



## **Oral History Interview with Anne Ladky**

Executive Director of Women Employed

Conducted at Women Employed Office, Chicago, Illinois  
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### **Interviewer: Nicole Winston**

A Loyola University Chicago Women's Studies and Gender Studies Student  
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Nicole Winston: Tell us about your background.

Anne Ladky: Well, I am a Midwesterner by birth. Went to school, went to college in Chicago, and decided to go to work here after graduation and after some traveling. And my goal was to get into the publishing industry, which I finally did after a variety of sort of marginal jobs in that industry. And at the company I worked at there were a lot of women who were getting involved in the women's movement. This was in the early '70s, 1971 and 1972, getting involved in the women's movement, having those conversations, having that debate, and reading all the books that were being read at that time.

And so, I got interested and began working with some of them on a women's group in the company we worked for, which was **Scott Foresman** in Glenview. And this was one of the first in-company women's caucuses in the country. Management didn't welcome them at that time the way they do now, but our management was pretty decent about it.

So, what we worked on was just like trying to get the company to allow women to use their vacation time for maternity leave, because there was no maternity leave. We worked on the content of the product, which was educational materials, to see if we could reduce the amount of sex segregation and sex stereotyping that was part of the books.

And at the same time one of my coworkers was trying to get me involved in **Chicago NOW**, which I ultimately did, at the same time that we were starting a citywide group for women in publishing called **Chicago Women in Publishing**. And the idea there was to improve opportunities and working conditions and also just operate as a support network and so on. And we started that in 1972.

At that time Chicago NOW was meeting occasionally at the **Loop Center YWCA**, met occasionally at other downtown office spaces that were churches or whatever. And there was a feminist radio show that was broadcast every week from the Loop Center YWCA called "**Talk-in.**" So, a lot of the issues that were being debated in the women's movement at that time were being discussed on "Talk-in." And **Diann Smith**, who was the director of the Loop Center YWCA, and a lot of the women that she knew really helped put "Talk-in" together. So, there was a lot of women's activity going on at the YWCA at that time at the Loop Center.

Now when the founder of **Women Employed** started looking for a way to create an organization that would be focused on women's economic status, she was actually working at the YWCA, but she was working at the Southwest Side branch of the YWCA. And she decided she wanted to do this employment focused organization, so she got herself transferred from the **Southwest Side Y[WCA]** down to the Loop Center. These were all branches that were part of the **Metropolitan YWCA**. And she got herself transferred down to the Loop Center, and Women Employed started as a project of the YWCA.

So, at that time there were NOW meetings there. There were a number of other organizations that were coming out of Loop Center. There was the first self-defense classes that were focused on women. There were sexual assault services, again a first in the city, that were housed at the Loop Center. And then Women Employed kind of joined the fold, in a way. Our founder, **Day Piercy**, was, as I said, a staff member there, and the YWCA Loop Center and the Metropolitan YWCA,

the women who directed that gave her the go ahead to say yes, you can start this as a project of the YWCA.

And it really was a pretty radical idea at the time because the board of the Metropolitan YWCA was, like a lot of social service boards at that time, made up of the wives of corporate executives. And Women Employed began right away putting pressure on these corporate executives and their companies. And this caused a lot of issues on the YWCA Metropolitan board that the director was very courageous in dealing with.

N.W.: Okay.

A.L.: And that gave space to the Loop Center to be able to house Women Employed. Women Employed was at the Loop Center and was a project of the YWCA for about five years. A new director came into the Loop Center at that time. It was no longer a really hospitable place for Women Employed so we moved and became independent.

N.W.: What is Women Employed's objective? How did it get started and what was your involvement with the organization?

A.L.: So just to pick up on my involvement, I was getting more active in Chicago NOW. We had Chicago Women in Publishing. We were still doing the organizing at the company I worked for. So a lot was going on and I was learning a lot from the more experienced leaders in Chicago NOW. And the founder of Women Employed came to Chicago NOW and said I need help. I want to start this organization, but I need some experienced leaders to help me. So, some of the more senior people involved in Chicago NOW said sure, we'll help.

