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Interview with:

Eileen Weir, Shankill Women's Centre, Belfast

Venue: Shankill Road Women's Centre, Shankill Road, Belfast. (Part 1)

The Memory Project, Smashing Times Theatre Company Ltd

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Q: Eileen we're just going to go over some of the things we talked about before when I came up here, maybe if we start off with where you were born?

EILEEN: [01:00:31:17] I was born in Belfast; I was born on the Shankill road in the house which was the family home. So I was the youngest of 3, and I was born in the front room! So I was a home birth with the midwife all those years ago [01:00:52:17] and I was born and reared on the Shankill road.

Q: And you lived all your life here?

EILEEN: [01:00:58:24] I moved when the Troubles sort of weighed in, in the late 70's, my mom took me out of the road and we went to Carrickfergus to live, but I moved back, I moved back to my roots. I'm back living now about 20 years, back, not so much on the Shankill but within that Greater North Belfast area. [01:01:22:17]

Q: You talked to me before about your experience of the conflict, and the kind of things that happened in the Shankill road, maybe can you tell me a little bit about that?

EILEEN: [01:01:34:11] Well I was probably, the age of 15 when the conflict really started, I was still at school. I can remember I was still at school, and it was very new, very scary but

very new, it was exciting, it was something new. Ah..we...y'know at the time of the no-go areas and different things like that and a lot of the trouble what's about which you know within my community - my community would be a protestant background - and everybody sort of like came out and looked after each other because there was a number of power strikes and there was no lights and no electric and so everybody got their camping stoves out and that's how the dinner was made and ...[01:02:19:22] all the women met in the houses and peeled the potatoes for the pots of stew, and there was a sense of community about it, although it was very serious of what was going on, but you weren't really aware of what was going on , y'know there was a number of things that you got involved in, that maybe you shouldn't have got involved in y'know and...ah...it was.... it wasn't about...I think that the propaganda at the time everybody was out fighting to protect their home because the propaganda about in them days was they're coming to burn you out, they're coming to get you [01:02:56:17] so everybody reacted on the information that was coming through. It was a very exciting time, looking back it was very exciting but with a lot of consequences that you wouldn't have thought 30 odd years on, 40 years on that that was the case. [01:03:16:22]

Q: And did you get involved, were you actively involved?

EILEEN: [01:03:19:10] Well actively involved, yes, in the sense that, my mom didn't know I was actively involved. She would have bit the head off me like, but the time of the no-go areas, I joined the UDA [01:03:35:14] and at that time the UDA wasn't an illegal organization. The UVF was an illegal organization but UDA wasn't so I joined up in the UDA and I was 16 at the time, when I joined the UDA and we were to look after the elderly in a certain area where it was a no-go area where bread men couldn't get in, the milkmen couldn't get in, and the elderly generation that lived in that area, couldn't get out to the shops to get their messages so we actually were there to look after the older people, [01:04:10:12] to make sure they got their butter. It would all come to the top of the street and you had to queue up and get your butter and your bread and your milk, and make sure that the pensioners in the area actually got what they needed to help them, and it was a core sense of community. And then one of the other roles that the women, that was in the UDA at that time, was to make sure, at the time of the no-go areas, it was all the men who protected the areas - it wasn't women - we were there to make sure that the men - that the wee girls didn't chat up the men that was protecting the areas - so we were sorta way the babysitters of, make sure there was no hanky panky going on [01:04:56:09] at the no-go areas, at the barricades, so that was another wee role. There was never an inactive role as in guns running or anything like that, it was all like more of the welfare side of it and a wee bit of first aid, other than that y'know that's what the women were used for in my community. [01:05:20:18]

Q: As part of that you were talking about the women's... what happened then after that, what happened after you left the UDA?

EILEEN: [01:05:31:00] Well the thing, I mean it was a natural progress of moving out of it because when the no-go areas came down and the streets were all opened again, what we were doing within the UDA was no longer needed, because people could get out and do their

