

*The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 digitally-recorded session of an interview with Jan Poppendieck by Cynthia Tobar on February 20, 2012 in New York City. This interview is part of the Welfare Rights Initiative Digital Oral History Archive Project.*

*Jan Poppendieck has reviewed the transcript and has made minor corrections and emendations. The reader is asked to bear in mind that she or he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.*

*[starts at 0:00:00]*

*Cynthia Tobar:* Thank you for being here and for taking the time to talk with me today. If you can just state your name and your role within the Welfare Rights Initiative.

*Jan Poppendieck:* My name is Janet Poppendieck and at the time that the Welfare Rights Initiative was started I was the director of the Hunter College Center for the Study of Family Policy and I helped to think up and plan and develop the program and wrote some of the initial proposals.

*CT:* I wanted to ask you about your background, your early life and influences. Your family and their education; I'm very interested in what your early childhood was like, any intellectual or spiritual worlds you inhabited growing up, that sort of thing. You can tell me a little bit about that and you can begin anywhere you'd like.

*JP:* Okay, my parents were both teachers. My parents graduated from college in the midst of the great depression 1932 so I grew up with stories about my mother getting her first job by telling the principal who was interviewing her that of course she could coach girls' basketball and then going to a library and getting out a book and learning to coach girls' basketball. But she was a social studies teacher. My dad for most of my early life was a professor in the ED school at Rutgers University. Looking back from now I realize he was a graduate student.

He was working on his dissertation but the way I experienced it was that most of my teachers had had him as a professor. School was always a very friendly environment for me, a place I felt welcome and kind of special because as I say, most of my teachers had had my dad. New Jersey at that point required teachers to maintain their certification by advanced study, graduate level study and he was the professor in a lot of those courses. I'm trying to

think about what might be early influences that would have in any way impacted my involvement with welfare rights initiative.

Oddly enough I think the first one may have been that I had rheumatic fever as a child the year I was five and I spent an entire year in bed and my family, bless their hearts, spent an entire year reading to me. They got tired of the little kids' books and they started to read to me chapter books, longer books and the one I liked best and required them to read me again and again and again was *Robin Hood*. So I think at a very tender age I got imbued with a sense of social justice and the need to readjust things between the rich and the poor in society. I certainly grew up in a progressive family but they weren't politically. I'm not a red diaper baby in the sense of my parents were not politically active in organizations but the ethos in the house was one about justice and fairness and we had a lot of education in my parents but not a lot of money. So I grew up, mom was very thrifty. If we didn't finish it one night we definitely ate it the next and I still have a very visceral aversion to the waste of food, which has been a big influence in my life. My parents were active in a church, kind of main prairie line Protestant Church.

Daddy came out of a Presbyterian background and mom out of Methodist but when I was a child we went to the nearest mainstream protestant church, which in New Jersey at the time was Dutch Reformed church and so I went off to Dutch reform church camps and I associate commitment to social justice very much with that protestant tradition. That's not, a lot of the other part of my protestant upbringing has worn off including most of the core beliefs but I still think my commitments are rooted in that version of early childhood socialization.

When I was about 13 we moved from central New Jersey to Northern Virginia. My dad took a job with the federal government in the US Office of Education, in that would have been 1958 maybe, a period when desegregation was beginning to be a public issue. I remember being a little apprehensive about would I be going to segregated schools when I was leaving New Jersey. In fact my eighth grade school was mixed but my high school was effectively segregated by geography patterns so it was a kind of an armchair liberal perspective I guess you could say. But one side effect of going to high school in Northern Virginia was the guidance counselors tended to focus on the Southern Universities and so I went to Duke and I landed at Duke the same time as the active phase of the civil rights movement in that part of North

Carolina and so from my freshman year I was involved in civil rights.

I wasn't playing any major leadership roles. I was just showing up at marches and demonstrations and from civil rights it moved into a little bit of support for labor union organizing both on the campus, it was an organizing effort to organize nonacademic employees who were overwhelmingly African Americans. And some support activities for textile workers organizing which confronted me with some of the realities of white poverty in the south. My college years were very strongly influenced by the social movements of the 1960s. There was an African American community organizer who was active in Durham, North Carolina which is where Duke is located, who was leading neighborhood organizing in one of the early antipoverty programs. One of the experimental programs was called "Operation Break Through." His name was, at that time, Howard Fuller and he was very charismatic.

I decided I wanted to become a community organizer and he was teaching at, probably on an adjunct basis, I don't know. But anyway he was teaching at the school of social work at the University of North Carolina and so when I finished my undergraduate work I went to the school of social work and I didn't get assigned to Howard Fuller's class. I got the much more traditional social work approach to community organizing in another faculty member's and became pretty disillusioned with the whole, I went to social work school because I wanted to help empower poor people. The University of North Carolina's School of Social Work was doing many good things but that wasn't really on the list. I had had a very exciting, intellectually exciting undergraduate experience.