I've always been interested in the economic issues. That's what drew me to the women's movement. And so, it seemed like a good fit for me. And plus, I wasn't exactly sure what we should be doing with Chicago Women in Publishing. At that time if you put up a sign, you'd get a couple hundred women in the room, you have an organization, you had to figure out what to do. So basically, lots of the women that I was meeting and working with through Chicago Women in Publishing also came into Women Employed. Although Chicago Women in Publishing was an organization that had a lot of vitality for years and years—decades after the '70s.

So, Women Employed then started in 1973, and I helped to get it started as a founding member. I think there were probably about a dozen of us. And so, we...the idea of it, of Women Employed, was to look at the downtown business district as if it were a neighborhood, and to bring sort of a neighborhood-based approach to thinking about how to engage people, how to get their ideas about what we should be doing.

And we also were born at the time of the farmworkers struggle, and that was a model for us to think about how we could combine these two ideas of expanded rights and expanded respect. And that was something I think the farmworkers had done so effectively. So, we had some of those strains of neighborhood organizing and also the economic organizing that groups like the farmworkers were doing.

So, what we did was to begin getting the message out about inviting women who wanted to work on improving employment opportunities for women to get together, tell us what was going on in their

work lives, what they thought should be improved. And as we did that, talking to a lot of people, we were out on the street passing out a lot of leaflets. And at that time, of course, there were no computers, so women would fill out the coupon, send it back, we would get in touch with them or they would come to a meeting and share what they thought was necessary to change conditions in their industry.

Originally Women Employed got organized on an industry basis, so we had women who got together to figure out how to...what would changing the banking industry look like, what would insurance look like if it had more equal opportunity. We looked at retail. There were lots of looks at different industries that employed a lot of women—what would it mean if we could eliminate discrimination in these industries. So that was sort of the early work of Women Employed, assisted by Chicago NOW.

A number of us who were involved went to the **Midwest Academy** for organizing training, and our founder, Day Piercy, was an instructor there. So, there was all a lot of interrelating of leadership from Women Employed, from Chicago NOW.

Our founder, when she was in social work school, before she went to work at the YWCA, had done her clinical placement as a graduate student at the **Chicago Women's Liberation Union**, so there was a connection there. And if you've seen the film "She's Beautiful When She's Angry"—

N.W.: I haven't yet, but...

A.L.: It's coming to the Siskel Theatre. You can see all the roots of this in that film.

N.W.: How was change accomplished? Was it mainly through legislation?

A.L.: You know, actually it really wasn't done through legislation. The change we were seeking was change in the way employers operated, driven by pressure, direct pressure, direct action that we would organize so that those companies would respond because they were embarrassed, or because they didn't want to be the subject of scrutiny by regulators or whatever.

Now we thought, early on, that we would get a more...a greater response from the companies. And for some we had pretty substantial evidence of discrimination, either because we had had a lot of testimony from women who worked there or because in some cases we got the payroll records, and so we knew.

But the companies didn't really want to change. And so even though they were hiring women into—in some cases they were hiring women into professional jobs, but they didn't treat them the same as the men. So even when they hired they didn't treat women even remotely equally to men. And in lots of cases they would just tell us, well, we don't hire women to be underwriters, or we don't hire women for commercial lending—

N.W.: Wow.

A.L.: —or we don't, you know, they were just blatant.

N.W.: Blatant, yeah.

A.L.: You can't move into professional ranks at this company unless you've driven one of our trucks or—you know, there were lots of excuses. So, we were unable to make much progress with direct action against the companies. So, in 1975, during the presidential campaign, we put pressure on both the Carter campaign and the Ford campaign to agree to enforce affirmative action requirements, which were federal policy then, but were not being enforced really at all for women or minorities.

