

Interview with Judy Schilling, WCCAO Emergency Services Coordinator
Interview conducted by Joan Johnson

Q. How did you first get acquainted with Community Action... and when?

J.S. It was through Jerralyn (Ness). At the time (1973) I was living on \$21 a week unemployment. Could not find work. Had just moved to this area. Was quite desperate and I knew Jerralyn. She said, "You should join VISTA and become a VISTA volunteer. We have this project – The Rural Tribune – although I did not end up in that project immediately, she knew I (had) worked on a newspaper.

And I thought, Wow! Guaranteed income. Great! So I joined for the money. I really didn't know much about social services. I had no idea what a grant was (or) where the money came from. It was just like, Oh! A job!

Q. Where were you from originally? Were you from Washington County?

J.S. I was from Idaho but I came here to go to school and I was working on a newspaper over on the other side of the valley. Then we moved over here and there was no work that I could find. So I thought, Oh Great! I could do this right away and be employed.

I went off to VISTA training and I was just really amazed at the whole social service world. I had no idea that it even existed and that was a real eye opener. I learned so much and I came back and I was so motivated and disturbed about the things that were going on in the county right under our noses. I didn't know about, for example, conditions for migrant farm workers. There were a lot of low income people living in the rural areas that had little access to anything.

I started out as the tenant advocate – we (WCCAO) had a program of advocates that were all VISTA volunteers and each one had their specific area. Mine was housing and tenant issues. I had lots and lots of calls all the time from people that were having problems with their rental contracts or were needing assistance with their rent. Also a lot of cases about what we now consider basic rights that were being violated. At that time there was no landlord-tenant law. It was just in the process of being written, and I worked with a group of people that helped get that through the Legislature.

Q. Let me interrupt. So when was this that you started?

J.S. This was in 1974. I started as a VISTA in February, 1974. Jerralyn (Ness) had already been there for one year as a VISTA.

It was just outrageous what was going on here at that time... like landlords beating up tenants for not paying rent; (landlords) taking tenants' things that did not belong to them; (tenants) putting horses in apartments – I had that. It was wild because there were no regulations regarding rental agreements basically.

Did you work for VISTA then? Or did you work for Community Action as a VISTA?

J.S. I Worked for Community Action as a VISTA in the Advocate Program. It was an incredibly exciting time because so many of the things we take for granted now legally did not exist then. Like we had a person who worked as the discrimination advocate – there were bars that said you could not speak Spanish and things like that all over. So there were so many things to work on... They had a case that they litigated and won over in Forest Grove of some Hispanics in a tavern who were speaking Spanish and were thrown out for that.

Q. So you started with VISTA. Do you remember who the director (of Community Action) was when you started in '74?

J.S. Carla Johnson. Under her was Don Patch, who now lives in Forest Grove.

Q. How big was Community Action when you started?

J.S. Probably in the neighborhood of 20 to 30 people. We had some administration and some support staff. And we had our Advocate Program which had about six or eight VISTAs and a supervisor. We had people in and out who were in different job-training programs. Maybe it was only about 20 people. We were affiliated with Head Start but it was not part of our program.

For example, legal aid was part of our program – we had VISTAs. Our VISTA program was quite large so we had a lot of the roots of things that are now so institutionalized. We had job training programs that became JTPA or Manpower or CETA – all that. So that kind of began there. We had some staff that were later Housing Authority staff. Legal Aid attorneys that are now Oregon Legal Services. It's like we gave birth to all these programs.

People would come in as a VISTA and organize, for example, food co-ops. And then suddenly there were food co-ops everywhere, but really they started as VISTA projects. The woodcutters, a volunteer group in Washington County, was a project we started. I started the shelter home when I was a VISTA. I remember when we started, people would call up and say, "What a novel idea – an emergency shelter for the homeless." And people would come down and interview me and want to find out how we did it and how it was run. And they were just fascinated with the idea. And now it is very institutionalized and everyone just assumes that there will be that kind of service.