I was a history major and the university had some really wonderful collections of original documents so I did my senior honors thesis using primary sources. Oddly enough they had the files of the joint board of the Textiles Workers Organizing Committee which was a, went back to the 1930s and was an effort to organize textile workers in North Carolina and that's what I did my senior thesis on. I when I got to social work school I was kind of disappointed academically or intellectually. It seemed sort of distilled, predigested. They were drawing from so many disciplines but you can't go and learn all of those disciplines. You can't cover anatomy and psychology and sociology and history and what have you in any depth. So it was all kind of a little bit prechewed and so I dropped out after the end of my first year in social work school.

As I say, I was kind of intellectually not engaged with the materials I was learning and reading, all though I did write some papers that stayed with me. And I did learn some things that at the time I thought, as I said, were sort of predigested and that actually have served me very well in the long run. But anyway, I dropped out. My then husband and I relocated to Massachusetts because he decided to leave law school and go to theology school and so that was convenient for me. I finished my first year at University of North Carolina School of Social Work and we relocated the Boston area and I needed a job to kind of help support the family because I wasn't going to be in school for a while. Through contact from my high school years, I was able to get a job at Abt Associates which is a social science research and consulting firm.

*CT:* How do you spell that?

*JP:* A-B-T, started by Clark Abt and that was a wonderful experience for me -- very fast paced, intellectually demanding, very, very bright people. We did one little survey and I think I was one of only two staff members who were not the first children in their families, first or only and I'm sure you've seen the stuff about Type A personalities but anyway. This was a bunch of high energy, high achievers and it was an environment, sort of, this was the late 1960s but some of the things that you read about, about Google or Apple, we had, breakfast was available in the conference room every morning so people were encouraged to come in if they wanted it at six or seven o'clock to start their work. And then around nine o'clock this enormous box of pastries would arrive.

There was a volleyball net in the backyard. There was a grill for cooking out so lots of efforts to encourage staff to sort of play and eat and stay around for very long hours. I think for me the biggest effect of my time at ABT was, twofold. One is that although my interest in organizing, when I left Duke and headed for UNC, had been imagining neighborhood organizing and change at the neighborhood level. ABT very quickly sort of scaled me up to the idea that federal policy was really probably where I wanted to work and that neighborhood efforts were often frustrated by the overall policy framework so I think I credit ABT with raising my sites a bit.

The other thing, it's happenstance, but one of my colleagues at ABT was a woman named Eleanor [Golay] and one day Eleanor came to work with a brochure from the Heller School at Brandeis.

She said “I’m going to apply to this program for a PhD and I think you should too.” And I looked at it and I saw that they were taking in a class of people who did not yet have MSWs but the Heller School at the time went by the name of “Florence Heller Graduate School for Advanced Studies in Social Welfare.” It had been designed as a PhD program for people who had MSWs. So there were a lot of people around the country who were teaching in schools of social work and the MSW was their terminal credential and so the Heller School saw its mission as kind of upgrading faculty.

I think at the time I went there, there were 40 deans of schools of social work who were Heller grads. That’s what they were doing, was producing deans and faculty for schools of social work and directors for big research shops. You know, the United Way in many cities will have a big research capacity and so they wanted people with substantial research skills. They have decided to leave and loaf with a class of people who did not have MSWs, who were coming directly from undergraduate and I think they were thinking was just to get a little different mix intellectually than people who had been socialized into a professional formulation.

So I thought, “Great, I can finish my MSW” because it bothered me to have a half a degree. So off I went to the Heller School with the idea that I would finish my MSW. I did, although the Council of Social Work Education declined to accredit the Heller School’s MSW program. So it only ran for like two years and I have an MSW but it’s not from an accredited program, which since I never practiced never was an issue. But it’s kind of like having a rare coin that was only minted for a couple of years. They were right, it was a great program but it was not an MSW program. So I think they probably did the right thing. But the group of students that I joined in a sense was really interesting people with broad interests in social change and public policy and the faculty was fabulous and I became attached to Dr. David Gil.

He was my advisor and at that point, it seems ancient history now, but almost everyone who went to graduate school was assigned to some grant or other. I mean, I never paid tuition. It was always assigned to a grant at the Heller School. I don’t know if I paid tuition at UNC or not. But in any case it wasn’t, student loans were not necessary. Students were assigned as—so I worked on Dave Gil’s grant project and that, he had a grant to develop a framework for policy analysis. So that’s what I, that’s how I kind of made my living and I was a dormitory counselor at Brandeis at the time. It was an interesting era. Then I moved into a commune. So I would

credit ABT Associates and then the Heller School for sort of changing my focus to national policy even international comparison a bit.

*CT:* It helps a great deal. Can you share a little bit about your time in the commune and how it affected your outlook at that time?

*JP:* Well, I was still married to my first husband. We spent my first year at Brandeis, which was his second year in theology school as dormitory counselors and didn't love it. It wasn't as much fun as I thought it would be but we did meet other dormitory counselors and I'm trying to think—I know how the commune got organized. Some of the faculty and students from the theological school Andover-Newton Theological Seminary where my husband, then husband, was studying; decided to create a group living situation and they invited us and we, through us, the dormitory counselors at the other end of our double dormitory We were Shapiro B and they were Shapiro A, so it was ten adults and three children.

