

Voices of Volunteering: 75 Years of Citizenship and Service

Interview Transcript

Title Page

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Collection Title: Voices of Volunteering

Interviewee's Surname: Harris

Title: Mrs

Interviewee's Forenames: Doreen

Gender: F

Volunteer/Employee Roles and Dates:

1958 Norfolk Clothing Store

1963-1974 Norfolk County Secretary

1975-1985 North Norfolk District Office

1985-1989 South Norfolk District Office

1989 Norfolk Training Organiser

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Interviewer's Notes:

Doreen Harris (DH) talks about her time as a WVS/WRVS volunteer in Norfolk starting with the clothing store and then her work as county secretary; she also talks about how she became a district organiser and her role in North Norfolk and then South Norfolk. DH comments on her time as a Training Officer and her opinions on change within the organisation.

[Jennifer Hunt]: This is Jennifer Hunt with Doreen Harris on the 9th July 2014 at her home in Lowestoft, Suffolk. Doreen would you just like to introduce yourself?

[DH]: Yes, I'm Doreen Harris and I'm getting very ancient now. [Laughing] This is being done at my home.

[JH]: And can you tell me what your earliest memories of WVS are?

[DH]: My very earliest memories are when they were WVS, I first came across them when I was travelling during the war and these lovely ladies were on the railway stations with their, and it really was tea and comfort because we were very young and they were always there with a smile and 'Are you okay dear'? you know, and so that was my very earliest memory.

[JH]: And why did you join WVS in 1958?

[DH]: Well my son was getting into his early teens and I was at a little do with some neighbours and there was a lady there who was from WVS and I got talking to her and said how I remembered them and she said 'Well you must come and join us' and sent me to this lady who was, I think there was central organisers if memory serves me well then who was a lovely lady but looked me up and down and says 'Well we've got nothing glamorous for you'. [Laughing] I'd had to explain that my memories of WRVS and WVS were being doers, and that was when she said y 'Well they do need help for the clothing store at Norwich', and that was how I came to start there, that was when I first joined.

[JH]: What did you know about the organisation before you joined?

[DH]: Not a great deal because they hadn't, well they had been formed of course, some time by then but I didn't know an awful, I was aware of them and, as I said, I had cause to remember them from on the station but that was all I could sort of remember.

[JH]: And when you joined in 1958 what was your opinion of WVS then?

[DH]: I loved it from the moment I got in until the moment I left, which was what I'd always done. I've, I've met so many interesting people and I loved the variety of the work that we did.

[JH]: Can you tell me about your role in the County Clothing Store?

[DH]: County Clothing Store Norwich I was one of the helpers and it was rather fun because when I first went they were all older ladies but absolutely lovely and then along came a young, younger member who was about my, my age and we sort of paired up and did all the clothing and sorting it out. And of course, in those days we used to send bales of clothing overseas and we used to have to, if it said a hundred jackets there'd got, it had to be a hundred not ninety-nine or a hundred and one. The idea was then when it got the other side it was coded and the people who had to deal with it overseas knew exactly what was in the bales. And in fact I remember vividly also sorting shoes which we had to do, as you can imagine all sorts of different shapes and sizes. And then do you know everything had to be looked at when it came in because as you can imagine some of it was not fit. But we had this lovely saying at the Clothing Store and it was always 'Not on myself not on my shelf', meaning that if we wouldn't wear it we wouldn't give it to anybody else. So standards were quite high really. So it was fun, it was a fun job to do.

[JH]: Mm, and what was a typical day at the clothing Store like?

[DH]: At the Clothing? Well really just as I've said you'd go in, and what, usually at the time we'd go in once a week most of us. There'd be parcels that had got to be unpacked that had come in and sorted out to children's and ladies' and men's and then put on the various shelves into sizes, so it was a little like shopkeeping I suppose in a way. [Laughing]

[00:05:13]

But, yes, it was, it was always busy but then the County Clothing Organiser, she used to have people come with their notes from Social Service, Probation, all the officials to say 'Could you help Mrs so and so it happens her children need some clothing'? And most of the people were very, very grateful that came to us, and that was quite interesting. We did have this lovely man who came, one occasion he said he wanted a suit. Well, we hadn't got a suit so he was offered a jacket and trousers and he said 'Oh but I can't have that I've got to go to my doctor's cheese and wine'. [Laughing]

[JH]: [Laughing]

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[DH]: Which we rather felt he was perhaps not a very worthy gentleman, but we had to send him off with the, the jacket and trousers. [Laughing] This as you can see was, had its funny times.

[JH]: And how would you describe the building that the Clothing Store was in?

[DH]: The building, you know, was at the back of the Cathedral of Norwich and it was quite a big store, sort of several rooms and a little office for the Clothing Organiser to interview people in. And yes, it was, it was a nice place to work in.

[JH]: And can you, what can you tell me about the other volunteers you worked with in the Clothing Store?

[DH]: Well it was obviously, yes they really were, as I said most of them were older than Joan and I but they taught us lots, you know, and were great fun and always laughing. And we all used to take our lunch in and we'd sit and do the crossword puzzle over the lunch time. But they were lovely, all the people I met were lovely.

[JH]: And you've already told me a few stories about the people who used to come in the Clothing Store, but who else received clothing from WVS?

