

## 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Interview transcript Judy Seymour

*Please introduce yourself and your role at WRDA.*

I'm Judy Seymour and I was Director at WRDA between 1993 and 2003. So I took over from Joanna. [00.28]

*Thank you. Can you tell us a bit about your own journey as a feminist?*

I was thinking about that: are you born a feminist or are you made one? [laughs]. Maybe it's a bit of the two. I was adopted and when I got my adoption papers, actually not so long ago, I discovered that on the two sheets of A4 that were the contract between the local authority and the couple who adopted me it clearly says that I'm female and gives my female Christian name, and then every line after that starts with "he", "his", "he", "his". So that was kind of setting the story up if you like. [1.20].

Then when I was eleven I had to do the 11+ like everybody did and years and years later I discovered that in order to pass the 11+... Well first of all if I didn't pass the 11+ I would go to a Secondary Modern school which I was terrified of because I was taught that it was a sink school and it was the end of life as we know it so I had to get into Grammar school. Then I discovered in my 30s when I was doing some research that the pass mark for girls was higher than it was for the boys. Otherwise there would be more girls going to grammar school than there were boys and you couldn't have that. [02.08].

Then when I went to university, I think 7% of the population went into higher education and I don't know what the breakdown was by social class but I imagine that working class people weren't that well represented. I've never been able to find a figure for gender representation but three quarters of the people on my course were male. [2.39].

When I left university I went to France and joined a radical political theater company and it was terrific. You know, it was counterculture, it was anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist and actually, already talking about climate change. Very loud, get in the middle of the audience and shout at them, you know, really wild stuff and wonderful. We had young people in our audiences tearing up their passports and their money, it was great. It was also deeply sexist. It was run by guys and if, as a woman, you wanted to have influence then you would need to sleep with one of them. [3.30].

I was there for a couple of years and then the group imploded and I came back to England via Paris with one of the women from the company. She had friends, women friends, in Paris who were involved in Le Mouvement de libération des femmes. I got to meet some of those women. This is 1971 so post 1968 Uprising and out of that flowed a lot of outrage and anger and those women in Paris were really angry. I think it just started to open up my imagination and on the way home I bought a copy of Germaine Greer's *Female Eunuch*. Then it was just opening up my mind and seeing what was in there and how much of it was shite basically! [4.47].

Then I had a baby so I was very involved in bringing up a wee girl and about four or five years on I set up a community arts project with another women working with young people

in community settings. We called it Kids Mobile Workshop but the kids themselves called it "Them Wifies" because we were two women. Wifie, I'm not sure if that's an expression that's used in Northern Ireland? No, it's a Geordie expression and it's used by young men to describe any woman who's three years older than them. So we had a little deliberation about whether or not it was a good thing to call ourselves that and I thought it was. I thought "I don't have a problem with that - let's take it on". So we became Them Wifies and that then evolved into a women's collective doing a lot of work with girls and young women and supporting women youth workers who were employed by the local authority but had very little support. In fact were really working against what the local authority thought they should be doing [6.06].

So, we set up self-defense for young women and for youth workers and did loads of adventure activities. It was very physical. Actually, we set up football groups. I'll just read you a little bit from this because I think it's brilliant coming this year.

"Football, it was good. We went to the YWCA in Gateshead and we did a football competition with lasses from other groups. It was all girls and we had a good laugh. There was loads - 50 to 70. God knows! We went in the evenings because we're all on schemes in the day. They showed me new skills and that. We were one to one with each other and this man who was the football instructor, we don't know his name, but he was only little and he was dead canny".

So 40 years from work getting girls access to play football, to being in the final of the World Cup. I think it's helpful to have an idea of timespans. Something I've thought a lot about in relation to what we're talking about this morning. Slow, steady, small patient work over and over and over again actually does bring about change [7.32].

But they do go on to say something less complimentary about me, "Jan's only here once a week and it's too much for her to do all that and Judy's a lazy swine, rolls of laughter" [laughs]. [7.45].

