

**Interview with Susanne Dahlen**

**Interviewed by Kathryn Brewer**

**Interviewed on August 25, 1999  
at the offices of the Minnesota Women's Press, Inc  
St. Paul, Minnesota**

**KB:** Well, Sue, could you start by giving me an overview of how you've been involved with the Minnesota Women's Press--kind of a summary.

**SD:** Well, I've been here for nearly ten years now. When we celebrate our fifteenth anniversary in the spring--I started in June of 1990--that will be my tenth anniversary.

I've done many different things. I like to tell the story of how, when I started, I came in as a volunteer helping with the library. I'd been coming to a book group and Friday night discussion groups. Glenda [Martin; Co-Founder and Co-Publisher] asked for help moving the library--when they moved from down the street to this current location. I said, "OK, I'll come in on Saturday and help move the library." So then I moved into being a volunteer--cataloging library books. I did that for almost two months solid--I was in here a lot. Then when their receptionist left and they didn't have anybody new yet... I'd been sitting out in the bookshop doing this cataloging all the time and they said, "Sue, you've been sitting here and you know what goes on. You come and be the receptionist." So that's how I got a job. [laughter]

I worked in the bookstore for a number of years, so I did both front desk and bookshop and library. I still did a lot of the library cataloging, which is still a big interest of mine although I don't work on it anymore. From there, actually, I moved into other areas partly because I was only working part-time. Then when I was going to get divorced I needed fulltime work. "Women's Press" supported me by saying, "Well, there's other things that need doing around here. You can work fulltime here." So they really helped me out at that time. And I helped them out by doing the work, too, of course. But there was a focus on, 'what does this employee need?'

Then I moved in to other areas. I started doing subscriptions, which I still do. That's one of my favorite things to do. I handle all the subscription databases, and talking to subscribers--both the newspaper and BookWomen [bi-monthly journal for readers of women's words]. BookWomen, especially, has been a lot of fun to be the contact person on. Everybody loves it, so it's so much fun to do. In a way, they're my clients, because most of the other work that I do is numbers oriented now.

I moved into doing payroll and accounts payable, so currently, I do accounting types of things and subscription types of things. ...And backup on all the other things that I used to work on, which over the years included the line classified ads, handling the list of distribution sites for the newspaper, and working with the ad reps maintaining control over the master database of advertisers. [The master database exists] so that there was control that the ad reps weren't each calling the same new client and that kind of thing. So I did that for many years, too. I even worked in production a little bit, not really as an official production employee, but I did some typing of articles and some employment ads. So I've seen a lot of different aspects of the business. When new questions come up, I sometimes get asked what I think simply because I have seen it from different sides before. So I have a wide range -- of experience.

**KB:** You do! Let's go way back and think about when you were a member of a book group and discussion group...and then you came in here and started volunteering, and then became an employee. What were some of the things you noticed first - or noticed as being particularly significant when you made that conversion from being a customer over to being an employee? I'm sure you noticed things about the organization that were interesting or surprising.

**SD:** Well, I was not working at the time. I had worked for the State of Minnesota for twenty-three years, and then I was in school. It was just stressful working on a Master's Degree and working. I was still married at the time and I just decided I was going to quit the State. So I volunteered. I'd just like to say this about volunteering. I came to the conclusion that it's nice to do volunteer work in a way; you're doing something that you really like to do. I was cataloging library books cause it was fun, and it was great that it also happened to be good for somebody. Rather than starting out saying "Oh, what could I do that's good for somebody?" So I liked that approach to volunteer work.

It paid off for me in getting a job also. So I was moving from working for the State into this small woman-run organization, of all women working together. It certainly was a huge change although I don't have bad things to say about working for the State either. As big as it was, I always felt that I had a chance to do what I wanted to do, basically. I got tired of doing it after a while, that was part of why I left, too. The experience that I get there led into some of the things that I do here. I did computer programming and software support, and I do a lot with computers here. It served me well for the kinds of things that I do now. Say we're doing a lot of web site updating and that kind of thing...I understand what's going on, because I used to be a computer programmer. So it fed into it in that way.