It was a kind of group home and perhaps we were pushing the definition a bit to call it a commune because we certainly did not take all of our incomes and pool them for common use. You might call it a group home, I mean what we did was share the rent and we cooked together, so we shared the grocery expense, you know, toilet paper and whatever and we did a lot of sharing of rides and pooling of resources that way but it's not as if we took all our of income and put it in one big bank account and drew on it. And I think of all the aspects of that experience the cooking once was probably, each adult was cooking every ten days so when you're only cooking once every ten days you tend to put your heart and soul into it.

It's the best I ever ate and I learned an enormous amount from other members of the house who had other cooking traditions and style. But the other thing that happened to me there is that the women in the house decided to form a consciousness raising group. This was early times in the women's movement and I did have my consciousness raised. Those groups were very effective. At the end of our year in the commune my husband finished seminary and took a job in New York working in the antiwar movement. Almost everybody in our house was very involved in antiwar, Vietnam era, antiwar activities. John went to work on a newspaper called *American Report* which was put out by a group called "Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam." We moved to East Harlem where we preceded to live in a very small commune just ourselves and two theology students and he worked fulltime in

the antiwar movement and I tried to write my dissertation. It was an interesting year.

We did that actually for two years. The first year we lived with two other people and the second year we just had the apartment to ourselves. I worked on my dissertation, on the research and worked for a while at the Center for Policy Studies, which is located at Columbia. And the project, actually my first time ever doing interviewing for a project was a study of neighborhood crime patrols community; crime patrols in public housing. Since I was living in east Harlem it was easy for me to do the East Harlem segment.

*CT:* So after your time, I guess after your dissertation where were your research interests lying? Can you tell me a little bit about that period right after?

*JP:* Yeah, the year that we stayed in Durham North Carolina, after graduating from Duke, the year that I was at the school of social work and my then husband was at the Duke University Law School, he had a number of friends from the law school. One of whom worked on the Citizens' Commission to Investigate Hunger and Malnutrition in America, which was in 1967 Robert Kennedy went to Mississippi for some hearings and Marian Wright took him on a tour of the back roads of the Mississippi Delta and he really encountered, it was essentially Kwashiorkor in Mississippi so your protein calorie malnutrition, children not getting enough to eat and hunger became an issue in the United States pretty much overnight because 1967 Robert Kennedy was news.

One of the organizations that was created out of that national shock was something called "the citizens board of inquiry" that was the right name, into hunger and malnutrition in the United States. This young man who was a friend of my husband's in law school worked for them on their staff. He gave me a copy of their report "Hunger USA" which I still have. I was just kind of blown away because like many, many Americans I had grown up thinking the poor in the United States were underprivileged. Maybe they didn't have TVs or what have you but at least they got enough to eat, unlike as I imagined, the poor in India. The reason so many of us thought this was because the main public policy issue around agriculture and food in the United States was surplus disposal, was the management of agricultural surpluses and a series of public controversies related to setting the parity price.

That's the technical term but it has to do with the price that which the federal government would buy surpluses from farmers. so that if the price fell below the parity price farmers could sell to the federal government instead of to the market and that would essentially hold the surplus off the market until the price rose and then either the federal government could sell the things, so farmers could get their contributions back and pay the government back—they were called nonrecourse loans—anyway, and because I had grown up in the Washington area these scandals, some guy from Texas named Billy Sol Estes and it was all over the news. I was very aware of the surpluses. I knew the federal government had a program for surplus distribution so I just thought "Well, of course people wouldn't go hungry in this country with all of this food." It's hard to understand, I think, from the current perspective but we really believed that the reason people were going hungry in Africa or in India was because there wasn't enough food. We didn't understand what we know now which is that we've not only had the capacity to produce enough food to feed everybody but we have been producing plenty of food to feed everybody for decades but people didn't know that.

They assumed that people went hungry when there was a physical shortage of food. When "Hunger USA" came out I was shocked and outraged because I love food. It took me a long while to understand the extent to which I became an anti-hunger advocate because I really do love food. Food was a central source of pleasure and identity in my life but in any case, when I started at the Heller School I had a public policy course, a social welfare history course and I was supposed to write a paper. I guess it was a public policy course but anyway I went to see the instructor who was the former dean of the school Charles Schottland who was a historical figure of some note in the history of American social welfare. But anyway, he was the professor and I said "Dr. Schottland, I don't know how to do any kind of paper except history." And he said "Oh, history is a fine approach to public policy, do history."

So I wrote a paper essentially on how AFDC got into the social security act, what were the origins of AFDC. And I got very interested in the great depression, the depression era. You may remember my telling you that my parents had both graduated from college in 1932 so that means I grew up with depression stories. I grew up with "You have to clean that plate and eat that food because during the depression we all went hungry." When I had a chance to study it some academically I was really fascinated. When it was, for that curriculum we were required to do a big



masters paper. It was called “A substantive analysis of a social problem.”