So from there into women's education. I did a Master's in Education Management and as part of that I did researched into gender and education and second chance education. I was working in the west end of Newcastle. A very multicultural area, I did a lot of work with Asian women, and we produced a book called "The Daughters of the East". Then everything started to fall apart. There was a change of leadership in the local council, and community education was no longer in favour and it started to become quite a hostile environment to work in. When I saw the opportunity to work with the WRDA it was just like all my dreams come true all at once [8.48].

*You moved to NI to take up the post of Director with WRDA in 1994, just after news of the historic ceasefires. You mention this in the 1994 annual report saying "What a time to arrive in Northern Ireland! To say I am excited at the prospect of a new home, new set of challenges, and the opportunity to work with WRDA is really an understatement". Could you talk a bit about your memories of that time and the transition to living and working in Northern Ireland?*

Yeah, I do remember just how overwhelmed with privilege I felt to be in this situation at this point in history. But also obviously I didn't know anything - that was also how I felt. I remember someone saying "one of the good things about you is you don't have any baggage, you're here and you don't have any baggage." and I was thinking I didn't feel that way at all. I felt I had going back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century worth of baggage. Actually, it took reading Anna Burns *Milkman* to really clarify - put into words - just how I felt [10.24].

I come from a background where we talked politics all the time, we were marching, playing music, putting on performances and when we weren't doing that we were talking politics. I couldn't imagine not being able to talk politics and I remember finding out I couldn't do that in Northern Ireland, you know, it really wasn't cool. The first indication of that was the second week after I started work and I was invited by Sir Patrick Mayhew to dinner at Hillsborough. He was having a group of people who work at community level and I think he was hoping for some gossip [laughs], maybe, or wanting to take soundings. I clearly remember the look of fear on Geraldine and Liz's faces as I left the office that afternoon to go to Hillsborough, and I don't remember if it was Liz or Geraldine saying "whatever you say, say nothing" [laughs] and "Loose tongues cost lives". I was thinking "what an opportunity, here you are, you're going to meet the Secretary of State, you have an opportunity to talk to him and you can't say anything because you don't know anything. Not only would it always have to be a very considered conversation you were having but actually you're too new here. How can I do this without letting people down?"

I remember, being in a new job, obviously you have a honeymoon period, so I did feel that I could ask questions that maybe other people couldn't ask. That's actually quite useful - you can have some very good conversations by asking questions. So it was about making the most of that window to ask questions knowing some of them would be stupid and you'd get away with it. But hope not to ask too many that would let down the WRDA. [12.40].

The other thing of course I will never forget are those first impressions of the WRDA. Joanna came in for a couple of weeks, just off and on to give me some support. I had this impression of a really well functioning organisation and culture of care and respect. So it seemed to me what I needed to do was work hard at just sustaining what was already there and keep things steady until I could really grasp what needed to be done. [13.28].

Of course it was absolutely stony broke. I mean really there was no money in the bank and that could have been awful, and it was in some ways, but actually everyone else was in the same situation. I didn't meet a women's group or a women's centre worker who wasn't struggling for money. I think one of the things of not having money is that you compare yourself to people who have. When they have and you haven't it makes you feel bad but if they haven't and you haven't, it's not half as bad. In fact it would have been very uncomfortable if the WRDA had had money when nobody else did. [14.14].

It was also quite lonely. In Belfast town center on the weekend there was still a - not exactly a curfew but you had to go through a checkpoint, was that the continuation of the Steel Ring? To me, it was very hostile anyway. So you know, what do you do for enjoyment? Just down from Mount Charles was the Crescent Arts Centre and they put on life drawing classes on a Friday. I mean imagine, life drawing classes on a Friday evening. "What are you doing

on Friday evening?", "I'm going to a life drawing class, yay" [laughs]. But you know, I did and so did about 20 other people. That was my introduction to painting which has taken hold and now I spend a lot of my time doing it. [15.15].