I just moved from a big organization to a small one. That makes a big difference in how the relationships occur. Maybe one of the biggest areas is that... Usually, you do more than one thing. That's why I had so many different jobs all at the same time. I'm usually doing about four jobs simply because it's a small organization, and you don't need one

person for each of those jobs. So I think there is more breadth to what you perform in a small organization.

**KB:** When you were working for the State, and you were a book club member, how did you start participating in the book clubs? Did you come on fairly early? What book groups did you participate in?

**SD:** I was in the Sunday Spirituality Groups for a number of years. Actually then I went on and led book groups for a while. I led a Sunday Spirituality Group. I led mostly spirituality groups--not just Sunday ones but other ones also.

**KB:** And, you were spending time working on your Master's Degree in theology?

**SD:** Right, I did get that degree and in the course of doing that, left Christianity. So there was no job in that direction for me, but spirituality was still an interest of mine. [laughter]

**KB:** How did that fit in with the book groups and the Sunday spirituality group, from a timing standpoint?

**SD:** Let's see... I probably started here right after that, because I graduated in 1989, and it was in 1990 when I started actually working here.

**KB:** So you were still kind of on the hunt--in a way--for an alternative?

**SD:** Yes. I was really interested in reading. All the women's spirituality type of books were really grabbing me at that point in time.

**KB:** Do you still participate in book groups?

**SD:** No, I won't. Once I started working here fulltime, it was like, "OK, it's the end of the day. I'm going home." So I haven't, although I am in a book group outside of the "Women's Press", and we have a staff group book that meets once a month now too. But I did drop out of the other "Women's Press" book groups that I was in.

**KB:** The first thing you started doing was working in the library, cataloging books. What was the situation at that point with regard to the library? Do you recall how big it was?

**SD:** It was quite small. I don't know how many volumes...

**KB:** Were there any records being maintained at that point about (it)?

**SD:** Just on cards...probably the same record keeping that we've had up until now, as we're starting to computerize. So the system has stayed the same since then, which is basically one card per book and by subject, and author within subject. When I started

there were about eight boxes of books waiting to be catalogued. So the library grew fast once I started cataloging all those books. We'd always gotten so many. It's been just amazing to me; people just bring in boxes full of books.

**KB:** Is that still happening?

**SD:** Yes, yes, and the other part is that we get new books from publishers that come to the newspaper for book reviews. That's really why we started the library--because we got all these books.

**KB:** But you're not participating right now in working on the library?

**SD:** No, no. It is still all strictly volunteers that do that. I would have to come back after hours to do that. I wanted to work fulltime. [laughter]

**KB:** Well, I'd like to pick up some of those early jobs that you did and I'm not sure that I have them all, so you can just jump in. One that you talked about earlier was maintaining records of the distribution sites. Did you generate new sites?

**SD:** Yes, yes. I tried to figure out what new places could possibly handle the newspaper and called them and tried to get them on the list. I think ever since I've started working on that we had a distribution of about 40,000 copies, which is what we still do. But it's always a challenge to be in the right places so that people actually pick them up. And then it diminishes over time just because places go out of business, or maybe a big chain that carried them all decides they don't want it anymore.

**KB:** Do you somehow match what's being picked up every week with each site?

**SD:** Yes. We hire a distribution company and they give us reports. They report on how many got picked up. So we know how many we deliver and how many get picked up, so you have to monitor that. They're always picking up eighty out of a one hundred, therefore, they're getting too many. ...That kind of thing... Or they're always zero, therefore, we could give them some more. It's complicated by the fact that some places will throw them out, if they didn't all get used. They'll throw them out, and it will say zero. So you don't really know. They're so many of them that it's hard to stay in close enough touch. You know, it's a big challenge all the time. A lot of the places are places where you're not really talking to an individual who even cares, or who even sees them. The location may be out in a mall or outside of the store or an entryway. There might not be anybody who really cares a lot. [laughter] So it's real challenging to keep track of.

**KB:** But you have to contact someone and get permission to do it.

**SD:** Yes, we don't ever put it anywhere without permission. So it can be difficult tracking down... If there's a big building that you'd like to go in, you have to find out

who's the management company for that building and who do you talk to there. Those are the hardest places to get into. Places like skyways or 'Mall of America' would seem like they'd be great locations, but they don't want us...they don't want anybody! ...Or they want only Skyway News or only City Business [local weekly newspapers], so they can be real limited.