The social problem I chose was hunger in America and I ended up writing this enormous—120 pages—overview of food programs and what was wrong with them. When it was time for a dissertation proposal I thought I want to find out how they got that way. Here I had had this assumption that people wouldn’t go hungry in America because I knew we had food programs and they all date back to the depression era and I had gotten fascinated with that era. And I thought maybe if I understand the origins I can see how they got the way they were when the Citizens Board of Inquiry and those other discoveries took place. I set to work doing history of domestic food assistance during the depression and New Deal. While I was looking to see how they got so bad the advocacy organizations were making them much, much better. It was a kind of here I was digging up how they got so bad and here was the food research and action center, Bread for the World, and a number of other activist groups were suing the federal government, doing legislative drafting, organizing citizens and the programs were getting better and better.

At the time that welfare reform passed in 1996 the federal outlay for food stamps exceeded by a substantial quantity the combined federal and state contributions to AFDC. Food stamps were sort of our stealth floor under consumption. Our stealth guaranteed income, if you will. During the years in which AFDC had been kind of under assault, food stamps were growing and growing. Until the welfare reform act they were the one program in the United States where all you had to be was poor. You didn’t have to have any particular family configuration. There were not work requirements per se. If you were poor enough, you were entitled to food stamps to make up the difference between 30% of whatever your income was and the cost of the thrifty food plan for your family size.

Now the welfare reform put some major holes in the food stamp safety net, created a category called “able bodied adults without dependents” and if you’re an able bodied adult without—no wait a minute, able bodied unemployed adults without dependents, then you can only get food stamps for three out of every 36 months, which is bizarre piece of public policy. They put in work registration requirements and other limitations. Anyway, my main point is that during the years that I was studying the history of how the programs got so far from being able to meet people’s needs, activists and advocates were making them better.

Part way through my dissertation writing my then husband and I moved back to North Carolina into yet another commune and our marriage, which had major stresses for a long while, began to really unravel and I needed a break. So I took a temporary job with the Food Research and Action Center [FRAC] which was then in New York. I moved back to New York and served as the interim director of the National School Breakfast Campaign. This was a project to get word out—when school breakfast was created it was a pilot program. It was available as an option only to Title 20 schools.

*CT:* What was the year of your involvement with the [FRAC]?

*JP:* You know I've been trying to figure it out. I think it was probably 1974. If I went back and got a legislative history I could figure it out but about 1974. They had lost the director of their project suddenly and they needed someone to run the project until they hired a new one. I knew or I believed if I took a permanent job I would never finish my dissertation and at that point I had four years into it, I wanted to finish. But I definitely needed a break so I took the job for the period that it would take them to find a permanent director.

I suppose I did it for five or six months but it had an enormous effect on me because seeing the advocates at work, at the time that I worked for FRAC they were doing a tremendous amount of core litigation, what was called a legal service backup center. They had never lost a case. FRAC's lawyers were superb. There were lawyers and there were organizers and I was in the organizers section and it was just a fabulous experience that left me with a very strong belief in the power of policy advocacy. Certainly a major contributor to wanting to build the Welfare Rights Initiative.

*CT:* Are there any other areas that you indentified as potential policy areas in your research, I guess, during your dissertation? I think you've alluded to many of them but ones in which you see ways they can make difference in the lives of poor women on welfare, women and children, families?

*JP:* I certainly focused mostly on the food programs but there were 14 of them, federal food programs. It is in itself an enormous policy network and empire. I'm not sure all 14 of them were running then but this was the era when the WIC program got started, women, infants and children. School lunch had been there since 1946 but school breakfast was added as a pilot program in the mid '60s, '66,

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I think and then expanded, as I say, in '70, about '74 it was made available to any school.

That was my job as director of the National School Breakfast Campaign, was to go around and speak and get the word out to communities that all schools could have this program. School breakfast is now in about 80% of all schools but then it was probably 10 or 15% it. It was a long uphill battle to get schools to start school breakfast program. There was the child and adult care feeding program and the summer meal program. There was plenty to keep me busy in the food program arena. But I mean, I remained interested in income supports and in welfare and in guaranteed annual income proposals which I feel like still we missed our chance.

*CT:* Let's talk about your book *Breadlines Knee Deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression and Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*. Can you describe what lead you to write these books and talk a bit about their reception? And if you want to segue also your period after your dissertation as well, maybe that would...

*JP:* Okay, well I guess I need to back up and say that working at FRAC was a terrific experience but as intended I left when they found their permanent person. Then I went to work for the Fund of the City of New York, which is a foundation in New York City, working on a research project doing research on the treatment of hypertension in nursing homes and facilities for older adults. The idea was that that was a job I could kind of show up. It wasn't my passion, okay, I could show up and do my work and then I could go home and work on my dissertation. So I nibbled along on my dissertation and I saved some money.

