

Barbara Stephen oral history interview transcript

Interviewer: Casey Palmer
Supervisor: Dr Hannah Forsyth, ACU

Barbara was interviewed by Casey in the elders' lounge of Redfern Community Centre in mid 2015.

Casey: So you live in Redfern?

Barbara: Yes.

Casey: How long have resided in Redfern for, or this area?

Barbara: Approximately 16 years.

Casey: Around that yep. So what's your involvement with the community?

Barbara: It has been to assist with Aboriginal education, mainly with the Montessori philosophy of education and teaching practice.

Casey: Do you want to tell me a bit about that philosophy?

Barbara: Well, it actually suits Aboriginal children's learning styles because it is cooperative learning.

Casey: Okay

Barbara: ... and I was told that by an Aboriginal educator called Charles Davidson who said that.. who came and he simply surveyed the children.

Casey: Yep

Barbara: In the classroom and after he had finished the session which went for two hours, he said 'This way of teaching suits Aboriginal children's learning styles.'

Casey: That's fantastic.

Barbara: Well I felt as he was the educator, I think he was with the AECT and so I thought it is worthwhile to do.

Casey: So do you know where the name Montessori came from?

Barbara: Ah she was an Aboriginal ...sorry, an Italian doctor. The first woman to be a doctor in Italy.

Casey: Oh wow.

Barbara: ... and in 1890, and the other students of the time who were studying medicine objected to a woman being part of the activity. She had to demand that she be allowed to continue the course.

Casey: That's quite impressive. How did the playgroup begin? How did you get involved in it?

Barbara: Well it was at a time where I had left teaching, I was in my 60s and at the time I was able to come in from where I was living for a short time, out at Gynea, and so I was able to have some free time and decided I'd help out where I could as a volunteer.

Casey: Yep, that's awesome. So what would you say the main purpose of the play group is? What are you trying to achieve with the playgroup?

Barbara: To assist those children to have an early childhood training or education that would help them to love learning and to have a better start at schooling.

Casey: Yeah of course. So do you think that the playgroup can contribute to social reform? Like, it can aid in that regard?

Barbara: Oh it certainly could. Yes. Assisting the children.

Casey: Do you have any examples of any students that have come through the playgroup and what they have gone on to do?

Barbara: Oh there's been about a thousand

Casey: Oh wow, a thousand

Barbara: ... a thousand children that have had some experience with the playgroup ... a lot of this area has been quite volatile, over the years

Casey: of course

Barbara: so children come and go and it's the gentrification in the area; they move to other suburbs.

Casey: So you said that you are still in contact with some of the students that you have had?

Barbara: Yes

Casey: That must be nice for you.

Barbara: Yes, it is.

Casey: Have you been involved in any other community venture over your time, that you've been here, or is it just mostly the playgroup?

Barbara: I suppose the most important one was with trying to save Redfern Public School from being closed down.

Casey: Yeah? Do you want to tell us a bit about that?

Barbara: Ah well, it was quite political; it needed to be done with protest so some of us had banners with 'Mr Carr, are you listening? Keep public lands in public hands' and

Casey: Oh wow.

Barbara: and maintain a school at Redfern and that sort of thing.

Casey: Was it mostly organised by individuals or by social groups in the community, or .. ?

Barb: I suppose myself and Jenny Munro were the two main organisers and there were other community groups like the P&C.

Casey: Okay

Barb: who were very much in favour of maintaining the presence of public schools.

Casey: yep, of course.

Barb: the P and C association

Casey: What was the outcome of the protest? Did you manage to save the school?

Barbara: No

Casey: No?

Barb: I think the government was too much involved with ... well the three people who were mostly involved in it were Bob Carr, Bill Crews and J.. Singleton; I think they were mostly the ones interested in the idea of closing down the school or

Casey: Yep

Barbs: or together they were to have the political clout and money from John Singleton.

Casey: Of course money always comes into play. So what do you think community means? What does community mean to you, in your life? Do you think you have a sense of community living here in Redfern?

Barbara: Yes I do, because I work in the community all day, every day. Whatever's happening, going to meetings of different groups, being involved and making it a better place to live in for community.

Casey: Yeah okay. So I believe that you were awarded Citizen of the Year in 2003 ? Did I read that right on the website?

Barbara: Oh you did

Casey: Do you want to tell me about that?

Barbara: Well that was simply because of community work, helping to save the school I think, being involved so much in the community.

Casey: Was it a proud moment for you?

