

Interview with Susan Larson
Northern Michigan University Sociology Department

1

Interview with Susan Larson

Northern Michigan University

Interviewer: Loyas Lay ?????

Transcribed: June 3, 2002

LL: This is Loyas Lay recording Susan Larson. She was a student here at Northern in the Sociology department back in 199-1963. Susan, what is the date of your birth please?

SL: I was born in Ishpeming, MI November 8, 1941.

LL: I'll start off with the first questions. Number one...you were a student here at Northern from '59-'63. What was the campus community like during those early years?

SL: The first thing I remember is there were less classrooms. We didn't have the PEIF building. We didn't have Cohodas, West Science, Jamrich, or Learning Resource Center. Basically, the buildings were the Longyear Hall, the building we're in right now, Carey Hall, and I believe they were building the University Center in 1961. So there were less classrooms. There wasn't sculpture. There was very little landscaping, except in front of the place that is Cohodas. And Longyear was the main classroom building. That's what I remember. There were quansit huts where the Korean Veterans lived. They were where the University Center is now. There were these buildings. You could see the clotheslines with their wash outside. I think there was one unit for married housing. The cafeteria and coffee shop was in Lee Hall, where the Art Gallery is now. It was very

small. Commuters had a coffee shop in the basement there. We could play cards and watch television, eat our lunches. It was dark, but it was a place for commuter students.

LL: Do you think the campus facilities are better now, or were they better back in those days?

SL: I think it goes without saying that the facilities are much better today. We have a very big library. We have the Phy. Ed. Building where students can use the weight rooms, swimming, the ????. None of that was available. We had Hedgecock for swimming, but that was basically only open for classes. I really can't remember what the science buildings were like. Maybe we did have West Science at the time. I just don't remember it that clearly. But Longyear Hall was an old building. The wood was old and the blackboards were dark. The facilities are much nicer today.

LL: Even though the facilities are much better today, there is some contention that they're so spread out and people don't get to know each other as well. Do you find that to be true?

SL: I think there's some truth to that. I think that because there just are more people, and there's more space, that you don't get to know the people you work with, or even the students unless you're on committees and that. Even years ago...well that's different. We were more interactive in our department. But I can't remember as a student. I just remember that I was a commuter student. I commuted for classes and then I went home

and wasn't that involved in a lot of activities on campus. So I can't remember how much involvement there was.

LL: Was there any faculty that stood out from the others at that time? Why did that person or persons stand out?

SL: Dr. Pearmen did. He was the head of the department. He was the head of Social Work. I think he stood out because he was friendly. He had a sense of humor. He listened to students. And he had a good reputation in the community with other professionals. I think he also invited us to his home. He came to student parties. There was another, Dr. Hayman, he didn't stay very long, but he was a sociologist. I remember being a freshman student in an intro sociology class and he was exciting, dynamic, and so different in the way he thought about raising children and families. He opened my eyes to a world beyond the Upper Peninsula. There were other faculty that stood out, but they were in other departments. But Dr. Pearman and Dr. Hayman stood out.

LL: How do you think the department has changed over the past 30 years? For example has it grown, are the classes larger or smaller? Or is it more or less personal, or demanding?

SL: It's hard for me to judge how demanding it is because I was a student and not faculty. I think that it's more demanding for students today because they have so many other complications in their life. Life is faster paced. It's more expensive for that. I

remember tuition being \$105 a semester. That was hard to come up with, but in comparison to what they're paying today, it's insignificant. I think because there is such a knowledge explosion, we're trying to cram much more into the classes that we're teaching. The reading assignments, and the quality of the papers are more than we were expected. I think it is much more demanding. Also I think that faculty are more personally involved in their students lives today because of advising, particularly in social work. I have students tell me things that they probably never would have told a faculty member. We make referrals, help them. There is much more acceptance of students having complications and life problems.

LL: Society has changed. It's more open than it was back then.

SL: That's a big part of it. I think our programs are more demanding.

LL: There's so much more going on now, it can't be simple.

SL: I think society in general has changed. We offer more classes, we try to structure the hours so they can take them on weekends and evenings. There's also such a demand because for our students they have to have volunteer experience before anyone will look at them. So they're trying to work, volunteer, half of our students are trying to either overcome a substance abuse problem, or a domestic violence problem, raise children on their own, it's a different population in social work.

LL: If you were a major in this department in the 1990s would there be any advantages that you did not have when you were here back then? Are there any disadvantages from back in the late '50s and early '60s?