**KB:** About when did you do this?

**SD:** Let's see - probably from about 1993 to 1997

**KB:** Did you sense resistance to the newspaper because of its name?

**SD:** Sometimes, yes. At one point, we were going out into [a clinic]-I don't remember which clinic it was. Someone in a central office authorized that we could send copies to all twenty-five health clinics. Some of those clinics called up right away and said, "We don't want this paper." You know, they were insulted by it because it's too feminist, or because ...

**KB:** Are those the words they use? Do you remember how that was conveyed?

**SD:** Well, they'd say it doesn't fit with their clientele with articles about abortion. They didn't want to offend any of their clientele, so it might not...

**KB:** Was it primarily abortion, do you think?

**SD:** [pause] I think so, yes. I think that would probably be the most common thing that anyone would find objectionable. So if they would get any complaints from their customers, regardless of what the people who worked there thought, they wouldn't want it, because they wouldn't want to offend anybody. So, yeah, that kind of thing happened a lot.

**KB:** On the other end of the spectrum, did you ever run across people who just thought this was the 'neatest thing since sliced bread'?

**SD:** Oh, yes! Those were the fun ones to talk to. [laughter] Those would usually be women who owned their own business, and you're talking directly to that person. It makes a difference to her to have you there, because you're another reason for people to stop in at their store--to pick up a copy of the "Women's Press".

**KB:** An example of that kind of business might be...?

**SD:** Well, let's see. I'm thinking of a couple of places that were sort of new age type bookstores. Usually 'somewhat alternative' are the places that we fit in best, unfortunately. But, on the other hand, I don't even know what's on the current distribution

list. I believe that we're at most of the Barnes and Nobles bookstores. In fact, when they open a new store, they call us and say, "We want your paper." They distribute a lot of them. We get people that have a hundred, and they're set up to handle distribution of free newspapers.

**KB:** Yes, they are.

**SD:** We've got some health club chains where sometimes it's the hardest thing, because you need to get one person at the top to agree that you can go in all those places. You're not talking to someone who's at the site and really cares about it.

So they're all different kinds of relationships in the distribution sites. It's a hard job and it's one that feels as if.. [pause] When I was working on it I didn't have a lot of time to spend on it--I was doing other things, too. It always felt to me like it should get more attention than it ever had gotten. It was kind of like the poor little sister in terms of functions of a company, but to me it was an extremely important function--if you're producing it, but you're not getting it to as many people as you could...

**KB:** Do you have a sense of how the number has changed over time in terms of total distribution?

**SD:** I think the total distribution has stayed pretty much the same. It's a matter of managing where are we going. What sites are we going to?

**KB:** How about the number of distribution sites?

**SD:** That we have to try to contain, because we like to try to set a minimum of fifty copies. We pay by the site, regardless of how many copies get dropped. So if we need a hundred more sites and they only each want twenty-five, it's a lot more expensive. It did get kind of out of hand. Lisa Ferguson [systems and distribution] has been working on it and has gotten it whittled back down again. But there are times when it's all right that you just have a few copies. That happens a lot with coffee shops, because we figure the copies get reused. So it doesn't just mean only twenty-five people are reading it. It's good to have it laying around.

**KB:** So in those cases you will distribute less copies?

**SD:** Yeah, right.

**KB:** Okay, well you talked about another thing that I noted. You maintained a master database of advertisers. Can you talk about what that project was like?

**SD:** Well, each of our ad reps, of which we currently have three--we've had four at a time in the past--they each have their own database with notes on it of who they called, what

they said, when they've advertised. [That's] what we're calling the master list. We've never quite liked the masculinity of that word, and people have recently started calling it the 'mother list'.

So it has on it all the advertisers that all three of the ad reps have. It's kind of a combination...it has minimal data on it. It doesn't have the ad reps notes. It's just, "This is our list of clients." So that the person sitting at the front desk when someone calls in, can say, "Oh, that's so-and-so's client." That's one of the purposes. Another purpose is when an ad rep sees a new store and wants to know if another ad rep has called there yet, she looks on the mother list to see if somebody else has already claimed it. So it's to prevent cross-over between ad reps. Also it's seen as a form of insurance against an ad rep accidentally losing her data--so that it exists somewhere else.

