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Oral Interview of Diane Elze by Ruth Nadelhaft Interviewer for the Feminist Oral History Project

Ruth Nadelhaft

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Oral Interviews for the Feminist Oral History Project.

Interviewer: Ruth Nadelhaft (RN)

Interviewee: Diane Elze (DE)

Date: 08/11/1992

Recording number: MF223-ElzeD-T1a

Length of recording: 46:35

[Transcript begins]

DE: See I went back to school. I had moved to Maine in 1972. From Springfield, Massachusetts and I went back to school in September of '78. And on my first day of school, at Orono, I didn't know anybody there.

RN: What college did you commit to, were you in Arts and Sciences?

DE: I went into political science, yeah, first, but the Department was too conservative, so I switched over to sociology. And so on my first day of school. I knew that there was an office of women 's programs and services. And so I went to see Linda Malka, who was the director at the time. Because also what was happening for me at the same time was, I was coming out as a lesbian. I was going through that process. And so, I hooked up with Linda, and through Linda I found out I think it was through Linda. I found out about Spruce Run. And I was also very much interested and so my history. Up until that point you know, I had been involved in consciousness raising groups and Springfield, Massachusetts. When I lived there I was involved in a group of women doing underground abortion counseling. When it was illegal to do that, it was before, Roe V. Wade and so going back to school you know provided me with some opportunities to do other feminist work because what I had also been doing up until that time was, I've been working for the state of Maine. In the Department of motor vehicle and then in the Department of what was it called, community development or something like that. As a clerk typist you know, and then I also got a great part-time job, so I was living at this point in poverty working for the Kennebec Valley Girls Club in Waterville as their physical education instructor, that was a blast. I love that job. Phyllis

O'Neal, who was doing Maine arts for such a long time, she was the director of the Girls Club at the time and so I thought, ooh I have to do something else. I have to go back to school. I got to finish. So, I applied to Orono, and they gave me total financial aid because I was totally broke. And as I was able to finish, so I met Linda and see I can't, what I can't remember and it might be in my file somewhere here is where I first got involved with Spruce Run, you know like what was the first meeting that I went to. Uhm because I got involved with Spruce Run, Linda Malka and I also founded probably the following year. You know in 1978, I got there in '78 so it would have been '79. The Bangor Web crisis center, Linda and I put that together, and then we also, with some other women put together a woman center at Orono in the basement of Fernald Hall, yes.

RN: I think I was on, I helped write the title one grant for that. And I helped hire the first director whose name has just gone out of my head, but we did have a director for it. That woman center, I remember she had very curly hair. But I hadn't realized that it was you and Linda Markle, who had gotten that started.

DE: And some other woman, yeah, we'll see that women's Center for a long time function all volunteer for a while, and then there was a work study student, Teter Bibber, who did something with it. But anyway, so it's probably sometime that Fall the following... Belinda Houston, ohh Belinda Thibodeau wasn't she at Bangor? She was at Bangor. The Bangor Campus. Yeah, yeah, OK. There was something at the Bangor campus, then too yeah, she's in Greece right now.

RN: Good for her.

DE: I know she's been living in Greece offline for a long time. So, it was probably sometime that fall or winter that I may have gotten involved in Spruce Run and, what are my first memories? I mean, I remember Terry Orlando and I remember Susan Don Nickles, Uhm because I remember their strong feminism.

RN: Did you start out through being a volunteer for crisis counseling?

DE: Yes, and I also did organizational stuff, and I may have done all of that from the very beginning. You know 'cause usually.

RN: Because I came across your certification as a crisis counselor.

DE: Yeah, I did, I went through the training that they provided and so, Oh yes, yeah. I probably started out as crisis intervention counselor and also doing some of steering committee stuff 'cause I

