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Illawarra Unity: Introduction 2002

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Abstract

Welcome to this special edition of Unity focusing on the Wollongong Women's Information Centre (WWIC) and feminism in Wollongong. This year the WWIC will have achieved 23 years of commitment to feminist activity within this community. At a forum on the early history of the Wollongong Women's Information Centre in October, members of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History enjoyed lively presentations by Irene Arrowsmith and Val Dolan (Newsham), who were both passionately involved with the Women's Centre in its formative years. By request this issue of Illawarra Unity reproduces Irene and Val's speeches and an edited version of the ensuing conversation. Also reproduced is a speech, given by Lenore Armour in 1982. Lenore's speech is dedicated to the memory of Ruby Makula, whose dedication to feminism is fondly remembered by many of the women involved with WWIC and its early history. The edition also includes some information on resources for those interested in researching the WWIC and comments by the editor of this edition.

Introduction

Welcome to this special edition of *Unity* focusing on the Wollongong Women's Information Centre (WWIC) and feminism in Wollongong. This year the WWIC will have achieved 23 years of commitment to feminist activity within this community. At a forum on the early history of the Wollongong Women's Information Centre in October, members of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History enjoyed lively presentations by Irene Arrowsmith and Val Dolan (Newsham), who were both passionately involved with the Women's Centre in its formative years. By request this issue of *Illawarra Unity* reproduces Irene and Val's speeches and an edited version of the ensuing conversation. Also reproduced is a speech, given by Lenore Armour in 1982. Lenore's speech is dedicated to the memory of Ruby Makula, whose dedication to feminism is fondly remembered by many of the women involved with WWIC and its early history. The edition also includes some information on resources for those interested in researching the WWIC and comments by the editor of this edition.

The opening of the Wollongong Women's Information Centre (WWIC) marked a major step forward for the organisation of women in the region and was unique in Australia in many respects. This uniqueness drew on a strong working class and radical organisational culture in the Illawarra together with rapid social and economic change and the influx of 'new wave' feminist ideas. These changes resulted in a different focus on women within the labour movement in the area. Issues specifically relevant to women at work came into focus in new ways. We saw women organising in new ways to decide on and implement issues important to them. We saw policy changes in the South Coast Labour Council (SCLC) and in individual unions. It is these changes which clearly linked the history of the women's movement with the labour history of the region. The complex interplay between individual women, different factions of the labour movement and community and feminist activities took place during a dynamic and colourful period in the labour history of Wollongong between 1978 and 1980. This local feminist history

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is rarely recognised in recorded history of the region, nor is it recognised in existing literature on feminism in Australia (for example the 1998 edition of The Oxford *Australian Feminism Companion* edited by Caine et.al.), despite the fact that it played a key role in a number of significant feminist campaigns, such as the Judith Mitchell case in 1978.

Officially opened in April 1980, the WWIC was the result of early collaborative efforts between feminists and trade unions in the region.

Feminist groups listed as participated in the pre and early history from 1975–1980 included:

- Union of Australian Women (UAW)
- Combined Miners' Women's Auxiliary
- International Women's Day Committee (IWD C'ttee)
- Wollongong Working Women's Charter Committee (WWWCC)
- Wollongong Women's Collective (Day and Evening Groups) (WWC)
- Women's Study Group, University of Wollongong
- Illawarra Non Sexist Committee (INSEC)
- Feminist Street Theatre Group
- Women's Abortion Action Campaign (WAAC)

The number of groups involved expanded in the first year to also include:

- Nebo Miners' Women's Auxiliary
- Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL)
- Women's Writers' Workshop
- Wollongong Women's Performing Arts Group
- Witchwork's Print Collective.

Union groups represented in this early history included:

- South Coast Labour Council (SCLC)
- Administrative and Clerical Officers' Association (ACOA)
- Australian Journalists' Association
- Australian Postal and Telegraphists' Union
- Australian Workers' Union
- Electrical Trades Union (ETU)
- Federated Clerks' Union
- Federated Ironworkers' Association (FIA)
- Meat and Allied Trades Union
- Miscellaneous Workers' Union

- Municipal Employees' Union
- Professional Officers' Association
- Public Service Association (PSA)
- Teachers' Federation
- Australian Theatrical and Amusement Employees' Association (ATAEA)

A special feature of this edition of *Unity* is the two 'inside' accounts of events leading up to the opening of the WWIC by two feminist activists, Irene Arrowsmith and Val Dolan. Irene and Val were passionately involved in the early history of the Centre along with many other women. Their stories reflect some of the different ways women in Wollongong engaged in the struggle for women's rights, and the profound impact this had on their personal and working lives and the community they lived in.

The stories from Irene and Val are different. Stories that are told by women who were involved with the setting up of the centre all different, yet all reflect a unique energy that emerged during this dynamic period.

Irene Arrowsmith has been an activist and a feminist since she can remember. She said her family had always been political. Her father was "a Wobbly and a Lang man". Her mother was a member of the Workers' International Relief Fund (WIRF) and encouraged feminist ideas. Irene's first job, at 16, was as a clerical worker for the "Wharfies". She has worked for the Communist Party (CPA), Wollongong City Council, Building Workers and Labour Council, Federated Engine Drivers and Fireman's Association (FEDFA), and the Miscellaneous Workers. She has been District Secretary of the Federated Clerks' Union, President of UAW, Secretary of WWCC and a member of the IWD Committee.

Val Dolan claimed that the only feminist thing she had ever done before she joined the Student Representative Council (SRC) as Women's Officer in the late 1970s at Wollongong University was "trying not to get given away at the altar". As Women's Officer for the SRC she played a leading role in setting up the Wollongong Women's Collective (WWC) on campus at the University of Wollongong. Val, a qualified teacher, was also a member of the Teachers' Federation, INSEC and the IWD Committee.

Both Irene and Val came from working class families and see their childhood and their relationship with their mothers as significant in shaping their feminism. They were both married with children and working full time during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Val was also studying part time. These accounts are based on their personal experiences and memories that

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emphasise individual growth, new experiences and new skills learned. Their stories talk about discovering new ways of being (or feeling) powerful. Both discussed close friendships with other women activists with a great deal of warmth, passion and admiration. They talk about family and community; and about campaigns of feminist activity and they talk about the complex interplay between individual women, different factions of the labour movement, community and feminist activity.

The speech by Lenore Armour is dedicated to the memory of Ruby Makula. Ruby holds a special place in the memories of many women who were associated with the WWIC in its early days. The speech was prepared for the Second Anniversary Dinner of the WWIC in 1982 and we thank Lenore for permission to re-print it in this edition of *Unity*. The speech not only re-iterates Val and Irene's acknowledgement of Ruby's commitment to feminist ideas, it also demonstrates the ongoing and evolving nature of a project such as the idea of a women's centre. It illustrates the almost impossible task of attempting to locate 'a fixed beginning' or starting point for the organisation. These three personal sets of stories remind us that organisations, such as the WWIC are sets of relationships and that these relationships are fluid, constantly changing and evolving. Although the members have a very clear sense of the WWIC as an entity with its own history; the WWIC can also be understood as an organising point for stories that are intimately interwoven with evolving personal histories, friendships and community.

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