[DH]: Well it was anybody that had been sent to us by any of the, any of the services, Social Services, mm, Probation, Children's Officers if they were dealing with a family and the children hadn't perhaps got nice clothes. But they all had to have a note from somebody in authority, they couldn't just come and say 'I want a new coat' and be given one, it had, it was all done under the authority of somebody or other, yes.

[JH]: And do you have any other memories of your time in the Clothing Store?

[DH]: Not in the Clothing, it was a long, long while ago, yes. [Laughing] Just that they were fond memories and I enjoyed it, yes.

[JH]: And then you went on to be County Secretary?

[DH]: County Secretary.

[JH]: In Norfolk?

[DH]: Yes.

[JH]: Mm, what can you tell me about your role as County Secretary?

[DH]: Well, it was to help the Organiser who was this lady, young lady that I worked with in Clothing. Mm, just before I left Clothing she'd been asked to take over as County Organiser and not long afterwards this secretary that worked already there was leaving and she rang me and said would I be interested? And I said 'Well, I'd absolutely love it', you know. And so she spoke to headquarters and that's how I began. And then because Joan and I were, were such friends we did so much of the work together, and if she was going out to see somebody she'd take me with her, or if she couldn't go to see any of the members she'd send me and she'd go somewhere else. So that was how I came to know the county so well and meeting people like that.

[JH]: And what are your earliest memories of being County Secretary?

[DH]: Mm, I don't know really. I think I was probably a bit amazed at how much it covers because everything came into that office from the whole of Norfolk, Norfolk's quite a big county, but there was always something different every day.

[00:10:00]

And I, I remember us having what is called, or used to be called...

[JH]: Mm.

[DH]: A Day Book so that whatever query came in you had to do it in the Day Book and put what was done and the action taken, that I do remember very well. And [Pause] I can't, just so much there I think, but I, I can honestly say that whatever it was that I always enjoyed it. I liked people and I think that WRVS was just great for people who enjoy being with people. And they all seemed to sort of have the same sort of thoughts, or the majority of them not all, I couldn't say all because you'd have sometimes somebody who came and think 'Oh this is not for me', some people thought it was hard work, but you don't do a job and expect to sit on an easy chair do you? [Laughing]

[JH]: No. And can you tell me about the County Office?

[DH]: The County Office? When I, I first went there it was down in Thorpe, just outside Norwich, and, [coughs] excuse me, we were on the second floor, we had two rooms up there and there was something to do with The AA I think on the bottom floor, and they were absolutely lovely and they used to hear us come in in the morning and they'd have a cup of ready for us which started the day well. [Laughing] And we also had the Clothing Store there at that time. And then we had to move from there and went into this lovely old house in Tombland in Norwich, quite near to the cathedral gate and that was a lovely place to be in. We had most of that building we took over and had quite, the Clothing Store was able to expand through being in there.

[JH]: Yes.

[DH]: And in that place we also had South Norfolk and Norfolk, Norwich City, as it was then, the County Organiser used to work from there. So quite a lot of us together there, but it was a lovely building to work in.

[JH]: And how did you feel about your role as County Secretary?

[DH]: I loved it, I really did. I know I keep saying this, it sounds silly, you can tell I've always been an enthusiast of the office. [Laughing]

[JH]: Yes.

[DH]: Mm, I did, because I enjoyed going out to different places and meeting people and hopefully being able to help if they had any worries or queries. And at least I can honestly say I did thoroughly enjoy it. And because the County Organiser did, Joan, she used to go away up to Scotland to see her family up there during the summer and I was sort of unofficially her deputy so that meant even more going about. But that I enjoyed travelling over Norfolk, Norfolk's a lovely county to travel in so...

[JH]: And so you've mentioned working with the County Organiser.

[DH]: Mm, mm.

[JH]: Who else did you work with in the County Office?

[DH]: Well we had other people that were in the office to do sort of filing and just to help with general office work, that's really what it was. Mm, not a great many of us as I seem to think, two or three other than myself and the County Organiser I think, but we always had plenty to do. And of course, people would come, if they wanted to know about WRVS they would be sent to the County Office to hear about it so we always had plenty of literature to give out.

[JH]: Mm, mm. And in *Blue to Green*, which you wrote and gave, gave a copy to the archive you wrote about that there was some opposition to the changes you and the County Organiser wanted to make.

[DH]: When it came to changing from centres to Counties, Districts sorry to Counties, a lot of the ladies that we had as Centre Organisers were by that time, most of them had joined in the War or just after the War, and they were, bless them they were lovely, but they were getting elderly. And there was interchange, and it didn't matter how often we said 'Well it's not our ruling it comes from headquarters', and I don't think they believed us and it did cause a bit of ill-feeling until we could...

[00:15:13]

I think in the end to try and settle things we got them all together at a meeting and got somebody from the Regional Office to come to back us up over this and so we all parted the best of friends and

so that was, that way you were able to get younger people coming along and it all ended happily in the end.

[JH]: Mm, mm.

[DH]: But it did cause a few headaches because they had done so much and we didn't want to tread on toes and make them feel awkward but it was just a ruling that came from up there, mm.

[JH]: And that was when it went from being centres to Districts.

[DH]: Districts.

[JH]: In 1974?

[DH]: Yes.

[JH]: And how did you feel about that change?