**KB:** How long have you had that list?

**SD:** Oh, I think forever.

**KB:** OK

**SD:** I think actually I first worked on that list probably way back in 1992 or 1993--back before the ad reps even had computers. We had only one small computer and the ad reps could take turns being on that computer. That list was the only list on a computer at that time. That was its starting point. Then we kept it when they each got their own computers and their own databases, so basically they only had paper files and this computer file and this small computer compared to what we have now.

I'd forgotten that. That really was the starting of the list, and then it grew to separate lists for the ad reps. It's still a big job. Being someone who's done computer programming in the past, it's a technical problem of trying to maintain the same data. Anytime you're trying it maintain duplicate data, it's difficult to have a process that guarantees that you're going to maintain it accurately in both places.

**KB:** I hadn't thought about that. How do you maintain that?

**SD:** Well, we're still... The ad reps pass through the computer network the individual records that they've changed, and then somebody sits down, opens the mother list, looks at the changes and changes the mother list. So it's not automated in that sense. It's still 'hands on'. That person can make a mistake and then they won't be the same, or forget to do this one, or the ad rep forgets to pass them. It's not a foolproof system by any means.

**KB:** Well, I'd like to look now at the two areas that you spoke of with such enthusiasm earlier, and that is the subscriptions and BookWomen. Why don't we talk first about the subscriptions. How long have you been doing the subscriptions?

**SD:** Well the newspaper ones... let's see, I'd say probably six years. I've probably been doing it that long too.

**KB:** Talk about that subscriber base, if you will.

**SD:** Well, you know we do mostly free distribution in the Twin Cities. Now the people that subscribe in the Twin Cities do it because they want to support us--that might be their reason--or they want to make sure they always get it. They don't want to have to go out the first day it's distributed and pick it up where they know it is. Or they live in a part of the Twin Cities where we don't do as much distribution.

We are metro-wide but the suburbs, of course, don't get as many. The more downtown areas....although not the downtown... It's more like Uptown Minneapolis contains the type of businesses that are more likely to say, yes they want us there, as well as the clients are more likely to be the ones that are going to pick it up. Downtown is difficult and it's partly because so many people are on the skyway. The skyways are controlled in a way. They don't want the mess of newspapers being distributed in their area, so it isn't always .. Right downtown in both St. Paul and Minneapolis is about the hardest place to be, although we get into state buildings--most of the state office buildings do that for their employees. They have places where you can put papers, so we can usually get into those buildings.

So back to subscribers.... [laughs] They might be people that just have difficulty finding it. The subscriber base has been decreasing. When I first started, it was about 900 people and we're down to about 500 now. I'm not sure what went on before I came in at 900 subscribers, but we do practically nothing in the way of campaigns to get new subscribers. So it's just attrition. Everybody's not going to renew. The new subscriptions that we get are people that did pick it up at a distribution site--at a free site--and they see that they can subscribe, so they send the form in and they subscribe. ...Or they're gift subscriptions, maybe to someone out of town.

We have a number of subscribers that are outside of Minnesota. That is, a lot of times people who used to live here and want to keep in touch, so they subscribe from out of state. ...Or it's college students--maybe their parents subscribe for them when they leave for college. The reason that we like having the subscribers is that we have all the expense of producing the newspaper anyway for the free distribution and so what we make off of the subscriptions is kind of gravy. ...Not everything you take in, because you know we have to do a bulk mailing on it, and pay to mail them out. But it's still kind of extra in terms of income. The more subscriptions that we can get, it's a good source of income.

**KB:** Now you mentioned earlier that you consider them as clients. Do you have much interaction with them?

**SD:** Some..not as much with the newspaper anymore. Some people call on the phone to do their renewal, so I do get to talk to real people...instead of just numbers. [laughs] Most people just send their renewal back in, so most of that is done by mail.

**KB:** Do you have any subscribers to the newspaper that have been around forever? They just systematically every year resubscribe?

**SD:** Yes. We've got subscribers on there now. The record keeping didn't account for when people get two-year renewals, before I started doing it. So we may be missing some years, but there are some people on there that are twelve, eleven, ten years of subscriptions. People that are not people that are shareholders....people that are just readers out there.