Barbara: I don't ... think

Casey: You're being too humble Barbara

Barbara: Pride is one of the seven deadly sins. Have you ever heard of them?

Casey: I have, yes. So we'll avoid pride then shall we.

Barbara: So, I guess I said, I didn't want the Citizen of the Year to begin with, and some of the committee meeting, people, said it might help with saving the school because with, I sometimes think of what happened in the Woolloomooloo area, when the developers tried to close down a lot of the community groups over in that area.

Casey: Yep.

Barb: and a woman called Juanita Nielsen - have you heard of her?

Casey: No I haven't.

Barb: Well you will have to look her up.

Casey: Have to look that one up.

Barb: was murdered and people think, by the developers probably. I mean who else would do it.

Casey: Oh wow. Yep.

Barb: criminals and um and they thought she was buried under concrete when the high rises were being built over the demolition area.

Casey: Oh that's terrible.

Barb: Disastrous however I wasn't concerned about that. 'laughter' because I .. so then I did accept the citizen of the year, on Australia Day, thinking that it might assist us with our

Casey: with your protests?

Barb: Well not just mine it was a number of people who were involved.

Casey: of course.

Barb: It was the Aboriginal people I was concerned about; Jenny Munro she worked very hard. She should have got a Citizen of the Year as well now that I think about it. For doing that, for helping It doesn't amount to much when you think about it?

Casey: So what is your involvement here at the Redfern Community Centre? Do you know much about the development of the site?

Barb: Yes yes I was on the committee that was helping to, demolishing the ..

Casey: the Wilson' Brothers..

Barb: factory that were here. Because the children used to play in them over the years and a couple of them fell down and hurt themselves with, umm, rotting rafters, and seems as though there was asbestos in the building as well. That made it like an adventure playground and so it seemed the most important thing to do was build up with groups that were involved in wanting to demolish the building (gestures around) I think this one may have been original and been renovated

Casey: So do you think it's a good facility for the community then?

Barb: Oh yes it definitely is.

Casey: That's really good.

Barb: and its helped break down the barrier between the area where a lot of drug dealing is and the rest of community.

Casey: That's really good. So what specifically did you do to help with the development of the community centre? Were you working with any of the community groups involved? Did you petition the council?

Barb: Well I was a part of all that.

Casey: You were a part of all that

Barb: Oh yes.

Casey: Did you assist with any of the petitioning?

Barb: I suppose I did.

Casey: You suppose you did.

Barb: Yep I was here every day. I was living in the area.

Casey: You were living in the area.

Barb: on Hugo street.

Casey: Oh so very close by

Barb: and eventually I moved to Edward Street.

Casey: Okay

Barb: That was more helpful still however. ...

Casey: Yes of course.

Barb: ... I think we focused on children's education.

Casey: Children's education

Barb: .. as It started to become more, gentrified I suppose, the places around the area were hard to find to run the playgroup.

Casey: Yes. So where are you at the moment?

Barb: At the Aboriginal DanceTheatre.

Casey: Yep

Barb: We went there.

Casey: That's very good. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your involvement in the Redfern community? Do you think we have covered most things?

Barb: I've been home visiting.

Casey: Home visiting? Yeah do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

Barb: Oh it's a lot of things but the families.

Casey: that have come through the playgroup?

Barb: Yes. I can't think of anything else to say about it. Just maintaining

Casey: relationships?

Barb: friendships.

Casey: Yes that's really nice.

Barb: Yes but we had to move so many times that it was disruptive to the students' learning. Ah now if I had thought about this beforehand I suppose I could have ... I think we have moved from, I was at Murawina to begin with. I worked there as a volunteer and did a transition program from pre-school to primary when Redfern Public School was still in operation. Murawina closed down for various reasons, I'm not sure but I think they wanted to move out of the area to another venue when they came to Redfern Public School for a while. The playgroup at the public school which was in a separate building. The public school we had down in Sydney .. the students were, 70% of the students were Aboriginal.

Casey: That's quite high.

Barb: Yes it was and it really shouldn't have been closed down with that population of Aboriginal children.

Casey: Do you see the playgroup running for a long time in the future?

Barb: Oh yes, definitely.

Casey: Do you think there will come a time when you step down from your involvement?

Barb: Oh certainly. yes as soon as it reaches where it needs to be which is a playgroup and an early childhood centre, within

Casey: So you would like to see a whole centre for early childhood?

Barb: Well at a public school.

