

NSW DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING

‘Millers Point Oral History Project’

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE:	Helen Xiros
TAPE NUMBERS:	MP-FH27 (1 Tape)
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DATE AND PLACE:	26 September 2005 at Millers Point NSW
DURATION OF INTERVIEW:	37 mins 1 sec
RESTRICTIONS ON USE:	Nil

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00:02 START OF TAPE MP-FH27, SIDE A

00:03 Tape identification

00:24 Tell me a little bit about you, Helen, first what is your full name?

My name is Helen Xiros.

Tell me a little bit about your family background - the family you were born into.

00:36 I come from a Greek background. I come from a fairly big Greek family, mother father, I'm the youngest of a brother and a sister. My parents migrated here around thirty years ago and I was born in Australia. Raised with a very multicultural way of life. I learnt how to speak Greek, read, write and a lot about the cultural aspect of the Greek lifestyle.

Are you involved with the Greek community much?

To some extent. I was much more when I was younger, involved in Greek school, Greek dancing, you know the Greek community, but as you get older you sort of form your own friendships and they consist of other nationalities as well.

Good. Tell me, which school did you go to? I mean which part of Sydney were you living in actually before you came here?

01:47 I grew up in the south-west, so I went to a school called Kingsgrove North High School. That was a public high school, very popular in those days, quite a good school.

When you left school did you have any idea what you wanted to do with yourself?

02:25 I had no idea, so I decided to do an Arts degree at Sydney University to keep my options open. The first year of uni I decided then I wanted to get into the area of welfare, something that I could help the community with - I chose social work, so I finished my Social Work degree at Sydney University.

Did you enjoy the course?

Very much so. It is a very broad degree, you can get into a lot of areas, and it is such a fantastic opportunity because you could work across the board with all age groups and any sort of disadvantaged community. You can work with young, old, mental health, disabilities. So that is why I chose social work, just to have a general outlook on life.

So you got yourself a Bachelor Social Work, was that what it was called?

Yes.

What did you do with that after you'd finished your studies?

03:35 Whilst I was completing my studies I was working in an aged-care facility, so I worked with something called the Community Aged-Care Packages, which is helping old people live in their homes longer, rather than moving straight into nursing homes. So I sort of started with the aged-care field. I worked with dementia care

programmes, I co-ordinated dementia care programmes. I worked with Community Aged-Care Packages. I then sort of thought it was time to work with young people, being still considered young by the young people I thought it was the time to work with young people. I worked in teenage residential care programmes and then started working here as a co-ordinator of a youth centre.

How old are you now Helen?

I'm twenty-eight.

All that experience already.

04:31 Twenty-eight to some quite young but to some quite old, when I work with young people they say twenty-eight is really old.

Depends where you are coming from, I suppose. Now how did the job come up here at the youth centre, tell me.

04:49 I think it was advertised in the newspaper as 'Social Worker - Youth'. I originally applied for quite a few jobs at the time, I was looking for a more stable job, nine to five. Where I was working previously was overnight work, residential work, quite long hours, so I was looking for something where I could leave at the end of the day. That really hasn't happened. I wanted more a steady job, so I came in with the understanding that it was Monday to Friday, nine to five job, and it was an eye-opener that it was actually quite different to what I expected.

In which way was it different?

05:40 Everything on paper looks different to what a job is. It was a drop-in centre for young people, case work, and it was managing a centre as well, so it was a combination of things. It was a great surprise, I quite enjoy it, but it was just something different to what I had done in the past.

Now this place had a different function before didn't it, can you tell me what it was before it became a youth centre?

06:06 It used to be a gymnasium. I obviously wasn't around at the time but what I've been told it was quite a popular place where the kids used to come and do gymnastics and that's why we've got very high ceilings here because it used to be a gymnasium. It was quite popular, they had boxing and things like that, so the kids constantly talk about things they used to do here in the past and they remember certain functions that they had here, certain events when they were younger and

things like that.

Who is actually employing you?

It is the City of Sydney Council.

You are their permanent youth worker for Millers Point?

06:43 Yes. My title is Social Worker/Youth Team Leader.

So how did you find this community when you started to work here?

06:53 It is actually quite a very welcoming community, I've had no problems with any of the parents or community members, none of the young people. It is quite surprising that the young people are very open and very welcoming to new staff here. From day one I've had nothing but positive feedback from the kids - they haven't in any way made me feel unwelcome. The parents themselves are quite supportive of the youth centre itself, you know there is nothing in the area to get them off the streets, so with a youth centre to get them off the street they are welcoming to anything.