[DH]: Well we welcomed it because it did, we were getting new people in and they'd got more of an open mind. It can happen if you're too long in a job that you do it your way and you don't want to change, and really it was through that I vowed that was never going to happen to me, I would go before I was pushed. [Laughing] And do you know it, it was just wonderful because we got these new District Organisers and used to have regular meetings for them to keep them up to track with what was going on. And we would go and visit them because they had their little meetings which again was a lovely thing to do.

[JH]: And what services were WVS and WRVS providing in Norfolk at the time?

[DH]: Well all the usual things I don't, well actually in Norfolk we did start quite a few things ourselves that hadn't been, they'd been sort of fitted over, such as children's holidays. We suddenly sort of heard from Social Services that there were children in London that needed holidays, you

know, they didn't know anything about the seaside or anything else. And so we had to advertise for hostesses to come see us so that we compared them, explain what we wanted, that we couldn't say how well behaved were or anything but it would be a tremendous help if they could give a child a holiday, usually for a week it was. And that was, that was also an eye-opener.

[JH]: Mm, mm.

[DH]: But the children, we didn't have any problems and we did... I think I mentioned in the write in that we had this lovely farmer's wife from Aylsham way and she had twin girls from the time they were about five years old that always wanted to come back and see her. And they left and got jobs but they came back to see her on their twenty-first birthday, which was lovely, and she kept in touch with them right through, so that was lovely too. Well then after a while we suddenly heard from our own Social Services that there were children in Norfolk that had never seen the sea, which we could hardly believe because we're surrounded by water aren't we? And so we said 'Well do you know charity begins at home we'd better do something about this', and so we went from having so many from London having to give to other districts down to more local. They worked in the same way and it was quite good. So, so that was a nice thing to do because usually the parents were very grateful. Some of the poor children arrived with very poorly clothing so again the Clothing Store came into its own and we fitted them out with nice little things they could have and take back with them. So that was good and that grew. And do you know we, we were doing sort of quite a big job with that, which was nice.

[JH]: Yes.

[DH]: Nice thing to do.

[JH]: And was there anything else we've not focused on so far?

[00:20:00]

[DH]: Anything, sorry?

[JH]: Anything else we've not focused, sort of hospitals or...?

[DH]: Oh gosh yes, hospitals, we started the hospital run, Joan and I wasn't quite so involved with that apart from the paperwork involved. The hospitals, do you know we had the hospital shops but before that we'd always had people visiting folks in hospital, we'd perhaps hear from one of the village reps that somebody was in hospital and nobody was going to visit them, and could we send somebody so we'd send somebody who was near and say 'Would you mind going to see this lady, it's horrible to be in the hospital and have no visitors'. And a lot of friendships grew out of that, we got the people to go. And then we also did the flowers in hospital because they don't have them now do they?

[JH]: No.

[DH]: But I just used to go in and arrange the flowers, take out the dead ones, give them, you know, water, which was nice to keep them fresh, and they all enjoyed them Jennifer. And then we also had the trolley shop go round the wards, you know, something like this, mm, with chocolates and drinks and those sort of things, which did quite well too. And again people were pleased to see us go, somebody to talk to.

[JH]: Yes, yes.

[DH]: I can't think that... A home from hospital, that was another thing we did, that, mm, if someone was coming out of hospital and we were told when it was known that she was going to be alone and could somebody just go and see her, and so that once the patient was at home we would send somebody to see them and sort of say 'Can we get you a library book?' or something like that. And do any shopping that was wanted and just generally make sure that they were okay, it was another pair of eyes wasn't it?

[JH]: Mm, mm. And also when you were County Secretary they celebrated the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of WVS'

[DH]: Yes we did.

[JH]: And how did you celebrate it in Norwich?

[DH]: In Norwich Lady Reading came down to see us and there is a picture in that scrap book. I don't, I think we were in the... [Pause] Some, somewhere in Norwich, I can't remember the name of the hall we were at, but it was lovely. And of course, everybody, all the members from Norfolk were invited and of course, Lady Reading was a wonderful speaker and a wonderful sense of humour she had, and I was going to thoroughly enjoy that. I always say that was the first time I heard, saw WRVS, of WVS with its head and sort of enjoying themselves. That was very nice, it's always lovely, it makes you feel very proud when you see all these ladies that, we didn't have too many gentlemen then, that came later.

[JH]: No. And how did you feel when WVS came, became the Women's Royal Voluntary Service in 1966?

[DH]: Well it was quite fun. We got lots of names, because you probably know or have heard that WVS was known as 'Women Various Sizes'. [Laughing]

[JH]: I'd heard that, yes, I'd heard that one. [Laughing]

[DH]: And when it came to WRVS, you might need to cut this out Jenny, it got known as 'Widows, Rangy Virgins and Spinsters'. [Laughing]

[JH]: [Laughing]

[DH]: Better not tell people that. But we did get for an [Inaudible 24:19] 'Women's Rural Voluntary [Inaudible 24:30]' who, and that, that was quite funny. But wearing the uniform they'd just gone for the hat, and my days working in the city and it was wonderful because the uniform was instantly recognised, and two or three times I had both men and women older come and say 'I must shake your hand and thank you for what you did for my family during the Blitz ' or something or other.

[JH]: Mm, mm.

[DH]: And I said 'Well that was lovely thank you, I personally wasn't there but I would pass the message on'.