The Fund for the City of New York had this wonderful pension policy because they wanted people to come to the Fund and then leave. They didn't want to get a permanent staff of people who stayed there forever. They wanted people to cycle through so they made your pension vest after like a year. I was so far from thinking pension at that point in my life. It's fun to look back on it now from the edge of retirement. But anyway, my pension vested, I took the money and went and spent a year working fulltime on my dissertation. I had an apartment on St. Mark's place for \$180 a month. It was possible to live in New York as a graduate student in those days. While I was doing that I was active in a political group called The New American Movement and we decided to have a

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meeting of the women in our group and we went around the room saying what we did for a living.

One of the women said she taught sociology at Hunter College. She ran a program that got students out into the field, particularly students that wanted to be social workers. She had been a social worker now she was a doctoral candidate. And I just blurted out “Oh, that’s what I’ve always wanted to do.” The next year she called me and she said “Send your resume to Hunter. They’re going to need you.” I sent my resume to Hunter. They called me in for an interview. They hired me. It was really easy, compared to what people go through now to get hired as graduate students in academic settings, I’ve been at Hunter ever since. But this does relate to the question you asked me because once I was at Hunter and I loved it, then I had a real motivation to finish my doctorate because then writing that dissertation was going to get me something. I did in fact finish *Breadlines: Knee Deep in Wheat* the dissertation, which was, that was also the title of my dissertation. Then I threw myself into teaching and I loved it and I failed to write any articles to speak of. I think I published one in a relatively obscure journal. So then four or five years later it was time for tenure and I didn’t have what I needed to be tenurable.

Then I took a leave, a scholar incentive award, thank you very much Hunter College. And I turned *Breadlines: Knee Deep in Wheat* the dissertation into *Breadlines Knee Deep in Wheat* the book. But I did a lot more research. I don’t know why, just because, because I could. Because I loved it. I still do love to do historical research. It was an accepted for publication by Rutgers University Press and so as I say finally the story of how the programs had gotten so bad was out there. You asked about reception, I was in a funny situation because it was a history, it was archival. I did much of the research in the National Archives and a lot of the rest in oral history projects like the Columbia Oral Histories of the Great Depression, reading newspapers from the Depression Era. But I was teaching sociology and so I wasn’t tapped into any conferences of historians.

And I didn’t think of the book as sociological. I now in retrospect know that it is really very sociological. But I didn’t, I was afraid to claim that. Basically I published it and I went off Mexico for a year on my Kellogg fellowship and so I didn’t write any articles and I didn’t speak and I didn’t do any of the things people do to publish a book. For a long while I was fond of saying “Both the people who read it loved it.” I wrote this book and it secured my tenure and that was great. And then I ignored it, the book and only after

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*Sweet Charity?* came out did I start running into people who had read *Breadlines*. I think actually after *Sweet Charity* came out people went back and got *Breadlines*.

I could write a whole primer on how not to do your academic career but I wouldn't because it's been very gratifying. Anyway, *Breadlines* did not get a lot of immediate reception at all but in the long run, many people refer to it now and use it, what have you—vindication in the long run. *Sweet Charity?* grew out of, well, I think I need to make a little detour and say in 1984 I was received a fellowship from the WK Kellogg Foundation. It was called the Kellogg National Fellowship Program and the theory underlying it, as I understand it, is that they saw that rewards structure in higher education rewards ever increasing specialization. People enter in with broad interests and they get narrower and narrower and narrower. Kellogg felt that some of the best minds in the country were going into Higher Ed and becoming in a sense, disabled to make any contributions to public policy and public discourse. So they created this wonderful program where you got a quarter of your time off for three years and a pot of resources to learn about something outside your field. It was great and what I learned about really was sustainable agriculture.

I knew a lot about farm policy politics in the Great Depression and nothing about actually growing anything or farms or what farmers were facing in the mid 1980s, which was a period of great dislocation in American agriculture. So I studied that and I had a sabbatical and we ended up going off to Mexico where I had thought I was going to work on a development project. Although what I actually ended up doing was teaching sociology in an ag school. Anyway, when I came back from Mexico, the Center for the Study of Family Policy had been created and Professor Abramovitz and Professor Sidel had been co directors for the first year and neither of them really wanted to stay with running the center.

They both wanted the Center to thrive and they loved the idea so they thought perhaps I would like to run the Center for the Study of Family Policy so I did. And did actually for 14 years. When I came back from Mexico, homelessness was much more visible than before I left. Whether that was the reality or whether it was my eyes, I don't know because my daughter was born in 1980 and then that period of needing to write the book for tenure and then the Kellogg Fellowship which involved lots of adventuring around Africa and China and Nicaragua and all kinds of really encountering the world. So it may have been that I just wasn't

paying attention as much but when I came back from a year in Mexico I was very aware of homelessness and it seemed very visible.