Are there a lot of kids on the street? Or would there be if there wasn't a youth centre?

07:38 When I say 'on the street' I mean there is nothing for them to do, so they are sitting on the street playing football or just hanging around. That is what I mean by 'on the street' - basically there is no space for them, there are no outdoor parks where they can play a game of touch football or play a game of basketball out on the street. They tend to play in the middle of the road because there is no outdoor space that is sufficient for them to play in. That is what I mean, when they are on the street they are just in their groups, hanging around, so they are seen as trouble makers because they are hanging around in large groups of people. You will have some, like teenagers, running around and look like they are doing something terrible but they are really just having fun. The youth centre just gives them an opportunity where it is a safe environment, where they can come inside, you know it is a space that is their own. There are rules, but they are quite basic rules that they have to respect and they have a great respect to the centre in that they understand that is their space and if they ruin it they don't get it again, so they have much respect for it.

How would you sort of summarise the community here? What kind of a mixture of people is it?

08:51 There is a mixture of people. The ones that I have most contact with are a lot

from generations in the area, so they are not anyone new coming into the area, so mainly they are from Department of Housing. I don't have much to do with newcomers to the area and that is probably because their kids aren't mixing with the other kids, I'd say. I do work with the young people in the area so the only parents that I do see are the parents of the young people.

Are they mainly the Housing Commission tenants?

Yes.

If there are any kids in the Highgate Apartments and in the Walsh Bay development do they come here as well?

09:41 I don't have any contact with them, to my knowledge none of them that I deal with are. To tell the truth I don't have contact with them.

So they basically don't send their kids here?

No. It is an open service, we don't sort of knock back anyone, we don't say, 'No you can't come in,' or 'Yes you can come in,' but whether it's known to them or whether they feel comfortable coming in are other sort of issues, I suppose.

So these kids you entertain them, you have to find programmes for them, how do you go about that?

10:14 It is more an individualistic approach, so the kids approach me and say what they are interested in. Then we look at gaps in their educational background and things like that. We tend to try and cater programmes that are centre-based because the kids don't like to leave the area. We try to build up their skills and then encourage them to leave the area and do TAFE courses and go to school outside the area. To build up their skills in the area we can do sometimes photography courses, we do a lot of music courses, computer skill courses, anything that the kids really come and say, 'This is what I want to do.' In terms of programmes that we don't have enough kids for we actually go out and look externally for Outreach programmes that cater for their needs. So we just take it on what the kids bring to us and what they want.

What is the general level of education that they do reach here, the kids?

11:17 From my knowledge and my experience it is up to Year 10. Lately there have been more going on to Year 11 and 12. When I came in it was encouraging them to get to their Year 10 and just the support to get them to their Year 10 certificate.

Most of them tended to leave at Year 10 in the past?

Yes.

You are saying now that some of them are staying on a bit longer?

Yes.

So tell me about those programmes, how do you dream them up?

11:55 Well we've got various programmes we run with Lend Lease, the local corporate organisation runs a task force, so there is about thirteen external organisations that work together to assist the young people in Millers Point. They range from -Department of Housing is on the Board, so is the Police, local residents that have a tennis club, Education Department/TAFE, we all work together and look at just gaps in the area and the needs of young people in the area. We have young people that have their say and say what they would like, what type of assistance they require, so we just look at ways we can help them. We started off with a mentoring programme, which is a way of supporting them through Year 11 and 12 and helping them get through school and just self-esteem building and things like that. It is just a group of thirteen people that sit around a table, have half-day workshops on what are the gaps in the area, what do we need to do. The biggest one was employment that we looked at, and unemployed people, so then just drawing back and looking at preventative measures of how can we actually assist these people find employment prior to leaving school and that type of stuff.

So these mentoring programmes, whose idea was it to start these off?

13:18 It was part of the task force. There was, as I said, a group of people that sat around together and looked at ways. We brainstormed certain ideas and it just happened that mentoring was one of them and we thought mentoring was probably the easiest to start with because Lend Lease had their volunteers already as mentors, I had connection to the young people, so therefore we had our two parties together to actually form a mentoring programme. At the time we thought it would be an easy programme to start with, we had got it already - we just needed to run with it. We have worked out that is probably the one that has taken the most time and a lot of harnessing to actually to get where we are today, but it has also been a very successful programme.

How does it actually work then, the mentoring programme, for those people who don't know

anything about it?