**KB:** Let's go over to BookWomen. It sounds to me like you have a little bit more contact.

**SD:** BookWomen subscribers are really fun to talk to, because they really like the publication. It's very unique. A lot of people when they by mail send in their renewal notice, write something on there about what they like about it. Or [they give] a suggestion for a book or writer to write about. But usually it's comments about, "Love BookWomen" or something longer than that. "Thank you for this." A lot of people give gift subscriptions to other people. It's also a national base of people, whereas the "Women's Press" newspaper is much less national--it's mostly Minnesota. [BookWomen] is all about books.. nothing localized about the content of that.

**KB:** Have you made any observations about the subscription base for BookWomen in terms of whether it's growing? ...In terms of where the subscribers are located?

**SD:** Well, we have subscribers in almost all the states. I don't know whether it's every state yet or not--I haven't checked. The way that started out being so broad nationally... We had a database of people about two years before we started BookWomen. We had what we still produce called our Great Books List, which is a list of books that have been selected as the favorite by the book groups the "Women's Press" does. And a person who does write for us, or did at the time, wrote an article for MS. Magazine [national monthly publication] that mentioned that Great Books List, and mentioned us. So we had many requests from around the country from "MS." readers for that Great Books List. So we kept their names on a database, and they were the first ones to hear about it when we were going to produce BookWomen. So that's how we got started being a national publication right away. We had subscribers from all over.

**KB:** What a wonderful list!!

**SD:** Yes.

**KB:** Women who like books and women who are presumably feminist.

**SD:** Right. So that was fun. The way that we keep that list growing is that we've been buying subscription lists by state from MS. magazine--they're still our best source. [It's an] intersection of interests. It's expensive, so we buy couple states at a time depending on how many subscribers they have in that state. So we purchase maybe 5000 labels at a time. I don't know what the percentage is but we make money on it. It's so ongoing that it's hard to tell. I can produce a report saying this many people subscribed from that mailing, but they renew next year and the year after that, and then go on and give gifts to other people who then renew. So it's hard to keep track over the long term what it really does for us. That has helped keep us growing all the time, because all those subscribers don't renew also--you've got a lot of attrition.

**KB:** How do you incent them? Do you mail them a copy of BookWomen or do you mail them a flyer? ...When you buy the labels from them [Ms Magazine]?

**SD:** It's a flyer about BookWomen. It just tells what it is. It's not a sample copy because we charge \$5.00 a copy, so it's a pretty hefty thing to be giving out to anybody.

**KB:** How many people subscribe to BookWomen?

**SD:** There are about 800 right now. That's about the max we've had. We've had 800 before--it goes up and down. Most people started with the first issue, so this time of the year now I'm having a ton of things to process because everybody's renewing for September. It's the biggest batch of subscribers in September. So the numbers go up and down with that, too--with how many expired, you know, with a particular issue. But 800 is a very good number for us.

There's just a lot of interconnection in BookWomen. People feel connected to it and I find that seems like a lot of the subscribers are people who write themselves, rather than just read. They also write. We do get people that want to submit things to BookWomen. I think the other reason or result of that is that people want to be connected. I can tell because they give us their phone number and e-mail address when they renew or when they subscribe. Most people are hesitant to give out that information for fear of getting junk mail and that kind of thing. So I think that says a lot about how people trust BookWomen and want to be a part of it. They'll say, "Here's how you can get a hold of me."

**KB:** Do you see many linkages between the paper and BookWomen?

**SD:** No, I don't think so, other than some people subscribe because they saw it advertised in the newspaper. No, because I think it's two totally different....

**KB:** Because of the national emphasis, or...?

**SD:** Yes, I think it's two totally separate groups of people.

**KB:** Well, that's interesting, because I've interviewed a number of women from the book groups and sometimes they are not newspaper readers. Even at the local level, it's an interesting difference in audience perhaps. So you talked about the web site. Now you work on the web site?

**SD:** I had started out when we first got the web site. I was one of the people involved in that. I since have not been working on it, partly because I cut down to seven hours a day. I only work seven hours a day now, and that's how long it takes me to do these other things. [laughs] Now just recently, Norma Olson [Systems Coordinator and Production Manager] was on vacation and she's the one who does the web site updatings, so I got back into it. I've done it the last three times. I had to learn how again, because we'd gotten new software since I'd been doing it. ...But it's fun doing that.