SL: When I read that question I thought, I became a social worker in 1963 as soon as I graduated from Northern. The knowledge base of the social work students today is so much broader. They just know more, and therefore they are more helpful to many of their clients. I'm thinking of the knowledge they have of child development, the knowledge they get about analysis of behavioral processes, behavior modification, things that they can help their clients with, that I had no knowledge of when I was a student. One of the greatest advantages they have is a much sounder research base, knowledge base. I also think that another advantage that I didn't have as an undergraduate student was a field placement of 15 to 20 hours a week. Our field placement consisted of 4 hours of work. What that meant is you could take off your coat, read a record, have a cup of coffee, and if you were lucky you might get to do something. I think one of the reasons there is that advantage for students is the knowledge base of Bachelor Degree social workers is much more accepted in the field. Therefore our students are treated with more respect and given more responsibility. When they're given responsibility they arise to the occasion and do fairly well. I think it's the knowledge base, the field placements are much better. I think the community accepts our students. I think also that it's just an acceptance of social work as a profession has grown. I think a couple things about being a student is we spend more time advising. I think that's an advantage. I can remember talking to other students about my advising, but I can't remember that faculty members

would sit down and spend a lot of time figuring out courses. I thought we were sort of on our own. There may have been a counseling center for students on campus, but I can't remember it. I think that's an advantage because we make a lot of referrals. I think another advantage for students today is that we encourage them to volunteer. And there are so many places in the community that they can gain that experience in lots of ways. The program is more demanding and their lives are more complicated, but I think that they're more knowledgeable when they leave Northern, at least social work program.

LL: There's more opportunities too probably.

SL: There are.

LL: I think that is with a lot of things. There's more opportunities out there.

SL: We didn't have a treatment center for alcoholism when I was here as a student.

Now we have 3 full time in-patient and two substance abuse residential treatment centers, and they also have some out-patient places.

LL: If people had any kind of problems they probably hid them in the closet.

SL: That's right. There was no knowledge of sexual abuse. There was no knowledge of eating disorders. There was no knowledge base. There were no welfare reporting laws for child sexual abuse...they came in '73. The awareness is so much better today. If I

Interview with Susan Larson
Northern Michigan University Sociology Department

7

was to think back, I think life was a little less complicated for students. That might be nice to go back to that. I think the disadvantage today is that coming by the money today is so hard.

LL: And older students going back for some kind of degree, it's not just starting right out of high school, with just yourself to take care of and just your studying. People have homes and families and other things besides studying.

SL: I look at some of the students...some of them are commuting from Manistique, Iron Mountain, raising children, holding down full time jobs. I don't know how they do it. I wonder about the potential of those, if all they had to do is study, how bright they would be. If they could just focus, what it'd be like.

LL: Transportation is different now from back in those days. You probably just stayed here in Marquette. Well you lived in Ishpeming, but it wasn't from Iron Mountain or Munising.

SL: I would say most of the commuters lived in Negaunee or just outside Marquette. We didn't even get KI Sawyer until 1957. When I was a student we weren't impacted by KI Sawyer. But I remember as a student there were a lot of veterans. I had a lot of older males in classes that were coming back on the GI Bill. Now, they're all retiring. These are people that are 5 or 6 years older than me and now they're getting out of the field.

They were students when I was a student. There were sororities and fraternities at that time.

LL: I'm looking at the old Northwinds to see if there was a lot of activity at the time in the sororities and fraternities. There's all kinds of things we had, social gatherings, each class had a dance. There's a lot more of that, but people say they're just too busy.

SL: I was a relatively poor student. I was probably anti-??? Because sororities and fraternities... I just wasn't interested. I remember people belonging to them.

LL: How did you decide to go into social work, or Northern to start?

SL: Well I didn't really plan to go to college. I was a high school secretary. Several of my friends came. I didn't have a job and my Dad said I could live at home and he would fund my schooling, he would let me go to school. I really didn't have plans to go into social work. I was in elementary education my freshman year. But I had to stand up in the music 101 class and I was very shy. So I got out of education because I could never stand in front of a classroom. I got into social work to work one on one with people, and ended up teaching. I tell them, I thought I was going into social work so I could work one on one with people and I hadn't been on a job a month and they made me go and give a speech on foster care children to a PTA group. I remember how scared I was. I wish I could have been more helpful. I just don't remember.

Interview with Susan Larson
Northern Michigan University Sociology Department

9

LL: That's okay. That's enough. Thank you.