remember being on the steering committee for quite some time and going to meetings and I remember going to meetings and being involved in some of this stuff with the City Welfare Office. And I know that was tumultuous and there's some stuff in the file about that. And so you know, how we did the crisis work. I believe that we went through dial help. Did we go through dial help? and dial help would call us. I know that's how we did it for the WIC crisis center, and I imagine that would have been the way we did it for Spruce Run. Because our phone numbers were never given around, so dial help called us, and told us and then we would call the person back. I remember one client very vividly, because I can remember driving her everywhere, it was one of those classic situations of you know, spending a couple days with somebody actually driving her everywhere and she had a couple of children and her situation had been horrendous, and ultimately, she ended up going back. I think to her partner, few days later. Let's see, so what else? Let me stop this for a minute? All right, I can address that. Well, a number of things and I would actually have to go back to elementary school and one of, in my formative years I went to Catholic school. And I think that ,and I know some friends of mine have heard me say this before, and I referred to it in a keynote speech I did once at Megan Lesbian Symposium but you know what I came out of Catholic school with, and there was of course a massive amount that I had rejected at even a very young age because I could see that it didn't jive. But what I came out of Catholic school with, was that you do good deeds for other people, you do good works and then make sure they inherit the earth. Now I think that perhaps the marry inherits the earth through revolutionary armed struggle and not through praying. That's how the meek will inherit the earth. But you do good deeds for other people and the underdog will prevail. OK, so that was, actually those kinds of messages had a profound effect on me as a child, because I also went to school in a very poor and a working-class Italian neighborhood in Newburgh, NY. And so, I could see poverty around me. But of course, didn't jive, and I knew this very young. You know, I think I rejected the notion of God at a very young age because I thought, well, you know if there really is a God that none of this misery wouldn't exist, really. It's sort of like the same kind of logic I used to reject the notion of Santa Claus. I mean, if there was really a Santa Claus, then there wouldn't be hungry children in Africa, you know? Or in the United States, you know. Cause Santa Claus would give them food, so and also what I also experienced in Catholic school was a profound prejudice against people who were Protestants and against children, particularly who were Protestants from the nuns, and I knew that there is something very wrong about this, this is not right so then I remember the first feminist book I read. I was at Springfield College from 1970 to '71 and right after it came out I picked up Sisterhood is

Powerful edited by Robin Morgan. And when I read that book, I went click, click, click, click, click click, click, click click click click you know? And then I became involved in a consciousness raising group that was put together by some graduate students at Springfield, I was an undergraduate, and then I got involved. I found, and I forget how I found them. But I found this group of women who were doing abortion counseling. So then, so my feminism had, like, started.

RN: And that kind of activist feminism.

DE: Oh yeah, immediately, it was immediate. Uh, because I was very much in high school. I was very much an activist around, like other things, you know. I mean, I was very busy all of the time doing things and then when I got to Springfield College, I also became very busy. You know I was doing some political work. There was a lot of leftist stuff going on, there was a lot of anti-war stuff going on at that time, so I was doing anti-war stuff predominantly. And then hooked up with women who were identifying themselves as feminists which like totally fit for me, because then the other thing I think that was going on, but I was less conscious of it in '70. I think started like late in 71, my whole struggle around my sexuality, but I had sort of put on the backburner after, I mean it was there during high school, I sort of put it on the backburner my first year of college 'cause I had that other stuff to deal with. Of course, I was massively trying to be heterosexual too, so then I think the whole area of violence against women. I think that's a place where lots of women come into feminist activism because those touch all of our lives, and I think it's around the idea of violence and the political and social and psychological ramifications of that for women that, I mean, it's an issue for all women and I think, though that's an issue that lots of women come into feminist activism around. So it just sort of like made sense and just so it was there, it was convenient. It's like, oh, oh, there's these this feminist organization going on Spruce Run. I'll go work for them 'cause they exist, it's there and then I think it was also partially through that experience that Linda and I started the idea of a Rape Crisis Center, casue there wasn't a rape Crisis Center and I think Linda was also doing some training for Spruce Run, possibly, I'm not sure, excuse me, I'm not sure when she started training.

RN: She said she was part of the organization and its early stages.

DE: When she went to work for dial help, she went to work I think as the coordinator the assistant coordinator of something over at the Counseling Center in Bangor and so she had some supervisory capacity at dial health, and I think I can remember doing training with her at that time and I

remember her being at a Spruce Run training doing something so. So I think that the you know, because it was the issue of violence against women and that brought me into Spruce Run.

RN: And did you have a sense when you got there that this was like, this was like home, that you were encountering other women that have been through similar kinds of massive development?