**KB:** How important do you think the website is going to be to the "Women's Press" going forward?

**SD:** I think it will be and it's already making us money. When we first went into it we just kept hearing that you can't make money at this. The fear was that it was going to cost us at least people-time, and what will we get out of it? We just started by tacking an additional amount of money onto the ads--things that we put out there--employment ads, the line classified ads, and the directory. We put our whole annual directory out there. So those three types of ads we added to the ad price, specifically in order to put it out on the Web.

**KB:** So can an advertiser say, "I'm willing to be in the paper. I don't want to be on the web site."

**SD:** No. They pay the higher ad price and we say, "OK, for that, you get the web". We've had one or two people who absolutely insist. It's difficult just to handle [those requests] technically and administratively, so basically we [ask] a higher price and they get on the web

**KB:** That brings up the whole area of accounting which you're involved in. I'm interested in how that system operates. You're divided into a set of profit centers..? It may have different words, but...

**SD:** Yes, we have the newspaper, everything related to books--which are the bookshop, the book groups, the trips, BookWomen--those are all one profit center. The directory is its own profit center. Those are the three.

**KB:** Where does the web fit in there?

**SD:** Actually, we have it as a separate profit center, so that we could keep track. It's a smaller profit center; it's called 'on-line'. We have a fifth one. We were starting to get into having a desktop-processing center and we kind of went up on that for a while and now we're not doing much. We're still doing a little bit of it, so it's still there as a separate profit center. Those are the ones that we have.

**KB:** So you allocate then a portion of each advertising dollar over to the web site?

**SD:** We have to keep track of the line classifieds. It's just by the number of inches that ran that time--it's not by particular ad. We do it in the easiest way possible.

**KB:** Are you modifying the accounting system, or is it pretty well established and in place?

**SD:** No, I'm not modifying it at all. It's worked very well for us; it's always worked very well for us. They don't really have what they call profit centers--they don't have that concept, really. The concept that they do have is jobs, so that you could track if you were say a construction company or something you would track a particular job and you could give that job a name. So that's the concept that we've used instead, and we're applying it to profit centers and it works out.

**KB:** And when you say 'they'.. Are you referring to a program or...?

**SD:** .Yes, a software vendor. We do all our own accounting, except for the end of the year tax return and K1's to shareholders. Otherwise we do all our own. We do a lot more of our end of the year stuff than we used to, because we switched accountants a couple of years ago and she was able to just easily show mostly me how to do things. She helped me to understand what it was that needed to be done at the end of the year, and exactly what kind of entries we needed to do it. That left her with less to do, and us with a smaller bill to pay.

**KB:** Who do you work with on accounting issues? Does Sarah work on that a little bit?

**SD:** Sarah sends out all the invoices for the accounts receivable. I do the accounts payable side, but I do all the bookshop accounting also. So I kind of do miscellaneous sorts of things. I do payroll related things.

**KB:** Is Kathy Magnuson [General Manager] involved in the accounting?

**SD:** No, it's Sarah and Norma and I. Sarah took over the invoicing from Norma, so Norma's still involved.

**KB:** Okay. Now did I miss anything that is ...?

**SD:** Well, let's see...what I've worked on. I used to work on line classified ads for years, which Sarah now does. That was my own little advertising client base, and I enjoyed that too, because there were a certain number of people that I spoke to about their ads.

**KB:** And this might be a place like the University of Minnesota..?

**SD:** No. Not employment ads--they're a lot of different categories..

**KB:** Oh sure, I know what you mean.

**SD:** Counseling, roommates, legal category...there are quite a number of categories and that same section has boxed ads in it also--what we call our displayed classified. So they're both boxed ads and line ads in there, and I did just the line ads. Then production puts those all together into one section.

**KB:** So is that a substantially different job than the sales reps?

**SD:** Well, it's a lot less complex, but. There's no sales work in the sense of scouting and looking for advertisers. It's whoever comes to us and says they want to run that kind of an ad. So that's a lot different. The way we operate is a lot different.