Casey: At a public school yep.

Barb: But not other than public.

Casey: Okay yes so you can allow more access within a public school

Barb: Yes but with the school being closed down we really need another public school here in redfern.

Casey: Yep.

Barb: Well I think, we will think about that after I say everything else. Well in case with my medical condiditons and skin cancers and everything at the moment. I really need to attend to those.

Casey: mmh of course.

Barb: But I can still participate in..

Casey: You're too important.

Barb: Oh no I don't think. There's another aspect that I keep thinking about. We had to keep moving premises that was one of the very ..

Casey: One of the big issues?

Barb: Because of the changes in whole area. Different areas. Redfern street used to be a very run down street. With windows battened down, and a lot of the damage .. so that began to change slowly and then all of a sudden it seemed that, it was almost, totally gentrified, with fashionable cafes and

Casey: Yes.

Barb: But with the playgroup we continued to find it very hard to find premises. We had use of PCYC for a few years. If I had it all in my papers here I could see the exact dates of when these changes happened.

Casey: Yep that's fair enough.

Barb: We moved to PYCY then, and that had to be changed, we had to move from there because the floor was sinking into the ground. It still is I think. I don't think it's been fixed. It's quite dangerous. I think it was a swamp at one stage.

Casey: Oh really.

Barb: The history behind some of these places.

Casey: It's quite interesting yeah.

Barb: And then from there we went to Bourke Street Public School. That was quite successful, at the public school, because the families who took their older children there.

Casey: to the school.

Barb: to the primary school were able to then stay on for the playgroup with their younger ones. We had up to about 47 families registered there.

Casey: Oh wow that's quite large.

Barb: And then the building education revolution. I don't know if you've heard of that.

Casey: Yep.

Barb: But you can look up if you want to see the history of it. It was money that was put into public schools. I think it was by Julia Gillard.

Casey: Yeah I remember it.

Barb: And the school wanted to renovate so we had to move on from there as well. Maybe after that we came here for a short time. It was quite successful downstairs where we kept having up to 12 families coming along to the playgroup but then after the so called riots, I don't know if you were around when that was happening, and there was a lot of damage down to the side of Redfern Railway Station and then ... they did a lot of damage to the area. I think after that a few of the larger groups that were very well funded started to move into the area with their programs and they had a lot of money at the times. Grants of millions of dollars which they could put into

Casey: yep

Barb: And we just survived on the smell of an oily rag the whole time with some people contributing a few dollars for this or that so it was all done by volunteers and I live.. of course I didn't want to be, I was getting paid by the old age pension funding and that satisfied me and I could manage that and ahhh I was never in debt but I was never in advance either. So it was an amazing time when we ended up back here. Being downstairs we were able to have about twelve families and twelve parent and children in the playgroup every week but many larger groups moved in with much more funding to pay for use within, of this building and so we moved to the area which was really just a meeting area downstairs and it wasn't suitable at all.

Casey: No.

Barb: The children had no room to move around. We didn't have room for all the equipment and so because it wasn't suitable for children for a playgroup, it was suitable for something sort term.. depending on what age they are.

Casey: Yep.

Barb: But its really a public meeting room that's it.

Casey: Used for all sorts of things.

Barbs: Yes well people use it today of course and the thing is that all the time with the communities, not children. If it's raining outside the children will need to come inside and use it... ... Aboriginal dance studio now.

Casey: is a better space for you?

Barbs: Oh well not better because it's used for dancing. It doesn't have much storage so we don't have the equipment. A lot of the equipment's had to go into storage. I can't think of anything else to say. We will be continuing for the people who want to have, in a public school. Not in private cause then it loses it access.

Of course, the Montessori hierarchy is now part of the private school system. It is beside the Montessori- for profits, non-government owned business... Montessori education for people who can afford it is thousands of dollars a year. With the Montessori schools ... I'm not interested in the private system. I'm interested more in the Finland education system. All schools

Casey: They don't have a private system.

Barb: No, I think they might have 2%. Somewhere I read there that they had about 98% public and they were well-funded ...

Casey: And they score very well on international testing.

Barb: Oh it has to. It has. So that is what I would be aiming for public education in Australia to.. if more people could get behind it. Though it seems that the private schools now are actually, even government and politicians are trying to chip away at the public schools and not looking really looking after those children who go to the public schools.

Casey: Anyway I think I might leave it there.

Barb: I do too.

Casey: Thank you so much for your time Barbara. We really really appreciate it.