DE: Oh yes definitely. Yeah, I'm trying, and I think Lulu Chamberlain was there when I was there, but meaby Lulu was on her way out and I don't have a good memory of Lulu. That's why I'm wondering about that. But I remember Terry very vividly. And I'm trying to think of one of the feelings I had at the time. You know it's a very, and then I remember Terry being, she had this incredibly intense strong but very quiet presence, and she had these like fiery eyes and this wild long hair that was just gorgeous. And she was, I remember her being this very strong feminist and what would come out of her mouth was always like very intense but quiet, you know? And she also had this very calming presence. It was very soothing at the same time, but it was so intense. I mean, that's what I remember about Terry. And I mean, it was certainly a mixed bag of a group. I think that was the other thing that was so wonderful. Everybody was so different and there were some women. I think. I mean there were women from all class backgrounds. There were women of all sexual orientations. There were women who were like very new to stuff. You know there were women who were just very middle class and sort of like in the innocent sense of the word. It seems somehow, but also very you know, so it was a real mixed group and so yes, I mean they like minded in many ways. Which was wonderful, and it was a great comfort too. Because also at the same time too. I mean, I had this interest. Yes, I mean this was also important to me. I mean I've had this long-time interest in social work of various kinds, you know, and so being involved in Spruce Run and the WIC Crisis Center, Uh, fed that because, it was a type of social work, but my social work started as activist social work and that has been. I am so grateful for that. It has been such a gift for me because then all of my social work that I've done since that time has been activist social work, and it's sort of like, huh? You can't do social work without organizing and without advocacy there always has to be advocacy. And if you don't get what you need through advocacy, you do something else. You might have to do civil disobedience. You might have to cut off the agreement that you have with this other agency you might have to organize people you might have to go to the legislature. You might have to go to the press, you might have to do something you might have to have a sit in at city welfare, so it was always and I'm sure that, you know, I mean, I brought, that some of that has to do with me too. And who I am but I'm just so grateful for those experiences

because it gave me a very strong foundation of how all of those things are always connected. And if you're going to do social work, you gotta do it all, you know?

RN: And in fact, there are a couple of drafts, either in your handwriting or what looked like your typing of the letter that eventuated with Edgar Brown and effectively repudiating the contract saying because you have not lived up to your end of this contract, Spruce Run finds it necessary to repudiate and contract, which is exactly the sort of thing you were just describing.

DE: Yeah, and I think, I may have worked on that letter, I'd have to take a look at it. I mean, I was. I was a fairly good writer and so I may have done some drafts of that letter as part of my steering committee responsibility. I have to look at to see how is this my language. I'm sure other people had input into it also.

RN: Oh yes, it went through several versions. Some of them are handwritten and they're on line-sheets of yellow paper. The handwriting is consistent with other stuff in there, so I think that's probably your contribution to it.

DE: Yeah, so yeah. And the other thing I remember about that stuff with Edgar Brown, I mean in terms of there was you know him putting women in potential jeopardy. Him breaking confidentiality, I think, but also him, it was a perfect example of this feminist process that was being sabotaged you know, because he was disempowering women, he was treating women. And I remember this very strongly and it went of course against the grain of everything that we were about in Spruce Run. But he was disempowering women and treating women like you know, these poor little victims who needed to be taken care of and will make everything OK for you, you know, and yeah, put yourself in our hands and of course no politics involved, you know or anything like that. So it was like this total, so it really that relationship jeopardized everything that Spruce Run was also about. Because it was an organization that was rooted in feminism. And also, I mean, I've always had, I mean another personal thing for me is that you know ever since I got in, I started getting involved in things and started getting involved in feminist and gay and lesbian causes. I have always subscribed to women newspapers from across the country and getting lesbian newspapers and there was a wonderful newsletter. Oh, Sharon has it, that wonderful newsletter put out by far-feminist alliance against... and then they merged with the Domestic violence coalition and put out a joint newsletter for a while. That newsletter especially was one of the best feminist newsletters about violence against women issues they had just fabulous stuff in that all the time about rape

and about battering, and it was a great newsletter, and I gave all my copies to Sharon Barker. And so you know, at the same time I was working at Spruce Run their crisis centers like reading all the time and I've always also had an interest in feminist theory, and so one you know, of course what has happened around the country is that many rape crisis centers and battered women shelters organizations have become more social work oriented and less feminist oriented, and one could see that movement happen, especially as organizations got federal and state money made agreements with city welfare agencies and all of that. And so, I think that you know for the time but always involved with Spruce Run and the women who were there at the time, I think they were very committed to having that not happen. And probably I mean there was that whole legislative effort that wasn't successful in the beginning that Nancy Gentile spearheaded, and I think some things may have happened during that process. That demonstrated that tension too, and I don't know if my memory serves me correctly, but I think that there was. You know there was a real resistance, you know, always a resistance from Spruce Run about compromising those feminist principles. You know, because if we do that, we really lose what we're about and I don't remember the specifics of that. It's just a memory, a sense of feeling that I remember.