thing. Ah so really...I can't really remember it coming til an end. I can just remember changing, having a mind set change and I was very actively involved in the Trade Union which I think opened my eyes to a lot of other things. [01:06:04:05] And I remember one day, for reasons, well, they, they used to block the road, the Shankill Road at 12 O'clock every Saturday, and when they blocked the road at 12 O'clock every Saturday, nobody moved anywhere for an hour, the road was blocked and this was a protest that happened every Saturday. Now I'm going a way back into the 70's, and I remember I worked, and I was sitting outside a vegetable shop on the Shankill and this guy came over to me and asked for my car, they needed my car to block the road [01:06:42:17] and I said I wasn't going to give my car up to block no road, and they said if you don't block it up we're going to take it off you. I says you'll not be taking the car off me, in the meantime my mom's in the shop saying 'give them your car, give them your car' and I'm going no, because the way I looked at it was, I had worked very, very hard to have this wee car, now it was an auld scrap heap, but it was mine! And I wasn't going to allow anybody to take it, so they came and threatened me about taking the car off of me and I says 'where are you going to put my car'? They said we're going to put your car straight across the road for an hour, so I drove the car across the road and I sat in it for an hour and I didn't let anybody take the car. [01:07:25:21] So that was a big turning point for me, because here was a guy who never worked a day in his life, going to take my car that I had worked and earned very hard for, so I seen a change in my attitudes in that where's the cause in blocking your own road for an hour? Who were you hitting? Who were you penalizing? Who was suffering? And it was all people in my community that was suffering. [01:07:50:12] And to the degree that I was being threatened to get my car off me so that was a big, big turning point in my life. And then I became a lot more active within the Trade Union and at that time y'know, I would have said I wouldn't have had a lot of socialist views but that all came from the Trade Union and the stuff that I was learning in the Trade Union and our committee was a women's committee within the Trade Union, and we looked at things that wasn't right for women...and it wasn't an orange and green thing and it wasn't a Protestant or Catholic thing, it was about the rights of women, low paid, strip searches, and most of those things that I would have been campaigning for, it would have been perceived to be a very Republican/Nationalist thing so I couldn't really come back into my own community and say I was doing these things, but I WAS doing these things. [01:08:47:14] And sort of way, put me down the road of equality and fairness and I think that has stuck with me right to the day, that y'know, that I've transferred a lot of the skills that I had within the Trade Union movement into my peace making role in the community, and into my work that I do at the minute. [01:09:08:18]

Q: And I remember before you were telling me about, when you were working for the Trade Union, and you had to go round and tell the guys to take down flags and other offensive..?

EILEEN: [01:09:20:19] No that wasn't actually in the Trade Union, I had moved, and that's not that long ago, oh aye yes, I know what one you're talking about. I worked in a well known industry and the time of the Flags and Emblems Act came out, there used to be a tradition within the factory, that coming up to the 12th, that they had their flags on their machines, and they had a wee mini 12th around the factory, so when the Flags and Emblems Act came

in [01:09:50:23] I actually was in Ballymena working at the time so it was a very staunch...real, well it would have been a probably DUP, you know, a real staunch loyalist area. And when the flags and emblems act came in, the guy who was actually senior shop steward was from a Catholic tradition and he didn't feel that he could go round and ask the people to take down their flags, their Union Jacks and their Ulster flags so he approached me and he says 'I'm off on the sick, I'm going out on the sick, taking holidays' and I says right, so he actually had left me with it which I understood. [01:10:32:01] I did understand, so when I was going round saying to the men, it was illegal to do it because a law had been past and the Trade Union signed up to the legislation that the Flags and Emblems Act had to be adhered to. So when I was going round the shop floor asking the guys to take down the flags, they questioned my loyalism which I'm not a loyalist, but they questioned my faith and I just sort of said to them, see when you were lying in your bed in August in 1969, while you were lying in your bed sleeping I wasn't so my credibility coming from the area that I came from . . . I didn't need to say any more than that so the sort of way.... backfired...the flags came down. But just to make it an equality thing, I walked into the fitters shop, now in most factories where it's a male environment they will have calendars up of nude women and different things that would offend women, but no women actually went into those rooms unless their machine was broke, so when I got all the flags down [01:11:50:22] and people not flying anything offensive, I went into all the fitters shops and electrical shops and requested all the posters to come down too because if the flags offended some people, the posters offended people too, so to change it into rather than being just one issue because the Flags and Emblems act is anything that offends - it wasn't just a flag thing. So all the nude women came down off the fitters shops too which they weren't too happy but they seen the point of it and they seen the principle, you can't apply one principle under an emblems act and not apply it in another principle so it was nude free and flag free (laugh). I don't know what's it like now but at that time it was flag free and nude free [01:12:40:09]. And in the same area, and because all the flags were took down, the Managing Director Mr Finlay, who was a lovely gentleman, sent for me to come to his office and he took me up the stairs and where his office was you could look right out on to the security gates of people coming in and he said have a look at this Eileen, and I looked out the window and they had organized red white and blue, red white and blue, red white and blue. Everybody wore a different colour jumper because they weren't allowed, because they weren't allowed to put their flags up. They were allowed to wear jumpers, the were allowed to wear coats, so the whole line the whole way in had it so that it was red, white and blue, red white and blue and when they got into the factory they hung their cardigans over the chairs, red white and blue, red white and blue (laugh) so y'know, I know I'm laughing about it now, y'know . . .but that's, that's how much it really affected people. They felt that they were lossing their identity, and so that was another. . getting the red white and blue cardigans on the back of, the back of the chairs to try and sort of like calm things down y'know. [01:13:54:16]

Q: When I was talking to you the last time, you talked about the...because you work for the Shankill Women's Centre and the Falls Women's Centre, what was the relationship between the 2 centres during the conflict?