So, as it turned out, the Ford people just weren't very smart about it and they wouldn't make the promise, although probably, looking back on it, maybe they would think they should have. The Carter people were smart about it, and they did make the pledge, and so even before Carter was inaugurated, his appointees, his top staff were sitting down with us after the election to say let's talk about how we're really going to enforce these rules.

N.W.: Interesting.

A.L.: Because we thought they would be sort of the best leverage that we had. Prior to that we'd gone to Congress, to the Senate banking committee. We had done a lot of work to see if we could get Congress to strengthen the laws. That was not as successful, so we went to the federal government. And these rules cover every company that has a federal contract, and that's a tremendous number of companies and a tremendously large percentage of the workforce, so we thought this might be good leverage. And national NOW had already done some work in this vein, so we had some ideas about how to proceed.

N.W.: Okay.

A.L.: And once we really began working with the Carter Administration on this, **Eleanor Holmes Norton**, now a congresswoman, became the head of the EEOC, the **Equal Employment Opportunity Commission**. A very smart guy named **Weldon Rougeau** became the head of the **Office of Federal Contract Compliance in the Department of Labor** and things really started to move.

So, the Carter Administration really did start to enforce the law. They focused on banking as one of their target industries, and so we were able to explain to them everything we had learned about how discrimination operates in the banking industry. And they started to de-bar companies that did not engage in affirmative action.

N.W.: Wow.

A.L.: They also reorganized the whole enforcement bureaucracy and the way these companies were regulated. And I think what happened was companies that were a little bit closer to doing the right thing started to do the right thing. Once that happened those companies, I think, began to see that they had a business advantage because they were recruiting much better talent.

N.W.: Right.

A.L.: And so they were really...it really started to change. At the same time, we were working with Eleanor Holmes Norton, and she was willing to work on the issue of sexual harassment, which had

not, at that point, been defined as an illegal sex discrimination, but in 1978 the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission did issue rules defining sexual harassment as illegal sex discrimination. She also launched a lot of class action activity, tried to process charges more rapidly so that women and people of color got their remedies faster when they had been discriminated against, so there was a lot of activity just in the four years that Carter was the president. After that it was a lot of defensive activity to keep the Reagan Administration from rolling back the progress.

N.W.: Interesting.

A.L.: And affirmative action has been under attack on and off ever since, but it has probably proven to be the most important public policy tool ever for the advancement of women into good paying jobs.

N.W.: Right.

A.L.: Today we have a different set of issues that we work on, but we're still paying careful attention to what happens in the Office of Federal Contract Compliance programs in the EEOC. Obviously in an administration like the one we're in currently that work is advancing well. When we're not in a Democratic administration it's much harder.

N.W.: Tell us a little bit about the interconnectedness between different movements and the women's movement.

A.L.: You know, women in those movements were extremely important to Women Employed's genesis and development. One of our other original ideas about Women Employed, particularly when we're talking about clerical workers, in other words people who didn't have—women who didn't have the education, necessarily, or advantages to be able to advance through affirmative action, we thought a union was the best solution for them.

But we really had a lot of trouble getting the men, the male leadership of labor unions, to understand how important it was to bring women in. They just did not understand. And by and large the women in the labor movement at that time were not powerful enough to make it happen themselves. However, those women were enormously supportive and helpful and motivating for us. And many of them had their feet both in the labor movement, and in the civil rights movement, and in the women's movement.

So, some examples would be **Addie Wyatt**, who was the first woman to rise into the leadership in the meat cutters union in Chicago, and nationally, was a founder of the **Coalition of Labor Union Women**, and was a mentor to many of us, and also herself a champion of civil rights. She was always encouraging us, always urging us to get out and organize. She was an inspiration.

Another women who actually just died a month ago, the **Rev. Willie Barrow**, was another one. Again, not as much in the labor movement as Addie, more in the civil rights movement, but a civil rights champion for decades and decades, since the '50s, '40s and '50s. And she also was always attending to those intersections of the women's movement, the labor movement, the civil rights movement, and also a great inspiration.