[25:02]

And that gave you a lovely glow to know you were into something that had that lovely reputation.

[JH]: Yes. And you just mentioned you uniform there, what did your uniform look like?

[DH]: At first we had the tweed, tweed, mm, spinach and beetroot I think we were referred to because we had this beetrooty coloured blouse. And of course, when I first joined we had the brimmed hats, which were rather nice, and just plain skirts and tabards of course, if we were going out on emergencies or anything. And yes, it was nice. And we had our badge, you've seen them - the WVS badge - haven't you?

[JH]: Yes.

[DH]: Which was good, I've still got mine. And yes, so I always enjoyed wearing uniform, although my rude son when he first saw me in it said 'Up the Boy Scouts'. [Laughing]

[JH]: [Laughing]

[DH]: But no, it was, it was good and it opened a tremendous amount of doors it really did. If I went in wearing uniform I got away with things I wouldn't if I had gone in just civvies, so yes it was, I always enjoyed it, yes. Then, as you probably know, we got the, the suits that were a nicer material, weren't quite so scratchy as the old ones. And again that was quite nice, it was the skirt and jacket and we went into the beret type hat then.

[JH]: Yes.

[DH]: And some of us liked it, some of us didn't but we all got used to it in the end, so that was quite a nice uniform to have with you.

[JH]: And also when, mm, you were a County Secretary in 1971 Lady Reading died, did you notice a change to the organisation after her death?

[DH]: Mm, I think we missed her to a certain extent most of us, especially those of us that had met her, but, mm, but I don't remember that we noticed a tremendous change. We had very good Chairmen who worked, came after her, I can't remember the sequence though you've probably got details of that somewhere, but they were all good and we used to have them down. When they'd come we'd call a County Meeting and have them come which was always good for members to meet somebody from headquarters. And they were always good and always very supportive to us on the ground so I didn't notice any tremendous difference.

[JH]: No.

[DH]: But I'm sure people at headquarters did find a big difference because she was a character.

[JH]: And then in 1974 you became, mm, a District Organiser for North Norfolk. How did you become District Organiser?

[DH]: Well, it was because the County Organiser, Joan, that I'd worked with for eleven years, she decided she wanted a change and she was going to leave. Well I didn't want to leave but I felt that they'd have to get a new County Organiser and she wouldn't want to get landed with me she'd want to pick her own secretary was the way I looked at it. And so the Regional Organiser came down and said 'Well I'm glad that you're not resigning too, what can we do with you?' So I rather cheekily said 'Well I'd like to look after North Norfolk', I knew it through my work and everything, I knew they hadn't had an Organiser, a District Organiser for some time. 'Oh well', she said 'that sounds a good idea you'd better give it a go'. And, because at that time I was living in North Norfolk anyway. And I worked from home at first, I'd asked if I could have an office if I could find an office and was told 'Prove the work's there and we'll see about it'. So I worked for several months at home, which in a small bungalow you can imagine it wasn't that easy. I began to get people interested to approach them again and they said 'Yes, okay look for one', so I found a little office in North Walsham which was lovely and so a little team of us went there. And North Norfolk has, is always my favourite district, and it was lovely because it went right round the coast.

[00:30:02]

[JH]: Mm.

[DH]: And again we managed to find Village Reps and Local Organisers and that, that was nice it was lovely, and in fact I did start a lot of work there, mm, because not very much had been done. And that was another place where there was one particular little town on the coast where they had an awful lot of old ladies who'd been in a long while and they did not like somebody new coming in, but we won them round in the end. That, that was a very happy time, that little office was good, I enjoyed being there, and it was easy access to the county.

[JH]: Yes. And how would you describe the office you worked in?

[DH]: That was, when we first went there we had just one room, mm, actually I think it was over a bank, something like that in North Walsham. I know we were on the first floor and Sibson's and Grizford's [ph 00:31:14] was one, one room, we had another little room. And then there was a little room that was owned by an estate agent and that wasn't used very often. And as we sort of grew, mm, I asked that because Jackie who worked at the estate agent was a sailing friend of ours so I said 'Look, you don't do very much in your office can we use it?' 'Yes', she said 'of course you can, any letters that come just re-address them please and you can have it', which is what we did'.

[JH]: Yes.

[DH]: And eventually they wanted to give it up and headquarters took it over so we had it. They were quite small apartments but they were nice. It meant that if I wanted to have anybody in to talk to it, you, you'd got a little bit of privacy.

[DH]: Mm, mm.

[DH]: So that, that was a nice building to be in, mm.

[JH]: And what serve..., WRVS services were you providing in North Norfolk?

[DH]: The same things as all over the county that has been done from County Office on a smaller scale to a certain extent. And because I'd been so long in the County Office most of the people I knew anyway which was a great help, so yes it was a very happy time then, lovely people I met. Because we had in the same way we had district meetings and we used to ask the new County Organiser and people from County and Region, Regional Office used to come and see us.

[JH]: Mm, mm.

[DH]: So it was, the work was much the same as it was, the typing varied greatly from the County Office.

[JH]: Yes. And what happened at the District Meetings that you used to have?