*In what ways was the women's movement and sector in NI different from England?*

There's obviously a big difference - we weren't having the Troubles. But there were a lot of similarities in that women were marginalised and getting very active. We were reclaiming the night. We had a lot of consciousness raising groups... I remember going to a Women's Liberation Conference in London, it must have been the second Women's Liberation Conference. Gradually the women around me were starting to talk about feminism. It went from that to "are you working class, are you middle class? Are you black, are you white? Are you disabled? Are you gay, are you straight?" Then you got that - what at first felt quite conflicted we learned to navigate. We wouldn't have used the word intersectional but it was about developing those bonding and bridging links. [16.56].

So in that way, I think, probably quite similar to Northern Ireland but we didn't have a women's sector because we didn't have women at grass roots feeling engaged or empowered. We had feminists who would be in roles working along feminist principals but never with the means to connect things in the way that I think Northern Ireland grew - the women's sector grew from the grassroots. That's the main thing that sticks out for me. [17.51].

For example, in the job description that I got from the WRDA there was mention of there being 50 women's groups in Belfast. I just assumed that was a typo because in Newcastle we had a women's centre, Newcastle is the same size as Belfast, so we had a women's centre run by volunteers, open two evenings a week, and there was a rape crisis centre. That was our resource compared to what you had in Northern Ireland. [18.41].

*Thank you Judy. Did what are often called "Orange, Green issues" did they ever bleed over into the work of the women's movement here and, if so, how did you handle that problem?*

I think I would just look to Geraldine actually, or Liz or Patricia [laughs]. I think there was a bit of "whatever you say, say nothing". I go back to Anna Burns' book because she describes it wonderfully, the innuendo. Some people would know. You would know by the way an eyebrow was raised or...but I wouldn't, I wouldn't recognize it and in some ways that was a strength but also there are unintended consequences to all of that. [19.54].

Those tensions were at the front of everything but the women like Kathleen from the Women's Information Group, and the work that the women's centres did between each other, creating the Women's Support Network for example - creating mechanisms for women to talk to each other across both communities - that's something that I hope women were, and are, incredibly proud of. It's such a wonderful thing to have achieved [20.44].

When you compare that with the way the women in the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition were treated in the peace talks, how they were denigrated and trivialized you can

see what the alternative could have been if the women's sector hadn't been there doing the work that they were doing. It should be a source of immense pride. [21.22].

*Thank you Judy. Just talking there about the Women's Coalition, what role did WRDA, and the women's movement generally, play in the run up to the Agreement? [21.46]*

I think the founding of the Women's Coalition was a brilliant move. The time was right. It provided a focus for women to imagine it being different. That act of saying "well, what if we don't think about the border? What if we don't consider that issue but we look at the kind of society that we want to be and that women need. What are the changes that women need to see and how might we put those into an agreement? The act of doing that, of imagining, let's imagine! That is such an important strategy. I don't think that would have been possible without the backup from the women's groups, networks and so on, the work that had gone on previously of building solidarity [23.21 It was always connected to the ground. Local women's groups, I don't think their reality was ever out of the picture [23.52]. ] And Mo Mowlam, in my eyes, was an honorary member of the women's sector.

And then again, when you look at the way women in the Women's Coalition were treated. At the time I was shocked. One of the women rang me one afternoon, I think she just needed to vent. She talked about how when she left the talks, when she left Stormont, sometimes she had to go home and wash. I remember thinking how horrible that was. But when I look at it now, I think that was an act of violence. There were women brave enough to put themselves forward to work for peace and at the very table where peace is being talked about they're being treated with violence [24.56].

So yes, I think there was backup and support. But at the same time I also think that's traumatic and often it takes years for trauma to become apparent. I do wonder about the long term impact of that on women's mental health. Across the Northern Ireland community actually. [25.31]. Because now a lot of those support mechanisms, I imagine, fall away because there's not a need for them anymore. But, actually, what you have is an accelerating experience of trauma. I think it comes in waves and so I wonder how that's being dealt with [25.56].

*Thank you Judy. Just to pick up on what you said there about how the peace has brought with it its own issues, I was wondering if you could talk about what impact peace had on the women's movement in NI?*

I think the contribution of the Women's Coalition around policy, particularly Section 75. I associate that with the Women's Coalition. Getting that into the Agreement and making it a statutory requirement to do that work [26.49].