And there were women in **AFSCME**, women in the **Communications Workers of America** who were also just right with us in the front lines, in the early days, when it was really, really difficult to do this kind of organizing. First of all, we didn't have the resources to do everything that we wanted to do, and secondly, the corporate opposition to what Women Employed was trying to do was very intense and very aggressive, and women were fired for belonging to Women Employed. They were reported on to their employers by people who came to our meetings. There was tremendous pressure on women in some companies not to participate.

So, it was, you know, it was very difficult. It was very tough going. And so, to have the support of women like the ones I've mentioned was really, really important.

N.W.: What role did Chicago politics and the Daley administration play for Women Employed?

A.L.: Chicago politics always plays a role, which you've probably learned. In the **Richard J. Daley** era there was a great suspicion of organizing. There was police surveillance of lots of organizations. The mayor did not like anything that took place in the streets that he didn't control. So that was kind of a fact of life in Chicago. That was evident in the civil rights era, in the antiwar era, the women's movement era.

And obviously we made some progress in the **Jane Byrne** era, just in terms of the city's employment practices. At that point the city stopped fighting discrimination complaints from some women who could not get them resolved before that. But we didn't have, I think, a fully progressive city administration that really cared about these issues in a deep way until the election of **Harold Washington**. I think it was a tremendous tragedy for the city that Mayor Washington didn't live to have a second term, when he could have really, I think, pushed forward an agenda that he couldn't push forward because of the council wars. So that was definitely a loss.

Obviously, **Richard M. Daley** was more moderate, willing to listen on a variety of issues. Not as much the employment issues, I think, as maybe some of the—you know, he had good people in the State's Attorney's office working with him on sexual assault and other issues, and I think he had a pretty good grasp on all of that. And now we have a mayor who I think, you know, he's controversial, no question, but he has raised the minimum wage. Extremely important to women. And I believe today he's announcing the formation of a working group or a task force on issues related to paid sick time, family leave and so on. So, I think we're going to try to make progress at the city level. Forty years ago, we had more opportunity to make progress at the federal level, which we don't today because of the Congress.

N.W.: Who were some influential people who were involved with the Loop Center YWCA? What was your involvement with the Loop Center YWCA?

A.L.: Well, I think the Loop Center Y was very, very important to a number of organizations, and just to women's organizing activity generally. Just to give you an example, I think because women came to the YW for self-defense classes, they came for French classes, they came for belly dancing, they came for a whole wide different things, I think it felt safe for them to walk into the YWCA for a conversation that could really have been viewed by many people as very radical at that time, which is I'm coming here to talk about the problems at my job and figure out what we can do about it together, and I'm open to the idea of a union. And that was very radical at that time, and people were fearful for their jobs and all of that.

So, I think the fact that women were familiar with the YWCA, they could come to the cafeteria in the YWCA where we gathered just for conversations, they could come to a meeting and be familiar with the location, it kind of gave Women Employed a...sort of a little aura of safety around it that we might not otherwise have enjoyed. And I think that was true for other women's groups, other kinds of discussions as well. So, I think women at that time really viewed the YWCA as a gathering place, as a place to get information, as a place to connect with women who shared some similar viewpoints or aspirations about women's equality.

And the woman who was the leader of the Metropolitan YWCA, although people don't talk about that much, made it possible for the Loop Center, in a way, to do that. So Diann Smith was a great leader of the Loop Center YWCA. She really wanted all that kind of engagement and gathering. But I think that—or I should say and a less known story is the fact that there was a leader at the Metropolitan Y who said yes, I'm going to stand behind you if there are issues over this. And that's where a lot of the money was raised and a lot of the money came from, so it was very important. Very important.

N.W.: Did you find that the Loop Center YWCA was a safe space for women and radical discussion?

A.L.: Well, in terms of the Y as a, you know, was it a safe place, I think on balance we'd have to say yes. So that if Women Employed had started as a completely independent organization and it had to find I'm not sure what space to be in, I think it would have been much harder from the point of view of the confidence of the women we were organizing. Now, there were still women who were sent to Women Employed meetings, and probably to Talk-In, I don't even know, but definitely there were women who were sent to Women Employed meetings by their employers to take notes and note who was there from their companies.