14:04 We started off with a pilot programme so we started off with a small group of young people, I think it was about ten, and ten mentors. The mentors went through a training programme through TAFE-Outreach, which was Mentoring the Community TAFE programme. They ran through I think about fourteen weeks, I'm not sure about that actually I can't remember exactly. They ran through a programme where they got the basics about mentoring. They then were matched up with young people that I had contact with and they also went to Balmain High School, so we had the vice-principal there on board as well. We all sort of looked at a profile on each individual and saw how we could match them. We then had a barbecue and just saw how natural pairings would form up with the mentoring young people and just got the relationships building and starting to form those relationships. From there we just matched a young person with a mentor, one-on-one. They meet once a week for an hour, maybe two, then, depending on the flexibility of work load and the young person's social life as well they negotiate between the two of them how often they meet, what they do. It is all about self-esteem, role-modelling, homework assistance, job search, TAFE courses, it is that adult person they can have in their lives who they can go to if they need that type of assistance with anything. It was something like my role – however, I have something like thirty kids that come through a day and I don't have that time to give them attention per individual so therefore with mentoring that gives them someone they can turn to and find that type of assistance.

So the mentor will help them with their homework, you said?

Yes.

Do they advise them if they have problems? Do the kids come to the mentors with problems that they might have and what might those problems be, do you think?

16:08 It just depends. A young person can have a fight with a friend and just feel that they want to talk to someone about it, someone that is not in their circle of friends, that is older, that does have a wiser outlook on life. They do go to their mentor and say what happened to them. Every mentor relationship has a different stance. The boys are mainly not as vocal - they tend to play sports together and role model through sporting functions and things like that, so they spend a lot more time actively doing things. The females spend a lot more time talking and chatting over coffee and talking about their weekend and things like that. Some of the kids have built really

strong relationships with their mentors where their parents have invited them in the past over for dinner and things like that. It just depends how the relationship hits off and how much they want to give to their mentor.

What have you seen happening between the mentors and the kids? What kind of improvements or positive feedback have you seen?

17:14 School attendance rate has been much higher. There was a lot of truancy before the programme began, but now we do a lot of work with the school, encouraging mentors to go to the school to assist them with homework. We have days where the mentors go to the school and spend the whole day at school with the young person. So it is all about encouraging them to stay in school and things like that. When we recently approached the mentees and said, 'What are you getting out of this programme? Why do you want it to stay?' they said, 'Well someone care about me and somebody wants to encourage me to go to school and I don't want to let my mentor down, they've done so much for me.' It is just the whole morale of the whole programme I think. A lot of kids feel very special that they are in this programme and feel it is something that is unique and they are very proud to be part of it.

Is this something unusual? I have never heard of a mentor programme before, so is this peculiar to Millers Point or do they have mentor programmes in other parts of Sydney?

18:16 Mentoring is very common, very common across Sydney - I've heard of many programmes. The unique thing about Millers Point is that we've got a corporate organisation that we are involved with and that is Lend Lease, and they are based in Millers Point. So we are working with a local youth centre and a corporate organisation in the same suburb and they are all working together. Mostly other mentoring programmes, well to my knowledge, they come from all sorts of ways of life, so all sorts of organisations, work lives, and they the mentor kids and not particularly from one centre, they could be from various centres. So I think because it is so local and everyone works together it has become accustomed to the way of life in the Youth Centre. I mean mentors come in and play a game of pool and then leave, so everybody sort of knows them, so one mentor could have one young person, although the whole Youth Centre knows them. It is just the way it works here, I suppose.

It is very interesting. The mentors get something out of that as well?

19:24 Yes, they've said that it is a great break for them and they are learning just as

much as the young people - they feel they are learning how to interact with young people, just the challenges of teenagers, so how to look at life in a different way.

Getting out of the office is a good thing for them, I think they said.

It rejuvenates them a bit, does it? Any problems in the mentoring programme? Have there been any obstacles?

19:52 I think there are obstacles with any sort of programme and we've had a few matches that haven't been as successful and we deal with them. We look at alternative mentors, we look at the issues that have arisen. There have been an abundance of young people that want to take part and we don't have enough mentors at stages, then there are times where young people don't keep their appointments with mentors. That's just the challenges of teenagers, I suppose.

What has been the most successful thing that you've seen come out of the mentoring programme in terms of relationships and things?

20:33 I think the biggest thing is the self-esteem and the confidence with young people to feel that it's okay to talk to people that are not in their social setting. Talking to people that are in the corporate world, visiting corporate buildings, looking at a lifestyle that is not necessarily their own lifestyle and just the confidence in being able to enter a building that isn't somewhere they are usually able to walk into. Some of the kids have been in trouble with the law, so they are constantly being looked down on from people that are an authoritarian figure, they are constantly being looked down on and getting into trouble and so I think they put them all in the same category. Then when they walk into somewhere they know how to deal with authority much better.