EILEEN: [01:14:06:23] Well the relationship y'know, I think the women's centre's going 27 now, 28 years, and it's the same with Falls they would have been the two...not the main ones but they were one of the earlier ones . . . and there was a bit of thing about funding at one time away back then and politicians were sort of way using the women's centres to y'know, if you do this then they're not getting the money and if they get the money then you'll not get the money and they were trying to play the both - the Falls and the Shankill off with each other. And it wasn't just the women's centres, it was money in that community and the 2 women's centres sort of way said well if both of us are not getting it then we don't want it so keep it. [01:14:52:05] And to this day that relationship still is strong with the Shankill and the Falls because at the time of the conflict here a lot of the men were all in prison y'know, there was internment and a lot of the loyalist prisoners, republican prisoners and it was women that ran the communities. It was women who had to look for the loaf of bread, the pint of milk, y'know and, and the struggle was an awful lot more because women were the backbone of the communities at that time because a lot of the men were in prison. [01:15:29:22] So the women had to sort of way get things done and, and there was a bond because there was families involved, there was kids involved, there was education involved and the women was the head and the breadwinner of the family for many, many years. [01:15:49:14]

Q: What was it like when the men came out of prison?

EILEEN: [01:15:51:14] Well I mean I don't have a personal experience of it but I know that listening to a lot of men who did come out of prison and y'know talking in groups where ex combatants would be in, y'know, some of them men went in, into prison and maybe their wives or their partner was pregnant and when they came out maybe 10 years, 11 years in, they were dads and the child really didn't know their Dad so they came from being y'know a guy in a male environment to come out into the community to start being fathers and y'know there's a big adjustment, and things... [01:16:32:19] change so quick y'know, a year makes a big difference. And y'know to resettle back in to community life again wasn't easy and still isn't easy for a lot of, of the ex combatants. Y'know, a lot of the ex-combatants are doing a very, very good job within the peace process and y'know the way I look at it, we need those people around the table as much as we need the likes of me around the table, to iron out situations that's actually happening in the community. [01:17:06:16] Within the Protestant community, they weren't treated as hero's as much when they came out of prison, where within the Republican communities, their guys were treated as heros and there was a lot more that I would think that the republican movement done for their ex-combatants than what was happening within the loyalist communities. [01:17:33:01]

Q: Ad what's your vision for the future?

EILEEN: [01:17:38:07] I've been saying it for the last 30 odd years, I, I firmly believe, you know, we don't have peace. OK, we have a document saying that we have a peace process and that's all it is and we don't have peace within our communities, there's an awful lot that needs to happen but I don't know.... Y'know I mean, there's things that happen within

communities when you are on the ground and you're hearing something's happening and you going well no-body came and asked me.... [01:18:10:14] Nobody asked me my opinion. And I've been working in this job for 20 odd years and I'm working on interfaces and I'm tending good relations meetings and there's a trip to Cardiff and nobody that I know is on it, who actually works on the ground 24/7 in these area. So y'know, unless the powers that be start connecting with the people who are actually working and hands on, and not bringing people along y'know because they're known for their background, I'm not saying that they don't do good work, I'm not saying that, what I'm saying is, if you bring the two extremes together, that's what you're going to get. But if you bring people together along with those two extremes to look at other ways round things without the.... when you bring two people with something so passionate to them of course there's going to be clashes and there'll be agree to disagree. But I think you need to widen that to people who are working on the ground for peace and you need to involve that voice. [01:19:26:20] At the minute, the work that I'm doing at the minute is trying to...well not trying, I am going to set up a Greater North Belfast Women's Forum to have the women's voice heard when there's decisions being made in communities. They NEED to be looking at the Women's point of view, I'm not saying that the woman's' point of view is always a right point of view but it's a point of view that is not been took on board and part of my role is to try and get those women's voices heard within their communities and within the political process. So it's down to them whether they want to get more involved in the community or more involved in the whole political situation that we have. [01:20:16:09]

Q. Very good.

End file

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IV EILEEN WEIR (Part 2)

