hoodwinking all the councillors. I said listen, ‘These are reports to council, we were at the council table, we were talking these things through, I'm not doing anything that is not approved and endorsed by council’. It was the flavour of Fitzroy really; it was that change movement.

There was another interesting and funny story. Because we were always at demonstrations.

Interviewee: After the Labor Government was defeated, I mean all hell broke loose because the welfare state, if we can call it that, the human services were under attack. Funding was cut from this and cut from that so there were always actions going on, not just locally but Melbourne wide and state-wide. We had a home maintenance worker with council approval - we got Dave to build a coffin out of plywood.

So, we used to run this, the death of Medibank, or the death of housing, the death of childcare funding. We would always be carrying the coffin at all these demos. Then I used to get calls from all these other councils, ‘Can we borrow your coffin?’ [Laughter]

It wasn't until years later that that handyman, Dave, said to me he hated building that coffin [laughs], and he never told me. I don't know what happened to it, but it got a lot of good use. If the State Department had heard about that they would have cut the funding. It was very funny! (Laughter]

Facilitator 1: Probably a good note to finish off, yes. Thank you so much, Jenny.