It was a very inspiring time. It was wide open for creating services and responding to needs. And also the way the funding (was set up) – that really was what VISTA volunteers were intended to do – to go out into the community, see what the needs were, and to organize solutions.

Then there were political changes that limited a lot of the stuff that we could and could not do. "Advocacy" became a bad word; organizing was forbidden. A lot of the things we had started out doing, we had to cease doing.

Q. That was one of my questions... What was the political climate when you

first started and how did you see it change? You started in 1974 – Nixon was president, wasn't he?

J.S. We were still riding on the tails of "the Great Society, the War on Poverty." And that was still a very viable activity. And then things began to change... but Jerralyn or Carla could probably give you more information on that.

Q. But your feelings are important, too. So you came in at a very exciting, growing and creative time in the early 70s. Can you pinpoint when you think it began to change?

J.S. I think about 1980. We had the *Rural Tribune*. We were doing a lot of organizing in the communities and publishing the *Rural Tribune*. Then the Collegio Caesar Chavez (sp?) formed in Mt. Angel and we were down there with them and helped them do some video work, some organizing. Then they got funding for a newspaper – *The Chavezta* - and we provided support for that. So people were really getting their message out and being very active and visible politically. And then things began to change...

I think it started under Carter but I can't really track it chronologically, but suddenly, the funding shifted. They began to de-fund Community Action programs and then the Economic Opportunity Act. And then they started creating these block grant programs – that's when it got real scary and then suddenly the whole scene changed. Organizing was no longer funded -- no advocacy -- all direct service kind of stuff.

Q. So where was Community Action located when you first started?

J.S. In a big green house on Baseline – 546 SE Baseline (Hillsboro). It was all there. The house was full. We had the *Rural Tribune* – we had that in the basement and we had a darkroom there. And then we outgrew that building and moved the *Rural Tribune* to a building in downtown Hillsboro. We had a shelter that was over on 4th Street. We moved weatherization out and started having more sites outside of the main building.

Q. So when did you start working with the *Rural Tribune*?

J.S. About a year and a half later (after Feb., 1974). I worked with VISTA and housing for about a year and a half and then CETA positions began. So then I was paid through CETA which was an actual salaried position (about 1975-76).

Q. What did you do with the *Rural Tribune*?

J.S. I wrote articles, covered the community. We had an information referral page that we maintained – a resource directory. Also, it grew into a whole media project that included video taping, posters, flyers for groups – everything related to media, as well.

Q. How do you think WCCAO has been viewed in the community over time?

J.S. I think we were seen, you know, as kind of a group of rabble-rousers in the beginning. And I think there was a lot of animosity and competition between different agencies – there was not a spirit of partnering or collaboration. We did a lot of investigating and attacks on AFS (Adult and Family Services) – on Food Stamps and the Welfare system. And just uncovering how poorly run these agencies were – they were providing services based on the personal feelings of the employees rather than what the legislation or administrative rules really required.

That was where Jerralyn really jumped in. She was real active on welfare rights. They were supposed to have an advisory board that included recipients and she got an advisory board. They looked into the way people were treated – even at the welfare office they wouldn't let people use the bathroom. They would have to go down the street to the gas station in the cold and the rain. People were just treated so poorly because of their economic status and people had to fight to get the things that were clearly their rights within the administrative rules.

It was the same with the housing stuff. People had to fight just like crazy to get their rights, even if there was legislation. And then when we did pass the Landlord-Tenant law, educating landlords about what their responsibilities were was a whole other thing, too.

So, it was like step by step to get things that we take for granted right now.

Q. So that was about 25 years ago – that is a remarkably short time for that kind of change.

J.S. The thing that is so great, I find, is that so many of the activities and the ideas and the ways we operated are still so viable today. Yesterday we had a staff meeting and we were talking about planning (for) the future for our department, for our group, you know, what would be ideal. And people, like some of the younger employees, would say, "What we really need is..." and then they would say something. And I'd go, Wow, we had that and we got rid of it for one reason or another, either lack of funding or lack of interest or whatever. Yeah, we did that. And if people still think that is important today, then that really validates all the things we did then... So, it's kind of like there's nothing new...

