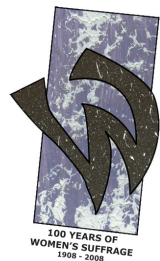


Eleanor Summer



100
YEARS OF WOMEN'S
SUFFRAGE
1908-2008



Reflection and Celebration





Eleanor Sumner



Limited edition handmade publication 2007

Printed and Handbound

RMIT University Students from School of Architecture and Design
& School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning

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Facilitation: Liam Fennessy and Soumitri Varadarajan

Project Partners: Women's Electoral Lobby and League of Women Voters Victoria

Adjunct Professor Judith Smart background material on women's suffrage in Victoria

Shawn Callahan of anecdote for opening question techniques

Meg Minos for background material on bookbinding

Jackie Ralph for transcribing

Interviewee: Eleanor Sumner

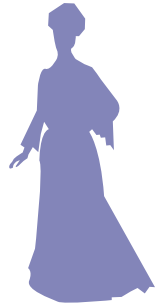
Interviewed by: Cara Jeffery and Sarah Costanzo

Designed By: Sarah Costanzo

Interview of Eleanor Sumner edited by Cara Jeffery

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I would like to dedicate this to all women fighting for equality

Sarah Costanzo



Introduction

The 24th of November 1908 marks the day when the Legislative Council passed a suffrage bill enabling women for the first time to vote in state elections of Victoria, Australia. For the centenary celebration Liam Fennessy and Soumitri Varadarajan, RMIT Industrial Design Program, Kerry Lovering Women's Electoral Lobby, Sheila Byard Victoria League of Women Voters Victoria and artist Fern Smith worked in partnership; facilitating RMIT students to produce handmade limited edition books of twelve significant women in Victoria.

Four students Emma Brelsford, Sarah Costanzo, Cara Jeffery and Diana White conducted twelve two hour interviews with Gracia Baylor, Elleni Bereded-Samuel, Ellen Chandler, Angela Clarke, Ursula Dutkiewicz, Beatrice Faust, Pat Goble, Professor Patricia Grimshaw, Mary Owen, Marian Quartly, Associate Professor Jenny Strauss and Eleanor Sumner.

The students had never interviewed, edited nor produced handmade books it is a fantastic achievement with in a twelve-week semester. Their background work informed from in-kind assistance of historian Adjunct Professor Judith Smart; expert in narrative techniques and director of Anecdote, Shawn Callahan; writer, artist and bookbinder Meg Minos.

For all of us who have participated in the project it has given us time to reflect on the achievements and persistent struggle toward gender equality in Victoria. What shines through these twelve wonderful interviews is the strength, persuasive insistence for equality within our community and their huge generous hearts.

Fern Smith 2007



Being an empowered woman...

I can tell you a story; I was very young in the days where we used to go dancing at nights, unattached. You know, go to the local dance. I used to dance at a place in the city, 6 nights a week then I'd catch the train to Reservoir and walk the 5 miles home, I was very fit! Anyway, one night a man asked me to dance... And I danced with him, and I didn't like him, so when the dance finished I stepped off the floor.. He came and asked me for the next dance. I said "No", so he disappeared. Then somebody else asked me to dance. I said "Yes" and I danced. And it was an absolute no, no; if a man asked you to dance then no way do you dance with anybody else! Well, he put on a terrible performance on the dance floor; that he'd asked me and I'd said no and here was I dancing with someone else. And I said to him, "What did you pay to come in here tonight?"

And he said, *"Two and six pence... why?"*

And I said, *"That's exactly what I paid. That gave you the right to ask me to dance and that gave me the right to say no."*

Women as carers...

I've been a carer for my husband for about 20 years. He's was, or is, diabetic and he suffered all of the manifestations of diabetes; gangrene in his toes, his toes have been amputated; failing vision; loss of the peripheral nerves. He falls over because he's got



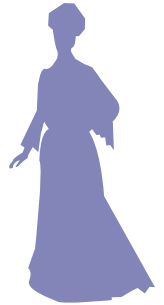
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no toes, he can't grip. He is a big man and I couldn't lift him up, so I'd have to ring the police and if the police didn't have a wagon in the area I'd have to ring the ambulance. Then it got that I... I mean, I've got a life and I think I contribute to society which is as much for my well being as well.