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EILEEN: Look and see about the whole flags and things like that and I'm still trying to get through the document, and there was to be responses in for Friday past and there was no way that I was going to be able to submit anything. I don't think they make it easy for people on the ground, people in communities to, to discuss or debate certain issues, they're focusing an awful lot on...I think they are putting all their eggs in the one basket as such. Now I've played sport all my life and I would say yes, sport probably done a lot for me because you mixed with other people, y'know I mean especially team sports, my sport was hockey [01:21:10:00] and y'know we would have played down south, we would've played all over so y'know, I'm not saying that sport is not a good medium cos sport is. But what I'm saying is they're putting all their eggs into sport and really a lot of the conflict and a lot of stuff that happens here on the interfaces and a lot of our young people - most of the ones that's on

those interfaces and most of the ones that's doing a lot of the anti-social behaviour stuff, don't play sport - and they're not going to play sport. So, y'know, I think there needs to be a lot more thought around what you are doing [01:21:48:02] and I know there is a part in it about doing summer camps which I think is a fantastic idea because here, especially within the protestant community we have a tradition, you leave school in June and you don't, you're not allowed to really to sign on till September so from June to September you get into a rut, you don't have to get up for work in the morning, you have 3 months that you don't really have to do anything if you don't want to do anything. [01:22:20"12] And most of our training centres that take kids in for skill training all close down over the summer; they only operate term time too. And they are looking about doing summer camps and things like that which I think is a great idea but I think, y'know, what's the point of having a lot of the training organizations and when the kids is off school, when the biggest part of a lot of the conflict and a lot of the troubles round marches and parades, all happen between June and September and there's nothing to keep our young off the street, [01:23:01:04] you know, to further their education and there's bound to be something that you could do as skill training, for 3 months that you have a skill training where maybe for 3 weeks you do Joinery, another 2 weeks you try electricity , or you try plumbing to give the youth a bit of the taste of what they could do and come September then they can pick from knowing what it was they tried over the summer yeah I like that, 'I would like to be an electrician'. [01:23:33:10]

Q: That sounds like a project.

EILEEN: That does sound like a project, and it's something that I have said, y'know, for a long, long time. [01:23:41:24] I'm not putting down the training organizations that close down over the summer, who don't have courses over the summer; I'm not knocking them. They don't get the resources to be able to do that and you know I just think it's crazy when our schools finish, last week in June and for a lot, for a lot of the older youth who are leaving school, y'know they get through July and August and part of September before they have to sign on - there's a lot of months there. I'm not saying all youth because a lot of the youth come out and go into training schemes [01:24:25:13] but they don't start till September, so if we're trying to get the work ethic, we should have something in place that's OK when they finish school, the second week after they finish school. They go into a training scheme to get used to getting up, to get out of their bed, to go to somewhere. Then have a fortnights holiday over the 12th and then come back, to get them into working mode. [01:24:51:11] Y'know I wasn't, if I left school my mom said to me you can leave school if you want, but you have to walk into a job, you leave school on a Friday, you'll be in employment on the Monday and if you can't do that you're not leaving school. Now it was easier in them days to get a job, you could have done that, move from one to the other, it's a lot harder. A lot of our youth are not skilled up, and a lot of the ones who are skilled have lost their jobs and they are moving into jobs in front of the youth [01:25:20:03] and I think we should be doing skilled based training, taking them away to be friends, down on a boot camp as such, great idea but it's not, you're not maintaining that ...its temporary, you're doing it over the summer, you're doing boot camp, you're taking communities together to bring them together to have fun, we've been doing that for years.

Yeah it works but unless you maintain something like that, you need to have something solid where there's jobs, and not necessarily jobs that they walk into but if you can have schemes put in place over 3 months when it's our most.... fragile situation...between June and September - if we were taking them into training schemes and working with people [01:26:19:00] and trying to learn a skill - surely that can be maintained? More so.... I don't think there's enough in it, you know I've been working in the woman's sector for a quare while, but the woman's sector isn't the only job I have worked in. I have worked in different community backgrounds and y'know I don't think they are putting enough money into the adults. When you look at the present protesting that's going on – it's all adults - there's no children - no youth at them, very, very few. It's all adults so we need to be keeping that education going for adults [01:27:01:02] as well as the youth cos you can take the youth away, you can y'know give them courses, you can learn them to respect each others' culture, you can learn them to do manys a thing, but then they go home to their parents, and if their parents says told them 'it's a lot of auld nonsense', so it has to be from the top down in the family as well as the bottom up, y'know we can't just. .

The youth is our future but we have 3 or 4 generation's that's going to be there for a fair while so we can't put everything, all our eggs into one basket and say right we have to get our youth sorted. [01:27:43:21] You just can't get one section of the community sorted and forget about the rest of it so I think, as again, I've only read part of this report but it's not made easy and everybody's meeting. Richard Haas and the political representatives are meeting, and different organizations are meeting him and they are meeting community organizations. I'm going to a meeting in another couple of weeks time in the CRC, I just wonder how many people they have met out of the CRC who do this fire fight 24/7, 365 days a year. [01:28:25:03]:

Q: OK, thank you very much Eileen.

End file 01:28:36:11

End of Interview