[DH]: The District Meetings? Well the idea really was to get them up to speed with what was going on, and really to give them a little encouragement and tell them that whatever problems they had we were there. And the lovely thing was if the District Organiser couldn't solve them there was always somebody higher up the line that you could go to. And meetings I always felt were a good way of keeping people together otherwise they got isolated and thought nobody bothered what they were doing or if they were doing it well or not. And, mm, so that was good and they all seemed to enjoy it. When I first went to North Norfolk I called a meeting simply to introduce myself to the members and thought it would be a one off. But so many people either wrote to me or rang me up and said 'Doreen I do hope you're going to have these meetings regularly', and I said 'Well, if you're willing we can', and so we used to have one, just a big District Meeting once a year.

[JH]: Mm. [Pause] And you were also involved, you had emergency teams in North Norfolk as well?

[DH]: Yes we had, yes.

[JH]: Can you tell me about those?

[DH]: Well, with of course, being on the coast we did get call-outs, we had to have emergency training with how to build a fire out of bricks. And again we had people from headquarters come to do this. And that was quite fun, we used to wear the orange tabards and learn how to cook and how

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to set up a rest centre and, for the people who were made homeless, much as today with the floods and surges that we've had.

[00:35:04]

And it did, it was quite good to learn and we were told how, if we did get a call-out, it will be from the police, the inspector of police, and we were always told it would be very formal the way they would call us out. But I was called out when the sea came through at Walcott, and I'd known the place because we'd had them come to our meetings sometimes and worked with them., And this lovely inspector rang me up and says 'Mrs Harris my boys it happened on the coast, they are so cold and miserable and can you help?' This is about nine o'clock in the evening, I said 'Well, we must do something about them mustn't we?' So I said 'We'll pick our team and be there as soon as possible'. So I gathered up the ladies with the tea, we got the urn and down we went to Walcott. And it was rather strange because the police were pretty looked after but we went into the village hall and they had wisely got a group of local ladies, mm, were looking after. And at first I think they thought we'd come to interfere, we said 'No we just want to make sure you're all right', and we said 'have you got enough blankets, because if not we've got some we can let you have', 'Yes', they said 'that's, that's fine'. So we said 'Okay we'll leave you to it, you know where we are if you want us'. And then we went on and fed and watered the police as well, yes. And that was, we did have one or two little call-outs but that's the one I remember mostly.

[JH]: And how did you feel about being called in the middle of the night?

[DH]: No problem, we knew it was likely to happen, and I'd warned my family so I think my husband worried slightly about me taking the car down to the coast with the storm raging, but he was very, very good about it, he knew how much I enjoyed it so that was no problem. It was also absolutely wonderful, I'd just ring them up and say 'We've got an emergency', and of course, they'd been trained for it so they knew you don't get an emergency during the day do you, they always come at the worst time.

[JH]: And what did you used to take with you to an emergency?

[DH]: We always had the inevitable urn and tea and coffee. And we, in those days we used to have arrangements with local shops so that they would open up for us any time day or night to let us have bread and things to make sandwiches, which is what we used to do. But it was mainly drinks, hot

drinks that they wanted so. But, well some of the girls would say 'I've got some spare cakes I'll bring them with me'. So WRVS is always resourceful. [Laughing]

[JH]: And also during that time you celebrated the Fortieth Anniversary.

[DH]: Yes Fortieth, and we all went up to St Paul's, which again was a wonderful experience and to see that, I think I said 'See that sea of green in that lovely place', because I love St Paul's. And it was great, you know, it was great. It caused a lot of interest when we stepped outside, people didn't really know, some of them, who we were. And we had a party of German people were near and they sent their courier over to ask what was going on and who were those ladies in those green dresses. [Laughing] And so we had to tell him. They were wonderful, they all gave us a wave and... But it was a lovely service and it was great to be there and absolutely full was St Paul's, which was something.

[JH]: And did any of the Royal Family attend that day?

[DH]: Mm, yes I did see, Queen Mother was there at that one, I think it was that one. And of course, we had people from the Cabinet, the, Douglas-Home I remember was one who came, and other dignitaries from, you know, round about London who came. And yes, it was a big thing so that was great. Nice memories of that one too.

[JH]: [Pause] And, mm, again from your *Blue to Green*, and you've said before that your green uniform opened many doors that otherwise would have remained closed, why?

[00:40:03]

[DH]: Why? Because the WVS and WRVS were very well respected, and because of what they did with helping people, and people remembered that and that I'm sure is why. I always said I'd got away with things in uniform that I probably wouldn't have done otherwise. But, mm, it, it was good, it was so well respected, yes.

[JH]: And then in 1985 you moved to being South Norfolk District Organiser, why, why was that?

[DH]: That's right. Well, because I was getting older but my husband had died and I wasn't sure that I could stay in North Norfolk. I'd, I have so loved it but without my husband around I didn't think much... And so I found, fortunately I found a doctor's wife, a young girl, that had been with us when I was in North Norfolk and persuaded her to take over from me and said 'Do you know I shall always be there, if you want any advice come and work with me for a fortnight then', which she did and I always laugh and say it took quite a long while because Heather kept saying 'Oh no I couldn't do that', and I said 'But you could do it'. Anyway she always says how I finally wore her down, and she turned out to be a very good Organiser. And so it was then, South Norfolk at that time, the Organiser from there had retired and they wanted somebody there so I said 'Okay'. And at that time I was living more that way so I took over South Norfolk.

[JH]: Mm, mm.