It got to the point that he would cry if I was going to go out to a meeting asking what time would I be home; if I said I would be home about five, come five o'clock he'd be ringing the police asking if I'd been in an accident and then he became increasingly manipulative. About eighteen months ago, though, he had another fall and he broke the femur, and also broke the bone between the hip and the knee and he spent a couple of months down at the Austin. And I just decided I'd had enough; all these so called support mechanisms to keep the person at home, without really a great deal of compassion for the carer. There are beds, what do they call it? -Carers relief- at various places, but he is now in a nursing home and they've got one bed available for 3 weeks carers relief. It's only tokenism, really only tokenism. I think there should be more nursing home facilities, for me, that is an issue.

It comes back to the time honoured concept that women are the carers; that women don't go to work because they should stay home and have children and look after the children and do all the housework... And it's alright if they get a job as long

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as they aren't earning more than what the husband earns. All of these things impact on women's quality of life. I'm sorry this happened to my husband, we had a good marriage and a strong marriage... But... um... I'm not ready to hang up my boots, alright?

Empowering women worldwide...

I suppose the International Council of Women is the big achievement. It was an opportunity to do good without being a do-gooder- the bringing together of women of all countries and accepting them as being equals and I think I'm very grateful to have and that opportunity...

Two events happened in my life very close together: I was vice president of the International Council of Women; it's a world wide body of women. It came into being in the late eighteenth century when some women from America, the New World, went to England, the Old World, for a conference on anti -slavery. The women were told they could attend the conference but they would sit down the back of the room and they were not to take part in any of the discussions. So the women went back to America determined to form a worldwide union of women with the aim to raise the status of women and children in all societies. So the International Council of Women was formed in 1887. Australia was actually represented at the inaugural meeting, we were the 5th



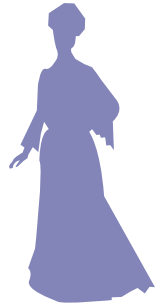
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country in the world to join and now the International Council of Women has got about 80 countries worldwide. It's non-political, of no particular religious view point, the main object is to raise the status of women and children.

So I'd gone to a meeting in the Dominican Republic. Some poor women had heard that we were coming and they asked if they could see us. So myself and another woman met with them and they - there's no birth control in the Dominican Republic; they euphemistically describe themselves as being widows, which we took to mean they were unmarried mothers. They lived in a swamp; houses were made of flattened kerosene tins and such. It's tropical, it rains and so the water rises and drops in the swamp. They cook with oil; frequent fires and the fire brigade wouldn't go in to help them. There's no running water no sewerage, the schools are on a two system, there's morning school and afternoon schools and the children had to walk about 4 miles to get to the school and of course they were poor and very vulnerable and the bullies used to wait to belt them up on the way home and so forth. Anyway, I said to them "Do you have the vote?" That took a bit of explaining. Once they understood and they said "Yes", and I said, "Do you vote when there are elections?"

"What's the use?" they said. And I said to them, *"It's the most powerful weapon that you've got. It's important that when elections are called that you canvas the people*

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who are standing; Tell them what you want and ask them what they can do for you." Anyway, I tried to stress to them that they must use that power that they've got and through a benefactor we organised some sewing machines for them and somebody to teach them some basic sewing skills so that they can so they could go into the markets and make little things and get some income, because there's no social security there.

Then a very similar thing happened to me the year before last; In Taiwan, the National Women's League asked me if I would meet with some young girls go through a mentoring session with them. Again I stressed to them the importance of using their vote and just as a side I said "Whenever the YWCA or the National Council of Women pass a resolution about some inequity you must let the politicians know. You must let the leader of the opposition know and the spokesperson for women's affairs in your government."

So these were two times where you know I have been able to stress just how important the vote is and how important it is that one exercises that choice that you've got. So they were two things but probably being elected to the board was a crowning achievement in my life because I wasn't elected to represent Australia; it's an international organisation and so you represent women worldwide. That was a 9 year appointment and I found it very fulfilling and very worthwhile.