On the other hand I do remember a pile of consultations on my desk, you know [indicates large pile with hands] coming in on a Monday morning. Including one from the Seed Potato Society, and I think "did I make that up?" But no, there was one from the Seed Potato Stakeholder group. So section 75 made a lot of work. I think that was very quickly brought into the work of the Community Facilitators because, clearly, they were the best placed people to do the consultations. If I had gone into a local area and asked what women

thought about a policy issue I don't think I would have got the same answer as the real answer that a Community Facilitator would get. [27.50].

So it started to make things function at a more complex and a more impactful level. What the Women's Coalition did I think was to open up our understanding of democracy, how to create opportunities for a wider range of action and ways of engaging. [28.15].

Then of course there was the Peace and Reconciliation Programme and we were all thirsty for resources weren't we, so that was exhilarating. The way that was managed through participatory budgeting, the funds that NIVT held, was wonderful. You came together, you got the headline, what this programme was called and what it had to deliver and "now can you sort out exactly what that means to you on the ground". You've already got your store of ideas because you've been nursing these projects for years but now they're in a different context and you're hearing what others people's ideas and projects are and maybe there's an opportunity to link up with each other. Even if you don't link up, you're much better informed. It was co-operation to build the cake and competition to get a slice of it. I think that's the point at which you start to see the women's sector being effective at a wider range of levels. The connection with policy and that bit of statutory backing. [30.15].

*Thank you Judy. In 1998 WRDA headed a major review of the Women's Sector called "The Women's Sector: Into the Next Generation". This review mapped the sector, its stakeholders, and set a sector-wide agenda. How did this important conference and review come about and what was its impact? [30.43]*

It was a conversation I had with Stevie Johnson who was the Director or the Assistant Director of the WEA. Stevie had come across Future Search when he was visiting the States. He thought because it was a whole systems approach that it would be helpful in terms of building infrastructure [31.25], getting common agreement and a common agenda. [31.29]. So he put me in touch with Ruth McCambridge who is one of their facilitators.

I chatted with Ruth and it sounded really interesting to me because it could enable us to move from seeing ourselves as a sector abundant with all sorts of different things going on but I don't think anybody understood it as a system. I think what Future Search promised to do, and what I think it did, was to shape what we were doing enabling us to see the individual elements, how essential they were, how they related to other elements and how that created an ecosystem. I'm now talking with my 2023 hat on, I think in terms of ecosystems these days, but actually that's what it was. That's what it is. It's organic and it's connected, it's living and breathing, and dynamic [32.56].

That got set down very early on. One of the first tasks you have to do with Future Search is to work out who your stakeholders are. You can have 80 people in the room and we were recommended by Ruth that there should be eight tables and eight stakeholder groups. That wasn't rigid but how it usually works best. I remember the meeting sitting in the top room in Mount Charles with a group of women from the women's centres, and regional representation - it was a fairly representative group. And we're saying "obviously the women's sector are stakeholders but is that one stakeholder group, or is it two, or is it more" So we tried looking at a typology. "Looks to me like there are women's groups,

women's centres, women's networks, and women's projects. How does that feel, does that resonate for you?", then going "yes" and there it was, it was done. You'd think that might be a conversation that would need to go on for ages but it actually fell into place extremely quickly and that's because it was already there, we just hadn't seen it [34.25].

The way of working was in single stakeholder groups so you got a sense of what your workmates mates thought and then later you would sit down with a different stakeholder group so you'd be sitting with people who didn't necessarily agree with you. You'd need to have a discussion and you'd need to come up with something that you could all stand over. And maybe there would be things that were too difficult. There was definitely a too difficult list but it was a wonderful process. It took place over two and a half days and I have here, can you see that, have you got a copy? [holds up copy of *The Northern Ireland Women's Sector: Into the Next Generation*] [35.35].