RN: Well, I remember it even in connection with the domestic violence project that I was part of because the Humanities Council was very leery... advocacy and trying to write that grant proposal in a way which didn't suggest advocacy was very problematical, and I remember having it out with Nancy Gentile. It was just adamant, that you know, Spruce Run operated the way Spruce run operated and if that meant that they didn't get a grant, they didn't get a grant.

DE: Well, I mean there was even stuff happening in places in the country where the feds wouldn't give any federal money to domestic violence organizations that promoted lesbianism or that have lesbians in in positions of authority in those organizations, I mean, it was just insidious, the kind of undermining at every level. So it was really important for us to be aware of that national movement, really you know.

RN: How did that get talked about in the organization?

DE: How did it get talked about? How did it? I mean at meetings I think, you know we do talk about stuff at meetings at steering committee meetings and I don't have good memories of specific steering committee meetings. And also in conversations you know between people outside of meetings, and it probably also permeated the training you know. I would think. I mean, I remember some

instances of that specifically around the rape crisis center. There were couple people in our training program that were not feminists and there was real tension that got created in terms of how issues would get addressed. And how, you know it makes a difference. It really does make a difference. And even in terms of, you know our feelings of man-hating going to be allowed. You know, in terms of just their expression, you know without people getting all bent out of shape and defensive...

RN: Whether you have any memories about putting those bylaws together and how they evolved?

DE: Now and see, I wonder when these were put together because I would have, I would have had to have imagined that that they were put together before I got involved in the organization. No, and this this is not my typewriter. "No employer should serve as a steering committee member...." No, I have no memory of the bylaws. None.

RN: Do you have any sense of how the relationship we worked out between steering committee members and Spruce Run workers? Is that something that you would have been conscious of?

DE: Well, you know, who were the workers? Joan... See, I don't remember who was paid or who wasn't. With no wait a minute, uhm? See Joan, I remember now Nancy went onto the payroll somehow because she was going to be the director. We were going to have a director I think, and that was going to be Nancy. Now I was transitioning out at that time. I remember going in meetings that summer, but I knew what I was leaving in the fall to move to Portland to find work 'cause I couldn't find any in Bangor. And but I remember them being around steering committee table and I remember how. I mean, I could be wrong about this. It would be interesting to hear what other people remember, but I always remember things being very egalitarian. Now maybe I've, maybe that's just because I felt it was egalitarian for me. You know, I was sort of like this rookie coming in and I was a student, and I knew a lot of politics, but I didn't know much about anything else. You know, and there were people there who had been involved with Spruce Run for far longer than I, but I always felt like everyone was treated respectfully and it was very egalitarian, and we all brought different gifts to the table. Now that may not have been, how the hired people felt it would be fascinating to hear what Joan had to say for example. I just don't know. But it seemed like what else can I remember? I mean, it felt like you know, we frequently talked about feelings at meetings. You know, some of us, did you know 'cause some of us just do? And so that meetings were a real mixture of like business and talking about feelings and talking politics. And what's our strategy going to be, as well as the mundane tasks of it all.

RN: And so what you remember at least is people sort of collectively working their way toward strategies, towards solutions.

DE: Oh yeah, yes, it always felt very collective to me.... yeah now let me say I don't know if this will answer the questions, but let's see if it does, what my memory is and what it feels like to me is that I walked into this feminist organization that had been very grassroots, and that had been operating on a shoestring budget. And I walked in at a time when it was beginning to expand and looking at, I want to say sort of like going more mainstream but retaining its collectivism and its feminist principles. You know I walked in at a time when during that time the relationship with city welfare expressed then an interest. I think whether or however, that happened. You know, I think I was there when that relationship with city welfare, you know, it was being developed. I was involved at a time when you know I and other women were the group that was developing that relationship with city welfare and going to enter into a formal agreement because we wanted, you know there was going to be a shelter, you know. And so that was something new and different, and developing at the time. And then the whole legislative process Spruce Run getting involved with the state legislature and that was certainly an expansion in in terms of seeking state money, this little feminist organization was going to work in coalition with some other grassroots, battered women shelters and seek money from the legislature, so that was also a mega development. A very new thing. So those were the two major changes and then of course the thing with city welfare underwent another dramatic change, and so what else do you want to ask about that?

RN: Yeah, I was really wondering whether you felt that as you look back at it that it is a time when the group was evolving and it sounds as if it was a critical moment?

DE: Yes, I would say yeah, now I don't know what was going on all the time prior to '76 when I got involved but uhm. You know, I'm sure also perhaps see the money get a SETA money had been another major development on that. Oh this feminist organization is going to get SETA money. And, what time is it? I want to get back to you, let me just see who it is. This is Diane, Oh Julie, I can't deal with this right now. I'm in the middle of something. Yeah thanks a lot, bye. OK, so you know, maybe SETA was another one of those leaps as far as change, but.