We had women who would walk into a meeting, look around and walk right out. We had women who would bring court reporting machines and write down every word. So it was an intimidating environment, once in a while, for some people. But that dissipated after a while. I think on balance we'd have to say it was really positive.

Now from a purely practical standpoint Women Employed got rent for a period of time—not the whole time we were there, not the whole five years. We paid rent part of the time. And we did, for the whole time, have the full-time salary of our executive director. So that's an enormous advantage because most organizations have to be around a while before they can afford even one staff person. So that's not to say that was also a symbol, because it meant it was an issue for the Loop Center Y and the Metropolitan Y when Women Employed did things that were uncomfortable. So we were putting pressure on these companies. We were putting out leaflets. We were ridiculing corporate executives who said ridiculous things. So how quickly we could have gotten the support we needed I don't know. Because of the YWCA we didn't have to charge dues until we were two years old, and at that point we charged five dollars. Well, you can't run an organization on that. So Women Employed raised the money to have more staff and pay for a lot of the things we needed.

The YWCA, after about a year, asked us to get a separate phone line, just to calm down some of the women on the Metropolitan board. But to have your key employee be paid for and to have rent and the use of all this meeting space was really a huge, huge reason, I think, that we were able to survive. I think most not-for-profits have tremendous struggles for the first five years and then the second



five years, they're almost as hard. And I think we weathered some of that in part because of the YWCA, and managed to get past our tenth year. But we did move out of the Y five years in. Still it was huge for us to have the advantage of that.

N.W.: Looking back, what are some things you would have done differently with Women Employed?

A.L.: Well, there are probably, after 42 years there's probably a very long list of things we would do differently. We were breaking new ground with Women Employed. Nobody had tried this sort of thing before. I continue to be amazed that our founder was as smart as she was about a lot of these things that we were just trying out. We did not know what the reaction would be. We certainly had no idea that the corporate response would be so hostile. Because our approach was not adversarial at the beginning. It became adversarial.

But not by our choice. So over time no doubt there are any number of things that, if we could roll the tape back, we would do them differently. But you know, on balance I would have to say that we did, you know, we no doubt made mistakes, but I think we got more things right than wrong. And I think that one of the things that is a hallmark of the organization, again I think that is rooted in what our founder was really trying to do, was we really tried to adapt to the realities that women were facing and we tried to look for the best opportunities for change.

When you do that, because we're not huge. We cannot do everything. We cannot take on the most entrenched problems. We have to work on the ones we think we can change and then tackle that. So, I think those two things, really staying focused on what women need and where the best opportunities are, and where we think Women Employed can make the biggest difference. So that's the reason why, after a period of time, we shifted an ever-increasing amount of our focus to women who are the lowest earners. They did not benefit from affirmative action because they couldn't get on the first rung of that ladder. And that's our focus today.

So, I think the staying focused on what women's most urgent needs are and looking for the best opportunities for change, even when the circumstances are very challenging, because the circumstances around low wage work are very challenging, I think that's been a core way of thinking and operating that got started in the '70s that has served us well all the way along.

N.W.: At what point did sexual orientation come into play with affirmative action and women's employment opportunities?

A.L.: Well, you know, that's a good question. I would say that the perception that the women's movement was anti-lesbian came from a really bloody fight in New York NOW, and to some extent, obviously, it was driven by the fear that somehow the movement would be discredited and damaged. Well, I mean, I think what people forgot was the people who were really opposed to what was going on were already calling everyone a lesbian as a slur, so it really didn't matter. But it was a very bloody factional fight in New York NOW.

And Betty Freidan did get involved in it. She did later recant what she said. But it did a lot of damage. And if you watch "She's Beautiful When She's Angry" there's a great portion of that film that shows how lesbian women really fought back against that.