I got involved in a research program about emergency food providers. Or really, that program called The Audit and Evaluation of Food Program Use and it was funded by the State of New York and the principal investigators were some colleagues of mine at Syracuse University. But they asked me to run the New York City fieldwork. What the state of New York wanted to know was whether people were using food pantries and soup kitchens as a supplement to benefits like food stamps and welfare or a substitute. So we did hundreds and hundreds of interviews and I hired students to do those interviews and while the students were interviewing the clients I would kind of chat with the program staff, typically with the director. And I became fascinated by the people who were running these emergency food projects and became increasingly convinced that—how to put it—in a sense they were being had.

They got into developing these food pantries and soup kitchens because they felt there was a crisis. And then they were so busy trying to get the food in and dealing with the sanitary regulations and logistics of, running a food pantry is kind of like running a little store and there are all kinds of rules and regulations and what have you. They were so absorbed with that, that they were losing sight of the kind of larger social justice issues and why are people lining up at their doors. It was a period of enormous rapid growth in soup kitchen and food pantry use. And so that's what *Sweet Charity?* grew out of. Because I was running the Family Policy Center and/or because I'm a really slow researcher and writer, it took me a long while to write *Sweet Charity?* Reception, that's very interesting.

I was very lucky that the first food banker that got around to reading this was a guy by the name of Bernie Beudreau, who was at the Rhode Island Community Food Bank and he was a very progressive person, had worked for OxFam and he got it. He understood the argument that I was making which was that in a way all of this outpouring of charity was diverting us from the deeper questions about what was happening in income supports and in minimum wage and access to jobs. You know, who is throwing them in up stream kind of question. I was introduced to the broader food banking community as an asset not a threat, I guess you could say; or as a thought provoking speaker, not an enemy.

I'm very grateful because it enabled me to get my message out to a lot of food bankers. You never know what impact something you've written has. You don't know who reads it. You don't know how they behave afterwards. But I have heard a lot of people say "We read your book and we added a policy person to the staff. We created a position for someone to work on the broader policy issues." So I think it had a real impact. It was exciting.

*CT:* You must have felt really rewarded by that as well, to see that impact. Let's talk about your time as director for the Center for the Study of Family Policy. Any reflections looking back, I guess also on how you observed WRI, its inception, its formation, early years?

*JP:* For starters, I was always a little uncomfortable with the name of our center, the Center for the Study of Family and Policy. I wasn't sure what family policy was and I don't know that I thought we were studying it. I know they had considered at one point calling it a Center of Race, Class and Public Policy. That would have made more sense to me. It may not; I'm not saying it would have been a better choice. It was something sort of friendly and innocuous about Center for the Study of Family Policy and that may have been a good cover as it were. But my vision for the center was that we would do research that grew out of the real lives of Hunter students.

I came back from Mexico very much impressed by the challenge of going to school in one's second language or not original language. I learned that from trying to teach sociology in Spanish while I was there learning Spanish. And I thought "Man, those bilingual students at Hunter. How do they do this?" One of the first projects for the Center for Study of Family Policy was what we called the "Community Interpreter Project" and what we wanted to do was recruit students who were fluent in English and another language. These were typically students, for whom English was not their first language. Very few people become fluent in a second language by taking college courses in it. But anyway, to recruit them and train them as medical interpreters.

We trained them in simultaneous interpretation and my contribution to all of this was to say, as long as they can get academic credit for it, they'll be able to fit it into their lives. Hunter students are extremely busy juggling college classes, often working for part of their income and very often have family responsibilities. If they're not parents themselves they very often

have to pick up a younger sibling at daycare or you know a niece or a nephew. They're embedded in their families and communities. I thought that we could make using their language skills as volunteer interpreters in health care settings, more feasible for them if they could get academic credit for it and I thought they certainly ought to be able to because you really become much more adept. They would learn about the healthcare system and they would expand their vocabularies in both languages.

That was sort of the idea behind the community interpreter project. Suzanne Michael came to us from the health department with this experience of creating programs that enabled people to become simultaneous interpreters. WRI grew partly out of that model of saying if we can arrange for students to get academic credit that's a way of making time in their schedule for other activities that might be important to them. I guess we'll get around to sort of origins of WRI for a minute but saying overall for the Center, that was my vision, was that the center would create projects that served the students of Hunter College and engaged them with the policy issues in the wider world. Not just policy, policy and service delivery.

I think another director might have taken the center in a more research intensive direction but what I did was create a bunch of programs that created academic course opportunities for undergraduates. We had the Child Welfare Leadership Scholarship. We had the welfare rights initiative and the community interpreter project and then after that the language diversity initiative. We did some things called scholar and advocate roundtables where we brought together scholars who were working on an issue with advocates in the community and that was very much the kind of thing I wanted us to do more often.

*CT:* Can we go back to tracing the origins of WRI and w did you select the people and did you meet Melinda Lackey? What were your impressions of her?

*JP:* I first met Melinda when she took a course that I offered. This will fit right into the pattern. In the early 1980s Hunter College became very concerned about the HIV epidemic and Nick [Freudenberg] and folks at health sciences became very concerned about HIV and created a certificate program for students who had other majors. It was a 15 credit certificate program in which they would take a fundamentals of AIDS course and I don't actually remember now what all of the courses were that made it up but one of them was a fieldwork seminar. Something I failed to say in all of this history



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was that when I was hired at Hunter in 1976, before I finished my dissertation, I was in fact hired to run the department of sociology pre social work field experience seminar.