Q. Over that period of time, you effected tremendous changes, but the opposition to the kinds of things you were trying to do also grew, didn't it?

J.S. Definitely. We even had a team of people that would go out and give talks to groups to educate them – we had like a whole community education component. And I was part of that, too. We had a movie we had produced for us. It was called "Portraits." It was a slide show put on film. We had a guy, Clyde Keller (sp?), and he went out and he interviewed several families and just put their stories on tape with their voices and pictures, talking about their lives being low income people in Washington County. And we would show that movie and then talk to the groups and try to educate them that these are "real people" and they have the same needs as you and I, and their situation is not because they are not "worthy people."

And, oh my gosh, we were like hated at times... and they would go, "Well, I saw that television set in their living room. If they're so poor, how come they have a TV? And we'd say, "Well, does it work? We don't know. Where did they get it? We don't know. Why shouldn't they have a TV? You have a TV. Everyone has a TV. This is America, you know. TVs are everywhere... they're a source of news, educating the children, or whatever. But the reaction – people were just very negative.

Or they would say, "Look at that family. They had a pet, a little dog. How can they afford to have a little dog if they're so poor? They've got to get rid of that dog. There was not a lot of sympathy." They would be like church groups, a lot of them with that attitude.

And so, the mentality has changed so much now. And a lot of it has been legislated and a lot of it has been institutionalized. And a lot of it, people really understand now much better than they ever did. And I think, too, so many people's lives have been touched personally in one way or another by the same issues. Before it was like these (low-income) people were just a pack of strangers.

Q. How do you think Community Action is viewed now in Washington County?

J.S. I think we are viewed as a very large, involved agency that provides a lot of leadership. I think we're looked at as a very advantaged agency and, you, know, it's kind of funny because people think, "Well, you guys have all the money." And I think, hmmm -- we don't, but it appears that we do. I think smaller agencies look at us as a very rich, powerful agency. I think in the community we're viewed by community people as an agency they can talk to, an agency that is reasonable, an agency they can rely on – that we're accountable. We definitely have incredible contacts and communication out through the community. We are respected by the powers that be but I think a lot of the smaller agencies that are struggling view us as something bigger and more powerful than we ourselves think we are.

Q. Maybe even your building helps foster that idea?

J.S. Yes... but it just makes sense to have it. Yeah, where we've come from is just pretty amazing. It's like a natural evolution... to survive... to be able to provide programs and services to the community. I think we really went the way that we needed to go.

Q. Do you think Community Action has made a difference?

J.S. Oh, yes, I do. I really, really do. Maybe not even so much directly ourselves but in the groups we've supported and the other agencies that we've helped. It's like it's really trickled down to a lot of places. So maybe somebody over in Beaverton gets a food box from a church over there was because we provided support to the agency that provided it (the food box) – like the Food Bank. We grew the Food Bank and now it's off on its own. I feel like we have a little piece of responsibility for every food box in this county from what we've done. And every person that receives a legal service or every farm worker who has a volunteer come out to help them or every person that gets served at any of the clinics. I can't think of one social service in this whole county that somehow we have not added something to.

Q. One of my feelings about Community Action is that it has always tried to help people to help themselves. Do you see that... or is that just my perception?

J.S. I think a long time ago we adopted the motto of self sufficiency, the philosophy that we're going to help people long-term. And I think a lot of people here never quite understood that for a long time. So what does that mean? So it's been a process of educating staff people, too, to figure out how to take your service and build in some kind of self sufficiency or some kind of educational piece or something besides just the handout. Pretty much now, it's something that all of us understand and all of us see and I think a lot of us view the service we provide as just the prelude to more...