*I think we do, I will have a look in our archives and try and find it but that's great. So is there anything else you want to say about how that project came about or what its impact was?* [35.47]

A little while ago I had to do a talk at the Fawcett Society on my work with the WRDA. I wanted to see what kind of things the sector was doing now, to bring me up to date. It was just amazing looking at everything that people were doing. But also, to me, one of the things that came out of Future Search, and again it's not that Future Search created it but Future Search sharpened the focus, was the importance of working collaboratively. So the importance of connecting across communities, connecting spatially, connecting areas of discreet work. When I looked at what people were doing it was platform, collaboration, alliance, joined/joint working, and co-operative working. Maybe it wasn't to do with Future Search but I like to think that it was, that there was still an emphasis on cooperative and collaborative working and I thought that was lovely [37.46]

*Thank you Judy, that's great to share. 2002 was a tough year financially for the Women's Sector. Statutory funding was cut and staff were lost from 42 Women's Groups, including WRDA. What are your memories of that turbulent year and how you steered WRDA through it?*

You know it is odd but I'm so familiar with organisations not having money. I've never worked in an organisation that had money, even when I was working for the local authority we were constantly being cut, so facing a financial crisis is very familiar, sadly. Normally I would just approach that with "ok, so that funding has ran out". I'd have a plan B and probably a plan C as well. But I think at that point, and honestly I don't remember it that clearly, because I think I just "put it away". But I think it was very difficult, maybe that's where the hope wore thin. It was very difficult to see what the alternatives were.[39.25].

It must have been an uncertainty because Peace and Reconciliation money was coming to an end. It was always only a year or two years, so it must have been a point at which a lot of programmes were coming to an end and we couldn't see a way ahead. I felt it very personally because I didn't have a solution. I didn't have a solution except hope and that's not great. That doesn't communicate very well to your staff. If you're responsible for making sure people can pay their mortgage or their rent, or put food on the table or feed their kids it's a big responsibility obviously, and I guess I didn't know how we were going to do it. So, it

was a hard one but it was happening to everyone else, that's the other side of it. It was button up and just get on with it. [40.35].

*Thank you. You were talking there about, that was a point where the hope wore thin. I think it's very true that the road to women's rights is a long one and hope and joy are important factors in sustaining the work of the women's movement over decades long campaigns. I was wondering if you could talk a bit more about the role of hope and joy in holding the women's movement together and moving us forward?*

I probably wouldn't have known this at the time, but where I am now, I'm very involved in climate activism, and we talk quite a lot about hope in groups that I'm involved with and whether that's a foolish thing. That's where Joanna Macey's book, "*Active Hope*", has been enormously helpful to us and it also helps thinking - as I have been over the last couple of weeks - of the role of hope in Northern Ireland. In fact, in one of those images that I showed you of Future Search, women have written "hope". But if it's going to endure and carry you through, it has to deliver something so Joanna Macey talks a lot about 'active' hope. She talks about first of all about having to acknowledge the truth. So, in a sense the women's sector is actively revealing the truth about what it is to be women in Northern Ireland. [43.00].

There's an American activist called Walidah Imarisha and I love this quote from her. She said "the decolonisation of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form for it is where all forms of colonisation are born". When I was talking about my journey into feminism, that was the point when I was in Paris and talking to those women and reading Germaine Greer. The colonisation of my imagination, what would it be not to have to think that the only way that I could have influence was by sleeping with a man, or the work that the Women's Coalition did in enabling us to imagine a different kind of Northern Ireland. [43.53].

So we're talking about a process here. This is what Joanna Macey makes clear: you have to acknowledge the truth, which entails being able to imagine something different and then you can go forward together - it's important not to be on your own with this. But if you can be with a group of people going forward together with the truth you can start talking about what you can do. Then there's joy in the action because it's empowerment, its agency. I think that was the strength of the community women's groups. They could have been helpless in that situation, just watching their communities be destroyed around them, and they chose instead to come together and do something, do whatever they could and it might be very small but that gives you a sense of agency and meaning. Those are two such important qualities in life, and for me that's where joy can come. [45.29].