So typically I taught two classes a semester that were what we now call Soc 331 and Soc 332. They had different numbers back then but I placed students in social agencies and met them weekly in a seminar. So I had lots of experience interacting with social agencies in New York and lots of experience teaching students who were in the field and I loved it. So for the HIV I taught a course, I can't remember what it was called exactly but it was a specialized course for students who wanted to do volunteer work--and it was 100 hours over the course of a semester. It was a day a week—in response to the HIV epidemic. Melinda Lackey was a student in that class. She was placed at AIDS Center of Queens County, ACQC and I think it was her freshman year, freshman or sophomore year. She had been a performer on Broadway in the music world, dancer. She had lost a lot of friends to HIV and so she signed up for this course. She was moved for that reason. We read Camus' "The Plague" and some other—it was a good course with lots of good discussion in which we learned to confront our own fears and what have you.

Then I never had Melinda in a class again but we kept in touch a little bit. In the semester she was taking my course she was also taking a course that had something to do with health or medicine or healthcare in literature. And she read *Bless Me Ultima* which is a wonderful, wonderful novel written by a guy named Rudolfo Anaya. But anyway, she wrote about it in her paper so then I read it and then we had this connection. She had recommended me a book, it's on my shortlist of my all time favorite books, a wonderful book about a healer in Southern New Mexico in that curandera tradition.

But anyway, before I knew it Melinda was getting her Masters in our BAMS program in social research and was doing research on students on public assistance through—it must be in these documents who sponsored that research—but she had done a lot of interviews. She came to me at the center and said "We need to be doing something about this." and at the same time both Mimi Abramovitz and Ruth Sidel were writing books about the assault on welfare. I think that's when Mimi wrote *Under Attack: Fighting Back*" and Ruth was writing *Keeping Women and Children Last*. And Mimi who is one of the founders of the Center and on our Faculty Advisor committee was commenting that she kept being

asked to bring welfare recipients when she was talking, when she was speaking on panels.

They would get in touch and say “Do you know any welfare recipients who could speak about this?” So she would bring students who were welfare recipients and I was thinking that the students that I knew who were public assistance recipients were so far from the stereotypes that were being used in this attack on welfare. And Melinda had this research that she had participated in that showed very convincingly that getting a college degree was the surest path toward long-term financial stability and independence and what have you. And then we had this experience with the community interpreter project of getting academic credit as a device that would permit students to make time. It was the convergence of those ideas and influences and people that created the Welfare Rights Initiative. I guess to add in there to say that we had this fabulous piece of luck at the Family Policy Center that, David Tobis came to work with us. He’s a long-term activist and policy advocate in New York particularly interested in child welfare with a PhD in sociology from Yale and he was asked to administer a small foundation. I never did know where the money came from because it was an anonymous donor who wanted to have a foundation in the area of child welfare.

So he was looking for a home rather than have to set up a completely independent foundation and go through—get his own 501C3. So he brought that to the Family Policy Center, so for most of the years that I was the director, the center was the home of the child welfare fund. The child welfare fund gave the welfare rights initiative its first grant that enabled us to get started.

*CT:* Can you talk about what basically got the work of WRI underway during that time as director of the center and seeing the work that Melinda was putting into it and the selection of people, the formation of the classes? Do you have any recollections of that time?

*JP:* A lot of my role was writing grant proposals. Anyway we had a little bit from the Child Welfare Fund. We were expecting a grant from the New York Community Foundation. I think that’s that.

This is on tape and I have some history documents and I should have reviewed them before I—anyway, let’s say that we were hoping for a grant from a prominent foundation and had been encouraged by the program officer to think we were probably getting it, a site visit had been made. I am an incurable optimist

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and thought this was such a great idea, how could they possibly turn us down so we thought we had it. Then we didn't get it and this came as a shock. We were already somewhat underway, I mean we'd selected a class of students and what have you.

We went to see the staff from NYPRG, the New York Public Research Group, to see if they might like to adopt us because the way NYPRG is funded is through student activity fees. We thought so they've got a steady funding stream maybe they would adopt our—because they also had a course students could take, an activism course. Basically they said “No, we don't want to adopt you but you could use the same funding mechanism. You have to have a referendum and get students to vote on whether a portion of their student fees could go to...” So that group of students, I think there were only five of them in the first class. They got out there and tabled and got the signatures we needed to get on the referendum and then lobbied and spoke in classes and buttonholed people. We won the referendum vote and it gave WRI an independent funding stream that enabled it to; it had a core funding stream it could count on. Now that also meant that it was accountable to the college association and it hasn't always been easy because it's unlike a lot of other clubs at Hunter that get this kind of funding. But it was a great boom to get that sort of core funding.

*CT:* How has the formation of WRI affected you?