I think people in the community see that and I think people realize more now the vagaries of employment in this county and so many more people's lives have been touched by the disastrous changes that can happen – like some place closing down over night or someone getting sick and you don't have insurance – because life here is very expensive and kind of precarious. So that view of people getting handouts is not as pervasive. I think a lot more people are understanding that it is working families that are on the edge; that with welfare reform and a lot of the stuff that has happened nationally that it's not just people living off the dole at all; that you can slip and slide down really, really fast. I think that's made people in the community a lot more sympathetic to agencies like ours because everybody knows somebody that needs something immediately and I think it's a big relief to them that they can send them here.

We tell them we will try to sort it out and find resources for them. Maybe we have it and maybe we don't, but we know what resources are out there. They can come here and maybe they say they just need a food box, but when we talk to them we find out they may need employment training or some other program. Or they may tell us they need a food box because they spent all their money on doctors' bills. When we ask why, they may tell us they don't have any insurance and then we can tell them they should be on the Oregon Health Plan. So we try to do that more or less with everyone who comes through here – give them at least one other resource or one additional benefit. You know you can't change peoples' lives overnight – it's kind of one step at a time.

But we've also got so many more services now that are useful to people – like our tenant education program or our child care resource and referral. So the fact that we've grown and brought in more services really helps promote the idea of self sufficiency for people. A lot of people would criticize if we were just paying a utility bill, but the good thing about emergency services is that it gets people in the door for that first-time help. Once we have them in here, we can find out if their kid is eligible for Head Start, if they've heard about all these programs, etc. So all these emergency services programs really bring people in and that gets them into the whole network of available services. And maybe we'll see them two years later and their kid has just completed Head Start and they've been hooked up with something at PCC (Portland Community College) like job training, so you do see that we have helped change people's lives.

A lot of people come in and they have multiple, multiple problems and we might see them for rent and then we see them for food and then we see them for utilities and then for rent again – over a long period of time. (They are) people without job skills

who end up in those temporary positions – they want to work, they really want to work. And they work so hard. They get up to go down to these crummy jobs at 6:00 in the morning. And then a lot of them have health problems. They are over income for the Oregon Health Plan; they have no benefits; they're part time workers. And then they get sick and it's just disaster. So there are a lot of people like that who are trying so very, very hard but can't get out of that mold, and we work with them.

Then there are a lot of people who have managed to get by day to day handling their expenses, and then something disastrous happens and they think there's a safety net out there. Then they find out there isn't and they are really just shocked. Even I have had that illusion – if something happens to me then I'll get something. Right? I'll go get Social Security disability but then you find out: oh, no, you're too young, you're too old, you're too this or too that; you have to wait two years to get it; or they don't think you're really disabled. So people have this illusion of a safety net and then they find out and they're just shocked. They don't qualify for welfare; they can't get food stamps or if they can, it's only \$20 worth. So we're here to guide people through all that because they can't get down to complain to the agencies that aren't helping them. So we're here to guide them through all those hoops and connect them up to someone else who can maybe provide other services.

Q. Judy, you went from VISTA, working with the *Rural Tribune*, so how did you get to your present position?

J.S. Well, after the *Rural Tribune*, we had the Print/Media Resource Center, which included all the media, and then we lost our funding... we had half-time funding and half time we were to create money, bring in money because we were doing publishing for other groups. We were kind of limping along at that point and then I left for a few months. When I came back, the Print/Media Resource Center was pretty much gone (Don Patch runs it as a business now) because groups in the community just did not have the money to pay for the services we were providing.