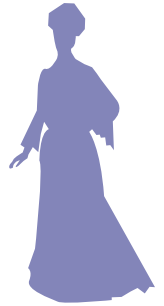
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I went to Pakistan a few years ago, I've travelled extensively in many countries but it was the situation of the women there was worse than anything that any of us could imagine. I was in a museum and there were three women and they were in the garb and their eyes were covered in a mesh... And they circled around and circled around and I could see that they wanted to make contact so I stopped...- Sorry, I hope I don't burst into tears- One of them said to me "*Sorry, we are so sorry. Our eyes cannot see and our lips cannot speak.*" And I said... I said, "*Your sisters all over the world love you.*" Anyway... that's where I'm coming from.

Women on the home front...

What do I think here? I think probably disadvantaged people are increasingly becoming disadvantaged, by that I mean the homeless or people who can't live at home because the domestic situation isn't tenable. I have to say that our problems are surmountable with government will compared to the problems elsewhere. So it would be easy to say to me, look we've got it made; There are safety nets available. In many cases it's not adequate but there is some social responsibility in Australia... It could be better; **there's the plight of the single mother, that could be addressed more realistically and with more compassion.** The other thing of course is the fees for young people to further their education. We are going to become a country where only the children of the wealthier strata of society are going to have the advantage of tertiary

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education unless something drastic is done. This is my opinion; this will be something that down the track, as a country, we'll regret...

Look, when we look at the money that is in the basket of the Federal Government at the moment and how it is, it is probable that just before the election is called there's going to be even more bountiful handing out of money. Then when you look at what we give in the way of what we give in overseas aid it's appalling. It is actually a blight on our society that our government doesn't give more generous aid to developing countries...

When you get back again to women getting the vote, **a lot of women made absolute public spectacles of themselves and I'll always be indebted to them for it**, but this isn't an issue any more the vote is there at 18 if you wish to or otherwise at 21... I suppose women could be more vocal about education and they could be more vocal about the need for childcare; It was in the local paper yesterday the shortage of childcare facilities, and the cost of it, which I guess... The way people buy houses now, you know, Mc Mansions, you need two incomes. I certainly worked; I went to work when my youngest went to school, but I had private arrangements, which worked out very satisfactorily and I think it's probably... **Women are contributing to the economy- they should be demanding more childcare facilities**, close to their work place, if



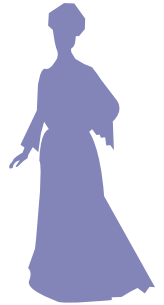
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necessary. And I think we come back, of course, to education- to the cost of education. And that of course transfers on to families when children are completing secondary schools if the family can afford to pay for the fees...

A few years ago there were separate YWCA's there was a one in Melbourne one in Geelong, Bendigo and so forth and we had a Victorian State Council. I was a member of the Council and then the Vice President there for a time and of course we were involved in programs, a lot of it was housing for young women- Actually this is still something that I feel that the government should address and that is for women who have been in prison coming out, to make sure there are reliable halfway housing available for them... Not where peddlers can be hanging around pushing them drugs. Some assistance for decent accommodation and more rigorous training while they are in prison for employment opportunities and I mean realistic training for employment opportunities, not putting a computer in the room and saying do this and this and play with that and then consider that they are computer literate when they come out. I think that's probably an area that should be more vigorously addressed.

The YWCA does have working with young women programs which tries to help along this way. I was on the board for couple of years and they made me a life member a couple of years ago. I believe in the Y; they seem to be able to work where there are

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areas of need. For example, they've put a program in place up at Timor to help the women there and again it's non judgemental it's no longer Jesus loves me sort of thing it's a commitment to raise the status of the women and to help the women achieve.

A message from one woman to all women...

Give me work until my life is done and life until my work is done... I suppose we should all believe in ourselves and we should cultivate our strength and try to overcome any failing or such that we have - but that's not what I mean... Um, I don't know whether I'm a great example - but I've seized every opportunity in my life, and where I felt I've been lacking I've taken action to inform myself better.. Yes, I... That's not giving you a great deal of inspiration to put down... I guess, seize every opportunity...



Final Notes

I would like to thank Eleanor Sumner for taking the time to share her stories with Sarah and myself. One can't help but feel truly inspired when listening to her as she speaks of her life experiences; Sumner has truly made the most of the strength that political freedom has given her, by helping to empower women and children of the world in less privileged positions. It was an honour to have been able to meet her and be able to hear such moving stories from such an amazing life.