*JP:* Maybe we have to say in context that I'm on [travia] leave which is the leave in anticipation of retirement. So unless I change my mind, I've taught at Hunter for 35 years and everything I ever did at Hunter, WRI is the thing I'm proudest of. It's the thing I wouldn't trade. Sometimes when I look at my time at the family policy center I feel like “Oh, maybe I stayed a little too long.” I thought the community interpreter project was a terrific idea and I've always been frustrated that Hunter wasn't able to institutionalize it as a regular ongoing feature of the college.

And I think we did a lot of other terrific work but WRI is hands down the thing I feel most proud of and it expressed my core values, kind of infusion of education and social justice and every time I get a mailing from Dillonna and Mo that talks about some success that a student had encountered, I feel a little ownership I guess you could say, a little reflected glory. I feel like a proud parent. And I think it's a terrific model. I guess I have regrets and one of them is that we didn't do the work to replicate this to get the word out more. We needed to write the story that you are writing

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now and maybe once this project is done and it gets out there other campuses will try and do something similar.

*CT:* Because you said your role with the organization was more kind of steering it toward grant funding and keeping everything kind of administratively in shape along with obviously Melinda, Dillonna and Moe but you were encountering different people from different walks of life, what was your recollection of that? And then from your role as an academic did you feel any constraints with that?

*JP:* I want to make very clear that I feel that I played an important role in creating WRI but Melinda ran it. I probably couldn't have run it. She poured so much energy and time. It was something that grew quite rapidly in terms of acquiring additional functions. It started out it was this, I was looking at some of the old proposals and we originally, I originally called what is now the Community Leadership Seminar, I called Student Welfare Mobilization Project. I saw that as the core. We were going to train these students and give them some intellectual background about welfare and public policy and then they were going to go out speak and I didn't originally envision the one to one advocacy in terms of running the hotline and having students who were having problems come in.

And I certainly didn't envision a clinical course getting started at the CUNY Law School. Melinda did all of that and it's a wonderful model because it roots WRI in the day to day challenges that students encounter as they try to balance higher education with maintaining their families. And I certainly didn't envision that Mo would essentially write legislation and get it through the New York State legislature. So it exceeded my dreams and hopes and expectations. But from the very beginning the WRI staff and students enriched the center. The center was a very warm and nurturing environment, I think.

We had great parties, especially our Halloween parties to which we all came in costume and had orange carrot sticks and black olives, refreshments. Anyway, I think that we all benefited from the presence of the WRI students and the opportunity to interact. It kept us grounded. I have never been a welfare recipient, well, that's not really true. We're all welfare recipients in the sense of benefiting from all sorts of public investments—higher education and what have you. But I've never had the experience of applying for public assistance and living with its rules. So I learned a lot about the day to day realities from the WRI students. It's been great. It was great.

*CT:* At the end of the day how would you characterize the impact of all this work on your own life and on your own thinking?

*JP:* I think the impact in my own life was a feeling of making a difference in other people's lives. I know that professors make a difference and as Melinda was my student, Maureen Lane was my student in SOC 101. I know that a good professor makes a difference but it's very diffused. You don't know. Whereas with WRI you can really see people find their feet, spread their wings, integrate their—they bring experience that they haven't been taught to value, don't see being on welfare as an education but it is an education. And if you can be helped to see what you've learned then you can harness it and then you can use it to help other people.

This was very much the same principle that the Community Interpreter Project was based on. Our experience with Community Interpreter was that students had not been taught to value being bilingual. They experienced themselves as students who didn't speak English as well as the native speaker in the next seat and then who therefore had a tougher road to hoe. The best part of Community Interpreter Project was students claiming the enormous potential of being bilingual and the ability to communicate so if they became a physician they'd be a bilingual physician and you wouldn't need an interpreter throughout the healthcare system and those worlds.

In an analogous sense I think WRI enabled students to claim the learning that comes from coming out of a low income neighborhood, having firsthand experience with public assistance and many, many of our graduates have turned this into a step toward helping other people. Lots of people have gone to social work school, many people who are working in community activist organizations. So it feels great to have been part of creating that particular kind of ladder and that validation.

*CT:* I think we're done. Any final words?

*JP:* Perfect timing. I need to think for a second if I have final words. I'm very glad that you're doing this oral history project and that the larger sort of documentation project is going on because as I said, I think if I have any regrets about WRI it's that we didn't find a way to spread the word more effectively. We made a few forays into having outposts on other campuses but it's very difficult. The space CUNY is always at a premium and it wasn't really feasible

for students from other campuses to travel to Hunter to take the leadership seminar, not for very many of them; again, realizing that these are students with particularly demanding lives.

Maybe if I had been a bigger, better fundraiser we would have gotten an enormous grant and could have put a staff person on every CUNY campus or what have you. We didn't do it that way. On the other hand the longevity of WRI suggests that at Hunter, where there is a particularly good fit, we really have sunk our roots pretty deep.

*CT:* Great, thank you so much.

*[End of Audio – 1:14:34]*