So when I came back, Gordy (who was then director) asked me if I would do energy assistance stuff – a new job. That was about 1980-1981. I was the Energy Crisis Prevention Coordinator. I was supposed to prevent people from needing energy assistance. So we began working a lot on energy policies. For example, PGE had no policy about shut-offs. We worked with a coalition of people and organized our own group of low-income Washington County residents to work for fair energy policies in the Oregon Public Utility Commission. We also organized people to start a wood co-op and looked at different kinds of self-sufficiency things that people could do. But we did a lot of policy stuff because people would have a bill and PGE would just shut them off and say no power unless you pay your full bill, plus deposit, plus blah, blah, blah... There was just no way they could do all that so that was a really great thing we worked on. We worked a lot with Oregon Fair Share on that. We had a VISTA position to do organizing around energy issues and then we had direct assistance through a program called LEAP. That kind of ran as a seasonal program – it started in the fall, went through the winter, and closed in the spring. Then I worked in the summers with the Summer Youth Employment Program. So I worked part time in the summers and full time the rest of the year.

During the summer, emergency services came out of our Shelter Program. So we decided to combine all the emergency services being done at the shelter with the energy assistance to create a year-around program. That became every kind of direct assistance. That must have been around 1985-1986. When we moved into the building on First and Baseline, then that's when we began to combine the services. We had information referral – we had a VISTA who worked on that. It was basically rolodexes listing all the different agencies. Then we got a computer and put it on the computer and that was pretty amazing. So we were developing our information referral program to go alongside our emergency services and those were all combined – and they still are.

Then we got this building – and it's full already. We need to add a third floor! But I don't think that's an option.

Q. Before we close, is there anything I haven't thought to ask you that you would like to comment on?

J.S. Well, I was thinking about your product. What would be good. Maybe it would be good to have a chronology, just briefly, and then a bit about the background from the founding fathers. There is still one person around – Don Jones, and he'll give you a lot of information.

You should talk to Don Jones and Don Patch. Also Betty Lu Sanders – she's been here as long as Jerralyn. She worked in our fiscal department and she knows a lot about who left and what year, all that kind of stuff. She did all the payroll, so she knew all the employees. She retired about two years ago but lives in Hillsboro. But they can all give you a lot of information.

One thing I think is kind of funny when I think about the shelter – I just went out and rented a house and started putting people in it. And the neighbors didn't know. It was just across the street from Hank's (a grocery store?) It was owned by the guy who owned Hank's and it kind of stood alone by itself. We just did it. And we did not have supervision; we did not screen the people. We had a lot of people with a criminal history who were in there. There was weird stuff going on and I'd get these calls at 2:00 in the morning from the Sheriff's Office, asking if I was "in charge of that shelter over there." And I'd say, I'm not sure – what's going on? And he'd say, "Well we had a report of blah, blah, blah..."

We had put shelter people in charge of managing it... We'd say, well you're here for three weeks so you're in charge. We didn't have staff and basically, we didn't know what we were getting into. Like if I knew then what I know now, we probably never would have had a shelter. We had to go through a lot of hoops to get the shelter we have now – dealing with neighborhood opposition and a lot of legalities. But our original one was totally illegal. We didn't know the laws at the time – we just rented a house and started putting people in it. Bit by bit we learned that you needed 24-hour staff and that we needed to screen the people... so it was very interesting I have lots of tales of things... but somehow we survived.

It was the same with a lot of the landlord-tenant stuff. I used to go out to the places where the action was. And oh my gosh, the things that were going on – it was

really wild. You know Birch Park Apartments over here – it's kind of notorious because it's so run down... Well, one of my first clients was a guy who worked for the county who had rented this nice, new apartment in Hillsboro, and the windows were leaking in it and he wanted to know if he had any rights. I went out and looked at it and it was Birch Park – and even when it was brand new it was leaking. And I remember it was supposed to be this new, exclusive apartment building. The guy was over income for our guidelines so I referred him to an attorney in Hillsboro who took the case for free because the guy got a letter from his landlord that said, "because you have complained about the apartment and the windows leaking, you are hereby evicted." Before there had been no laws to cover this sort of thing, but the Landlord-Tenant Law had passed and so it was a good case for that attorney to take.

END OF TAPED INTERVIEW:

Referrals: Don Jones - 357-3802

 Don Patch - 359-9394 (home); 641-4717 (work)

 Betty Lu Sanders - 640-3200