It really never became a big issue here. There were lesbians in the leadership of Chicago NOW and lesbians, although certainly not people who were out. You know, in the '70s not very many people who had regular jobs were out. Lesbians in the leadership of Women Employed. It just, it never really got...I'm sure that I don't even remember that there were possibly discussions that were controversial and so on and so forth, but we were fortunate not to have that get into any kind of factional fighting in the organizations here.

The question of whether to take it on as an issue didn't arise that much. And whether that's right or wrong, one of the things that Women Employed had as a really strong sort of strain in its organizing was to try and help women find the commonalities. And so sometimes maybe that subsumes differences, and that may not be the best thing. But if you think about historically what we were trying to do, we were trying to get women together, some of whom had college degrees, some of whom had advantages, some of whom were, you know, had never had a decent job, some of whom were working in the basement of insurance companies filling out forms. That's what they did. And what we were looking for, we were looking for the women who wanted to work across all of those differences together for something.

So, in today's world when those differences are more present and more discussed, and there's a lot of good things that come out of that, that was not the era we were in. So, we were very interested in having diversity in our leadership and so on and so forth, but mostly that was focused on racial diversity.

And a large part of that really had to do with the fact that people just on their own, never mind what was happening in the women's movement per se, just viewed that coming out would be very dangerous to the employment status, to their families and so on and so forth. So, it really didn't surface as a big issue. It also wasn't much of an issue from a policy point of view at that time. I mean, we only now, you know, the Obama Administration has just put sexual orientation and gender status into the federal contract compliance mechanism. That could never have happened via Congress or—I shouldn't say never, but certainly not today.

N.W.: Yeah, yeah.

A.L.: So, it's a very different world today when there's lots more exploration of identity and a lot more, I think, very healthy desire for people to express their identity. And last year when our summer leaders were here—this is the summer program for students—

N.W.: I actually saw that, yeah.

A.L.: Yeah. I was asked the same question about what's Women Employed's stance on these gender identity issues. And it was really interesting to get the question because our history has been like looking always for those commonalities. But we operate in a world today where we want more of those differences to be comfortably expressed.

N.W.: Absolutely.

A.L.: So we all evolve.

N.W.: What advice would you give to current and future generations of feminists?

A.L.: Well, I think that one of the best things about what came out of the Loop Center Y and so on, I mean, the women, it was very age diverse. I suppose Diann Smith and women of that generation are 20 years older than I am. And I had mentors from the labor movement who were 30 and 35 years older than I am. So that age diversity, and possibly at that time, you know, it was much more skewed young. But it was really interesting. I mean, clearly there were women who had been waiting all their lives for the women's movement, and all of a sudden they're 65 and the women's movement comes along, and they sign right up. And the rest of us are 25 and coming into it.

I think what's really important and that we have to make space and time for is good communication across the generations. That's part of the reason that we have an advocacy council and a summer leaders program, so that we can have places for that kind of dialogue. I think it's great that so many young women are interested in history, and I think that's important.

I actually think it's even more important for young women to really define what feminism means and what advancement for women means in the era that they are in, and not to accept a 40-year-old definition of something, or feel that the history defines the movement. To me the whole...you know, one of the most wonderful things about the women's movement is that it does constantly redefine itself and makes critiques of the culture, of the economy, of family issues, social issues. That took place in one form and fashion 45 years ago, and it takes place in a totally other form and fashion today. And to me that's a really healthy thing.

And so, I think that we have to, those of us who are in the older generation in the women's movement have to encourage that and leave lots of space for that, because that, to me, is a huge, hugely important for the future of the movement.

N.W.: What does the Loop Center YWCA mean to you personally?

A.L.: Well, the YWCA has a, you know, shining place in Women Employed's history because without the YWCA I don't think we'd be here, so that the YWCA was a home and a sort of starting place, and a safe place for women to come. The terrific thing about the YWCA, it's still a vital, important institution today doing different things than it was doing 40 years ago, but that's just as it should be. And with strong roots in where it was on a lot of issues, but attacking them in new ways.

*[End of recording.]*