It gives them confidence too, does it? You said some of the kids are getting into trouble - what kind of trouble do they get into at Millers Point?

22:04 Under-age drinking is a major problem. Truancy, not as much any more. They do a lot of things that I think they are unaware of that can lead to quite dangerous things. As I said under-age drinking is one - that then leads to violent behaviour, hanging in groups, intimidating people, throwing rocks. You know little things that can be quite dangerous and quite detrimental to people.

Is it worse here than anywhere else, or is it just like the rest of Sydney?

I don't know, I can't say.

What background do the kids have? What sort of ethnic background?

There's a range, there's a range. You've got Asian, Australian, Islander, there is a range. We don't have a specific one that is a minority or a majority here.

Any conflict between different groups of kids at all? Does one group not like another? Or is it not like that?

23:44 I think Millers Point is quite a close-knit community, the kids are quite close. Even though they are from different age groups they tend to all get along. There are times when they'll have little arguments and there will be times where some people won't come into the centre because they are having a fight with someone, but I think that is across the board with all teenagers, you know, they have their fights. But there has been nothing quite major that they have been segregated for a long period of time or anything like that, no.

Right. Now the Youth Centre here - give me a time when it opens, when it closes, what the kids do when they come here, what kind of games they play, or whatever.

24:28 It is open from Monday to Friday. It is open from ten until six p.m. However, the young people don't have access in the morning unless by appointment, the reason is we don't like them to truant school to come to the Youth Centre. We are open from two-thirty to five-thirty on Monday to Thursday, on Friday we are open until seven p.m. What we do - we have structured daily programmes. On a Monday we have a girls' activity day programme where we encourage young females to come in and we do arts and craft, cooking, personal hygiene, educational things there. On a Tuesday we have volunteers from Lend Lease that come and do some homework activities. Wednesdays we have sports day. Thursdays are arts and craft. Friday at the moment are cooking and a health Outreach service that comes and does some free health services for the young people. In the daytime, as I said it is by appointment only and that is my case work time, programme development and community involvement.

And you set the programme, do you?

25:34 The programmes yes, we do. They change each term so it just depends on what the kids are interested in, what is available at the time.

Do you have input from other people from say the Sydney Council? Do they have a say in it as well?

25:50 Yes. We've got another few youth services in the Sydney City Council, so we have youth team meetings and we try to make it consistent across the board with all

youth centres. So if someone is running a programme then I'll pick up that programme and run with it and we just sort of use everyone's programmes.

So they let you do your own thing here?

I've got a manager that I report to and I will inform her what is going on and it will go through Council with a proposal to see if it is appropriate and it will continue.

You have Internet facilities here as well don't you, tell me about those.

26:34 They were donated from Rotary and they've been here for over two years now. It is an Internet Cafe where there are five Apple computers that all have Internet access. The young people use them quite a lot, mainly for sort of chat.

Now which have you found the most popular classes? You have cooking classes, you have arts, you have beauty classes, you have dancing, tell me a bit about some of those.

27:16 With the girls it is quite easy because the girls love the attention. Probably me being a female helps. They love the hands-on sort of work, so anything like cooking, craft, if we give them the attention and we are there they quite enjoy it. The boys are bit harder to engage, they just love to play pool and Play Station and table tennis. We try to encourage them to participate in music programmes and that is something that they have found quite interesting. So cooking for the girls I think, music for the boys.

You have got quite a few electric guitars here I notice.

Yes the boys love their songs. They are in the process of making a CD, so it has been a successful outcome. Originally they would just play the guitar and just bash the music.

28:14 END OF SIDE TAPE MP-FH27 SIDE A

28:15 START OF TAPE MP-FH27 SIDE B

So have you seen a change happening in the students since the centre has been open, since you've been here?

28:35 I have seen quite a change, I'm just trying to think of specific instances. I've seen a lot of people get into trouble and then get out of trouble and then be scared

to get into trouble again, so learning from their mistakes I think is a big thing that they have all learnt. I've seen kids grow up and see what other people have gone through and then I have seen them take it in a positive way or a negative way, some people following them and some people not following them, so it just depends.

Is there a drug problem around Millers Point?

29:24 Look I think there is a drug problem everywhere. I don't have a lot of clients that are involved with the heavy drugs. Personally I'm not a drug and alcohol counsellor, we do have a drug and alcohol service that does come out and if the young people like to see them confidentially they can, but I myself don't deal with that.