[DH]: Very different people, South Norfolk to North Norfolk. Mm, but I still think that the work was interesting.

[JH]: Mm, mm. And how were the people different from North Norfolk and South Norfolk?

[DH]: I don't know. Is it, it's probably with all counties it's different, you find they're different in their outlook over things. But, but it was, it was a nice area, you know, and you just had to sort of get used to things. And of course, they had a little office in Diss with a Local Organiser and so I used to go down there quite a lot. But we had the District Office was in Tombland where I had been counter secretary, we had one of the rooms there as, for South Norfolk and the District office there. Then eventually I managed to open a little office in Wyndham and we had a few people there. It, it's always a great help if you can get somebody in charge and it's easier to keep an eye and the can come to the Organiser if there's any problem.

[JH]: Mm. And can you tell me about the other volunteers you worked with in South Norfolk?

[DH]: Yes, they were again volunteers in WVS much the same wherever you go I think. Yes, they again were lovely ladies and had been rather a long while with the Local Organiser and thought she that should be in charge of everything and, you know, here was this women coming and doing different things. [Laughing] And, but they were fine, and do you know, I, again the famous meetings, I had meetings so that I could talk to them and talk to them individually if there were any problems, which always makes a great difference that you can tell them.

[JH]: [Laughing] That's fine. Mm, and also how did you increase your, increase the WRVS's role in the district?

[DH]: I would say word of mouth. Mm, you know, I'd, I'd always sort of say if I was giving a membership talk 'Well, you know, if you enjoy it tell your friends you enjoy it we can always do with new members, if they can only give us half a day a week it all makes a big difference'. And it grows like that a lot by word of mouth because I think if people see that you're enjoying it they will think 'Well it can't be that bad'. [Laughing].

[00:45:00]

And I used to say 'Well come and give it a try, if you find you don't like it, you know, you're not obliged to stay', but they mostly did I'm pleased to say, yes.

[JH]: And what services were being provided by WRVS in South Norfolk?

[DH]: Exactly the same Jennifer, yes just the same. They had Meals-on-Wheels that were already there and they had a kitchen that the meals were served from, and again they had an emergency team and all the same things, it was all the hard work all over the county really. So it was much the same, it was more or less a repeat of what I'd been doing in North Norfolk, yes.

[JH]: And you mentioned Meals-on-Wheels there, was it, how many rounds were people doing at that time?

[DH]: In South Norfolk I couldn't honestly tell you. I know that when I was in the County Office we'd got it to nearly a hundred rounds all over Norfolk, which was quite a lot but that was spread out, but I honestly couldn't tell you how many. There were quite, quite a few because Meals-on-Wheels was always a big thing in the house wasn't it?

[JH]: Mm, mm.

[DH]: And we used to tell the people who went on Meals-on-Wheels is twofold, because you go in if there's anything wrong you can get help or send somebody in. And I, I helped out on several occasions and doing Meals-on-Wheels myself and it was just wonderful to see how grateful people were. And you knew that we were the, probably the first people they'd seen we'd been there the last time, and you always had to make time for us to chat because I always felt it would be awful just to go in, dish out the meal and rush out again. Because we had... Do you know, have you ever heard of the hot box?

[JH]: Yes.

[DH]: Yes, you've heard of the hot box. And of course, it did keep them warm and we always made sure, we used to say 'Don't just dump it on the plate, get a spoon and do it nicely so it...' [Inaudible 00:47:15] It was always hot.

[JH]: Mm, mm. And were you just providing hot meals or did you start providing the frozen meals as well?

[DH]: No we were not, during in my time we weren't into frozen foods, no. We used to get them in all sorts of different places. Mm, hotels would sometimes do it, schools were very good. But of course, life was much easier in those days than it is today because we'd have somebody say 'We could do with Meals-on-Wheels in our village', and we'd get on to Social Services and they'd say 'Okay I think we know a school that can do it', and it was as easy as that. But no we weren't into frozen, it was a long time ago Jennifer. [Laughing]

[JH]: And were you still providing the children's holidays at, in South Norfolk?

[DH]: Yes we still had some go from there, got the hostesses from there in the same way, yes, yes. And hospitals because they were general hospitals and we had the trolleys get out and in the little district hospitals they were then weren't they? And just all the same sort of things I'm pleased to say. [Laughing]

[JH]: Mm. And how did you celebrate the Fiftieth, the Golden Anniversary in '88?

[DH]: Fiftieth? Now that was when we went to... Remind me, you said it before, the Hall, Westminster Hall was it?

[JH]: Yes, Westminster I think.

[DH]: That's right. And yes, that again was lovely and we were so pleased because our County Organiser then was a very young, very pretty girl and she was asked to be one of the pole, you know, the flag girls, flag bearers, there's a title, I can't remember what it is, and so we were very proud of her at that time. And again it was just wonderful to see all the WRVS uniforms there. Yes, lots of happy memories of these events. When, when it came to the Fortieth, I must tell you because it always amused me, several of us said 'Why are we celebrating the Fortieth, it's usually the Fiftieth'? We were looking so old, 'Well a lot of you might not be alive by the time we reach the Fiftieth'. [Laughing] Quite reassuring I thought, but that's the sick humour that WRVS had.

[JH]: And also in 1989 you went to the Buckingham Palace Garden Party, how did it feel to attend...?