RN: Was it hard for the organization to decide to go in these various directions? Do you remember how you even talked through what your role would be as an organization looking for the legislation, for instance, or in first engaging and then disengaging from the city welfare system?

DE: Oh yes. I mean, I'm sure, yeah, but see I can't remember the specifics of our conversations. I know that we talked a lot about it. However, my memory is that the one with city welfare was harder than the one with the legislature 'cause Edgar Brown was such a loose cannon and.

RN: Well, he was right nearby, whereas the legislature was a little bit remote.

DE: But as far as I mean, I'm trying to think what were my senses are my feelings about all of that. Well, I don't know. I think we talked it through. I think we looked at all sides, of course, 'cause we had to reach consensus and you know weight pros and cons and then OK. And then OK, that's our bottom line you know. And I think we were pretty grounded at what our bottom line was going to be. And when he violated, you know, we knew that we had to take action. So, so I think yeah. I mean, I'm sure we had like a political discussion. You know whether the political ramifications of a signed agreement with the City Welfare Agency having, that of course is part of the oppressive system, you know. But, you know, but then we went ahead and did it and had to find our bottom line. Now with the legislature, you know, I'm sure we had discussions about like oh everything, strategy compromises, you know is there a compromise? I mean, I'd have to look at the bill, you know, to remember what the particulars were of that piece of legislation.

RN: How did you decide, under what circumstances spoke for the organization you know who wrote letters or?

DE: Well, we all decided that in like steering committee, I think. And we you know shared responsibility. But when Nancy, and I could be wrong about this, but I think when Nancy took on the legislative effort and was the director then. I think that she was, you know, had the title, perhaps of director or executive director. You know, but probably she started signing stuff up, but I think other than that it was pretty much of a shared thing. You know, people did just volunteer with steering committee meetings to do different tasks, I think. I don't remember any more specifically than that. And I do remember I mean what was so exciting about the legislative effort and this, you know despite sort of like the dangers, the potential dangers, and doing something like that, was that woman battering is going to be a state issue. Our government needs to take responsibility for this, so and that was I remember the excitement of all of that. You know, like oh, we are on the moon.

RN: When you took on Edgar Brown and the welfare sort of industry in Bangor that too must have had a certain excitement for the organization and in some ways made you feel closer to one another, and having identified the problem and having allowed the collective strategy for dealing with it.

DE: Yes, probably now I don't remember the press conference. I wonder who actually did the press conference, Oh, Tary Orlando 'cause it's in the newspaper article, I think. Or, If there's not a newspaper article, is there a newspaper article in there about the press conference?

RN: There's a mention of it, but I'm not sure that I ever saw the newspaper, I might have just passed it by when I went through your materials.

DE: But I don't have a memory of that, so maybe I couldn't go for some reason, meaby I had to go to classes. And maybe I was there and blanked it out, who knows? But I don't have a memory of press conference. Yeah, I mean I don't have a good... Hi Misy, come on in. We're probably finishing up this is Ruth Nadelhaft. We're doing a history of Spruce Run, oral history.

M: I was part of Spruce Run.

DE: What year, do you remember?

M: 1979? I think.

RN: My goodness that is just after you.

DE: After me.

M: And then from there, we started the predecessor to new hopefully and we did the domestic violence services.

RN: So this is incredible, so did your training in Spruce Run, then sort of push you in the direction of kind of just...

M: For a while. For a while yeah, yeah. And then I sort of left that.

RN: Oh well, that's great. I'm glad to know that. Well, we will record that on the tape.

DE: Oh Mitzi Lichman. What's your phone number? 3385889... Susan John Nichols. Yeah she's still up there, isn't she?

RN: Well, actually Diane is the first person that we're getting to talk to because the schedule was so because you were leaving this state, we just decided we wanted to capture you before you left and so I just took off from Orono and came down so that I could.

DE: Who did what?

RN: Who did the training.

DE: Who did the training? Terry Orlando, long dark wild hair? Diana Shore, short blonde hair?

RN: I keep thinking Marian Allen. Maybe she had long blonde hair, Mary and she had one daughter named Heather. I don't remember what her son's name. I don't know, I'll check with her shortly. Well that's amazing. Cool what's your work phone number? Mitzi's work phone number is. 5964249. No, we but we may come back to you as we trying to put all this together.

[End of transcript]