Right. Now another thing you do is casework advocacy - tell me about that.

29:54 It's about supporting young people's rights and supporting them through things. I think it is quite difficult for young people to communicate sometimes, so for them to get their voice across sometimes they express it in a way that doesn't seem appropriate to some people, but it is the only way they know how to express things. So by having a positive role model that is able to advocate on their behalf they are able to express it in a much more appropriate manner for them. We do a lot of advocacy in terms of whether it be with the police and the legal system, whether it be for educational purposes, housing, that type of stuff.

Do you help to put them into jobs as well?

30:44 Yes. So it is also being a referee for them and advocating on their behalf. A lot of young people don't see the positives in their life, so it is just about drawing out those positives and showing people what they are about.

Now are some of these young people living in rental accommodation here, with their parents or even outside of their family homes?

All the people I deal with are living with family.

So do you put them on Department of Housing waiting lists and things, or is that not part of your job?

31:320 It is something that I have done. It is not a common thing that I do and that's because most of them are teenagers and they are still living with their families, they are under eighteen years of age. I help them more with CentreLink and getting them benefits and things like that.

Great. Tell me about the RocksFest activities that they do here - that is a remarkable thing, the kids.

31:42 We took five girls through an event-planning management TAFE course teaching them about the process from developing a flyer up until delivering the actual event. They chose a film festival, so they wanted to get other people involved in the area, other young people, so they got other young people involved in making short films. They also got young people involved in performance, so on the night performing. So the RockFest sort of had an Oscar theme to it where we had a few short films made by the local young people, directed by the young people and just judged by the young people, giving out Logies for best actor, best designer.

They did an Academy Awards, did they?

32:33 Yes. It was supported by the Task Force, so we had a lot of people. It was something the kids really wanted to do for the community. The young people in the area get a bad rap a lot of the time, so they wanted to give something back to their community, so they invited everyone in the community. Since that event a lot of the community members have approached myself and said that that was fabulous - they'd like to see another one. You know, 'I can't believe what the kids do at the Youth Centre, it is a great,' so it was a positive thing for the young people.

Now is this peculiar to Millers Point or do you think this happens outside as well, this kind of thing?

33:16 I'm sure it happens outside as well. The difference with Millers Point is that it is such a small close-knit community hidden in the city, so I think it has got a strong bond. I was very surprised when I came here how close-knit the community is and how much everybody knows about each other and how the kids are quite close. If they do exit Millers Point they exit in groups and they go in groups, so they are quite a close-knit community and that is what I think is quite unique about the area.

So what has it done for you personally, having been in touch with these young people and helping them through?

33:56 I think, especially in this type of industry the outcome is not straight away - you have to see it down the track. Being here for two years I've been able to see some people with outcomes straight away and some that have been down the track, so it has been quite pleasing for me to see changes and see such positive outcomes. We've got young people that when I first came here were in trouble with the law and

they are now working full-time and with quite good jobs. I've got others that have moved out of the area - which was a major thing for them to move out of the area and form friendships externally from the Centre, go to tertiary education and places that they could never believe that they could have gone in the past. It is actually quite rewarding for me to see such changes with young people.

Excellent. So you are growing with them.

I am actually, yes.

I know your time is very, very tight and you have to be somewhere in three minutes, so any final comments you want to make before we close the interview?

35:06 Just that it is a very unique area that is quite enjoyable to work in, I think it is great and I've never had a problem with the young people in the area.

Do you see a good future for the area?

35:19 I think it's a small area and the population is quite small and once these people, these young people move on I can't see the new people coming through. I don't have much contact with younger kids in the area. So it is a concern that the Youth Centre may not always be around because the kids are growing up and they may not need the youth centre. A way of drawing in younger kids and whether there are new kids in the area is not known.

Are there any threats to your funding operations and so on?

35:51 Look, it is run from the City of Sydney Council so we don't have to apply each year for a grant or anything like that. So whatever Council has on plans I suppose.

Are you finding you have enough funds to do all the programmes you want to do?

Yes. I'm fortunate in that I don't have to look for grants to support my role here - it is supported by Council and programmes that we run here are supported by Council. It is just external additional programmes that we may need.

The young people are decreasing in number I believe - there are less and less teenagers, is that going to be a problem do you think?

I think so, I mean I think that's just how it works if you don't have young people you don't have a youth centre, so I think it just depends on the need for the service.

All right, well thanks very much indeed for this interview.

That's okay.

37:01 END OF TAPE MP-FH 27 SIDE B AND END OF INTERVIEW WITH HELEN
XIROS