[DH]: The what?

[JH]: The Buckingham Palace Garden Party?

[00:50:00]

[DH]: Oh yes I did, that was wonderful, yes that came right out of the blue. And it was through WRVS of course, that I'd been asked to go and I forget how many, just a few of us went up to, we had to meet in, in London and we then went in convoy with the WRVS cars. We had to wear uniform, of course we didn't have fancy hats and things so we caused a bit of a stir as you can imagine. But it was, it was wonderful, it really was. And fortunately it was a lovely day and the grounds looked beautiful and we saw The Queen and The Duke, and we were very thrilled because The Duke spotted us and said something to The Queen and she looked over and gave us a wave, which we sort of stood six feet tall as you can imagine. [Laughing] Yes, it was lovely, it was great. Then of course, we had... Are you interested in this?

[JH]: Yes.

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[DH]: We had this journey because there was a rail strike on, strike on and that was when I didn't think I'd get there. And this young County Organiser said 'I'll get you there if I have to march you there. [Laughing] And so she was talking to other chauffeurs outside while we were there, and of course, when we came to go home London was blocked as you can imagine, it took us about six hours to get home, but just a WRVS car again really winding down their windows 'Have you got your tea urn on'? [Laughing] We could have sold loads and loads of, or given loads and loads of tea if we'd had it. So it was quite fun but we were very, very tired by the time Cathy and I got home.

[JH]: Yes.

[DH]: But again it was wonderful, yes it really was thank you.

[JH]: And also you received your British Empire Medal?

[DH]: Yes I did thank you.

[JH]: And how did you feel about that?

[DH]: Well, that was wonderful because that's all very secret and I just wish my dear husband had been alive but my son was very proud of me. You hear, first of all you get a letter to say would you be willing to accept it, but it's highly secret, you mustn't tell anybody but I broke the rules slightly. My Mum was very old and I thought I couldn't bear for her to go and not know, and I knew that Mum could keep a big secret so I said 'This must not go any further', 'You know it won't', she said and so I told her but I didn't tell anybody else. And so it was a wonderful thing, I was very humbled to have it, because it's not you alone that does the work. I mean I couldn't have done what I did and done the WRVS without all those lovely people around me. But it was very special and they gave me a wonderful do. I went to County Hall and The Lord Lieutenant came and presented it, and there were also two lovely lifeboat men there as well having theirs at the same time. And then the girls had put on a wonderful lunch in the Tombland office for us so it was a very happy day, a very happy day, thank you.

[JH]: And how did you, how did they give you your medal?

[DH]: Well The Lord Lieutenant, and the Regional Office and Nancy Abraham, I expect you've hear of Nancy's name.

[JH]: Mm.

[DH]: And she had to write, they call it a citation about what I'd done and one thing and another and gave it, The Lord Lieutenant had to read that and then he just pinned it on, opened the clasp and pinned it on, very proud. [Laughing] And it's a lovely medal because they put your name round the edge, and they didn't just put 'Doreen Harris', they put 'Doreen Mrs Harris', which I thought was lovely really, it's a very pretty, a very pretty medal, I was very proud to wear the ribbon of that. But, as I say, I couldn't have done it without a lot of help.

[JH]: And then you were also an Acting Training Officer?

[DH]: Yes, that was just before I retired. I, I felt the time was coming, I always said I had trouble with older people, and do you know, I just felt that you should step aside if you can get younger people to come and take over because you perhaps don't have the energy. Fortunately at that time I still did have plenty of energy but I felt the time was right. But they asked me to do the Acting Organiser, Training Organiser for a time and that was much like going out and giving a membership talk, you know, and making sure they're all right. And so I did that for a time before I retired, reluctantly in the end but I'd had over thirty years so.

[JH]: And how would you describe the role of Acting Training Officer, what sort of thing do you get?

[DH]: Well it is really to make the people, the members all over the county aware of the work the WRVS did and how it functioned, you know, because a lot of people come into WRVS, I've found after, or just before I retired I went to a meeting and a luncheon in Yarmouth, which of course, is Norfolk. And sat next to two lovely ladies who told me they worked at the hospital shop, and I asked them something else and discovered in conversation they knew nothing about WRVS at all. And I always laugh and I finished their lunch giving them a membership talk. [Laughing] But they were lovely and they said 'We'd no idea WRVS did as much as that', which saddened me.

[JH]: Mm.

[DH]: They were working for us but nobody had given them a membership talk so, as you can see, I'm a great talker, I talk too much.

[JH]: And did you find there were more people that went towards the end of, before you retired did you find there were more people coming into the organisation that didn't know anything?

[DH]: Yes they were, yes because this is why we used to have, I'm sure you've heard of the membership talks we used to have. And that was wonderful because you got a little group of new members and had them together in the office and give them a coffee and just go through everything as we've gone through this morning and telling them about the things that we do and say 'If there's any particular aspect that you're interested in let's work on that'. And they'd founded I think because otherwise you're working at your little job that you do, and it's a big organisation, you need to know what's going on elsewhere don't you?

[JH]: Mm, mm. And how did you train volunteers, was it just talks?

[DH]: Just talks, yes. Just talks, yes.

[JH]: And did you have any other roles in WRVS at this time?

[DH]: No.

[JH]: No?

[DH]: No, that was the last one, [laughing] my swan-song.