It's very important to be conscious of your mental state, where you're at on the spectrum. Collectively we can do so much to help keep the hope alive. There's something we used to say on women's marches about the spirit, "you can't kill the spirit", is that it? That's going back. So yes, its joy in action, it's taking action and having agency, even if it's a small step. Look at 1970 when we were doing girls football and here we are.



But also, it's really important to keep records and tell the story. [46.39]. One of the biggest things that women achieved in England in this period was through the Greenham Common Peace Camps. So, I don't know whether you know about Greenham Common Peace Camps but over seven years women occupied the land around Greenham which was an RAF base housing US nuclear missiles. It started with 38 women sitting in around that fence. They were there, not necessarily those 38, but they were joined by thousands of women. They were there for seven years and they got the missiles removed. There were peace camps all over Europe. These 38 Welsh women started this. I was having a conversation with a young woman recently, a theatre director, working with a group of young climate activists. She was as smart as anything and really clued in. We were having a conversation about how to bring about change and what's an effective strategy, and what's women's contribution been to that, and I said "Greenham Common's a wonderful example" and she said "what's Greenham Common?" She'd never heard of it. [48.03].

One of the things we come across in climate activism is people saying 'what's the point of me recycling, because it's (the problem) so big there's nothing I can do about it ". One of the things I'm going to do is make a "box of treasures" - examples of things that people have done. So: Greenham Common women, Northern Ireland women, your story is a way of unlocking the imagination, of decolonising the imagination, and of giving other people hope as well. In that sharing and communicating of the story we can support each other. I see many synergies between Northern Ireland and climate action groups here. So yes, we can support each other and have joy together [49.24].

*Thank you Judy. That's a nice, hopeful note. What are you most proud of from your time at WRDA and what do you feel is the organisation's greatest achievement?*

I have to say that I don't feel proud personally because I didn't do anything individually, it was collective. I'm incredibly proud of a lot of the work that we collectively did and I'm so proud of having been there [50.06].

And so far as the WRDA is concerned? It's the same thing - just playing its role [50.25]. I was doing some work on resilience with some artists not long after I'd come back from Ireland. We were a bunch of artists talking about resilience and the artist, Josie Madge, was painting and drawing as we were talking. We were there for a day and she painted the whole thing. We started out by asking "what's your image of resilience?" And people came up with [mimes fists in the air and crossed arm poses]. At the end of the day we said "Josie, what's the image of resilience please?" and there she had painted a boat with somebody scanning the horizon and happy sailors eating. That image is, I think, the WRDA. Its scanning the horizon looking at the future, where are the opportunities, how hard is the wind blowing, where are safe harbours? How are people feeling? Let's go and have a cup of tea. To me that's an image of WRDA [52.05].

*Thank you. Do you have any memories or anecdotes about past AGMs?*

I was always exhausted by the time the AGM came. When I was at WRDA the AGMs were in December and the run up to that included funding applications and the money running out

in March. There was the DHSS evaluation, our core funders so that was serious, and there was the normal workload to do so I was always tired. It was a joy to know that Geraldine would be making sure people were there with the right information and the right papers and that our Chair, whoever she was at that time but always wonderful would take us through the meeting and I would be there and hopefully able to answer questions! It was the run up to Christmas of course as well so I would also be prepared for the fact that I'd have flu by Christmas Eve. [53.38].

*Do you have a message for our 40<sup>th</sup> AGM?*

Oh, well done you people. Yeah, big hug. I think all I would say is what are your plans for 20 years' time, what do you hope the women's sector will have achieved and what role will the WRDA play in that? I think this time thing is really important. One of the problems with the funding situation is that you're pushed through two year, one year, three year cycles. That's as far ahead as you can plan. It's always about being innovative to attract funding. The ability to look further ahead is so important and so easily forgotten. So I hope somehow that the WRDA will find the time to take a long term view. But whatever you do, you'll do it brilliantly [55.13].

*Thank you Judy, that's lovely. Thank you for joining us and sharing some of your memories with us, I have really enjoyed this interview so thank you for sharing.*