[JH]: And why did you decide to retire from WRVS in 1990?

[DH]: Well, it's simply that I was getting older, and I'd, as I said, I felt that younger people should be encouraged to come in, and it struck me that this was needed during the latter part of the time I was there, and I used to work from Tombland again with the Training Officers and the girls in the other office would have a query and someone would always say 'Go and ask Doreen and she'll know'. I used to say 'Yes I do but you should know that', and that's why I felt it was necessary for somebody else to come along and know what was going on. So it was just sheer age dear. [Laughing]

[JH]: Mm, mm.

[DH]: I think at that time I was probably late sixties. We were supposed to retire at sixty-five, which I felt was good, there was a lot of organisers protested against that but I said 'Well, if we don't retire it's not giving somebody else younger a go is it?' And I just wanted somebody to come after me and enjoy it as much as I had.

[JH]: And did you find that we were still getting the younger members at that time?

[DH]: Yes, yes, they were. I think as in all things it is a variety.

[01:00:00]

[JH]: Mm, mm.

[DH]: And of course, what it's like now I don't know, it's a long while since I retired, but at that time yes, we were getting younger members.

[JH]: And so between 1958 and 1990 how did your opinion of the organisation change?

[DH]: It never changed. I loved it from the minute I went in. I liked what it stood for, I liked the way it helped people and it always managed to get over a problem and there was always a laugh. We used to say 'We took our work seriously but never ourselves', and I think that was something that was good to learn because we did laugh a lot otherwise you'd cry at some of the things, you know.

[JH]: And did you, a lot of other people have said to me they found that it was, they enjoyed WRVS because of the camaraderie?

[DH]: Exactly, you always got that wherever you went, the minute you mentioned you were in WRVS 'Oh I used to do that' in another part of the country or something. Yes, like any service, there was this comradeship which was just wonderful.

[JH]: Yes. And apart from administrative changes in 1974 when it became district...

[DH]: Mm.

[JH]: And counties and centres, were there any other changes to the organisation?

[DH]: Not that I can think of, but we, we had several changes of chairman.

[JH]: Mm, mm.

[DH]: [Coughs] Excuse me, of course, which is inevitable over that length of time but the principles were the same and I do hope they're the same today, I know nothing about it since we lost the 'W', [whispers] shouldn't have told you that. [Laughing]

[JH]: And so you said you don't really know much about the organisation apart from dropping the 'W'.

[DH]: Except that I know they say, they say they dropped the 'W' because the man came, but we've always had men, I had men working on Meals-on-Wheels and emergencies although they probably have more now, but then times change don't they, and I'm very old now. [Laughing]

[JH]: So do you think they should have kept the 'W', to keep it Women's Royal Voluntary Service?

[DH]: Well, this is a personal opinion, I think they should and I think it was a big mistake when they changed the uniform because nobody ever recognised that new uniform, but the green uniform we were known as 'The Ladies in Green', and it was recognised up and down the country. But that is a personal opinion and people would say that I'm out of date, which I probably am, but we all have our personal opinions don't we?

[JH]: Yes. Because now we've gone back to the green and red.

[DH]: Have you?

[JH]: Yes, with the change, name, change of name we've gone back to the green and red.

[DH]: Oh good, good. Because the men used to have a tie that they wore.

[JH]: And where would you say that Royal Voluntary Service, as it's now, place in society is today?

[DH]: I just have no idea Love. I, when there's a disaster or anything like when we had the big surge here [coughs] last December and I watched the local news and I couldn't help but notice that not a sign of RVS, as it is now, WRVS we would never have had an emergency without WRVS was mentioned and being there. But that is a jump in time.

[JH]: And what would you say, or what would you like the future to be for Royal Voluntary Service?

[DH]: I honestly couldn't say because you can't go back.

[JH]: No.

[DH]: And because I'm old I suppose I tend to think that it was, it was great. I can only say from my personal point of view I loved it and the way it was working then it worked and we had a very large membership. I don't know what the membership is today because I don't hear anything about it so,

and unfortunately a lot of my contemporaries have now joined the big white cloud in the sky.

[Laughing]

[JH]: And what is your fondest memory of your time with WRVS, WVS or WRVS?

[DH]: My fondest? That's very difficult.

[01:05:00]

Possible, possibly sort of when I first received my Long Service Medal, and then was very proud I think. We'd had to do, then that was after fifteen years, then I think we, if we'd done another seven years we got a little rosette. I think those are the things that I fondly remember because they were very personal to me. And of course, I remember the friends, I've made a lot of friends. And the girl who was County Organiser with me, I was friends with her until she died two or three years ago. We used to meet up and always talked about WRVS, and she loved it as much as I did, with all its faults and peculiarities.

[JH]: And do you have anything else you'd like to share about your time with WRVS?

[DH]: I don't think so dear, I think you must be, ears might be... I'm sorry.

[JH]: It's okay.

[DH]: I told you I was a talker. [Laughing] No, I, I'm sure you can guess from this it was something I was very fond of. And, as I say, I've never regretted a minute, I enjoyed it from the time I went in to the day I left and was always interested in it, yes.

[JH]: Well thank you Doreen for talking to me today and this will make a very good contribution to our Voices of Volunteering Project.

[DH]: I'm so glad, thank you.

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[End of Interview 01:06:38]