**KB:** Front desk and the bookstore...we haven't talked about that.

**SD:** Well, that's where I started out. I still miss that. Gosh, this is a job? ...To stand here and talk to people about books? It was a lot more relaxing--is one word for it--and fun. You didn't have this set of tasks that had to get done today. But my main area of interest in the books was spirituality--I kind of knew a lot about all those books. I didn't have enough of a breath of knowledge about all the other categories that we carry also, but we've never been a very big bookstore anyway, so we don't have a lot of customers coming in. So generally, you've been the receptionist and the bookstore person at the same time. When I started in the bookstore I was working Saturdays. In fact, I'm the one who got us open on Saturdays, because I said to Glenda, "If we're going to be a real bookstore, we have to be open on Saturdays. I'm willing to work on Saturdays." So I was working almost all the Saturdays at first, for at least a year.

**KB:** I know that the bookstore business is changing dramatically because of all the large bookstores, but is Saturday still a reasonably good day for bookstore sales?

**SD:** Reasonably good. We still every once in a while look back and say, "OK, how's it going now?" Is it worth it to us? Most of our books are more related to the book groups; we're not quite so much oriented toward off-the-street customers. They kind of have to pick from what we have. We do some ordering but we don't make an attempt to keep up and have all the latest books, or keep a large breadth.

**KB:** Which probably wouldn't have been a very good business strategy--considering all the things that have been going on.

**SD:** Yeah, yeah. But it's still nice for all of us to have it there, too.

**KB:** What does it do to the atmosphere of the company? ...Just to have it the way you walk in..

**SD:** Yeah, I think it's great. I think it puts a slant of being interested in many things. We have these books on all these different subjects and we have the public walking in to that. Also, just the fact that we have the public visiting... We're not just an exclusive business that only talks to each other, with visitors coming in and library users, too. I think it's nice that we have that connection with the outside world or that connection to the community of people who walk by every day. We know the other shopkeepers and that kind of thing, because we are a business.

**KB:** OK, have I missed any of the jobs? It looks like we probably covered [them all]

**SD:** Yes, I think we have.

**KB:** Well, I'd like to turn then to the whole idea of what makes Minnesota "Women's Press" different from other organizations or businesses that you've worked in and what makes it the same. I'd like to suggest that you can think about that in so many different ways. A couple of ideas might be: the ways people interact with one another, the way space is allocated perhaps, the way jobs or tasks are organized and allocated out, the way decisions are made, the way you interact with the outside world, the way you deal with the problems, problem solving, the way you generate revenues... Are there any things there that, or other things that, come to mind when you think about how the "Women's Press" is different and how it's the same?

**SD:** I think one area that it's strong in--especially in the last maybe two or three years--is respect for people's personal needs. ...For a father dying and someone having to be away for a length of time. When that happens, we say, "OK, this is what's going to happen . We have to figure out how we're going to cover that." It's kind of a given that we will and we talk with several people within the organization about how can we handle that person's work while they're gone.

Or the ad reps, for instance, have each been working one day a week at home. That was a new idea. First one person wanted to do it and then pretty soon, everybody wanted to do it. So that was an accommodation to how people wanted to do their jobs in that case. People that are in school need to change their hours.

Myself, I wanted to work seven hours a day instead of eight--just to have more personal time in my life--and that was accommodated. I'm the first one that gets asked, "OK, then

how does this affect your job? How do you see what you can still do and what you can't do anymore? What would you suggest for the things you can't do anymore? How would you suggest they get handled?" Then it would go on and be discussed with other people. I think that's a big area and that makes it a real good place to work

**KB:** And that would be different than the State of Minnesota?

**SD:** Probably for most people. In my experience, I worked part-time for years and years and years for the State. I basically always did get to do what I wanted to do when I worked for the State. [laughter] Maybe I was just lucky. So I would say in my experience with the State, it's not all that different. However, I would think that in most big businesses or maybe other small businesses, they may be a lot less attuned to taking care of people's personal needs, and taking those into consideration in the job.

**KB:** You said something about "at least for the last couple of years" we've been doing that. So this is a fairly new [experience]?

**SD:** I just think there have been some relatively severe needs that people have had that stand out. It stands out that we have worked hard to accommodate what people needed. Instead of saying, "You can't do that", or "It's too bad for you". It doesn't happen that way. Even some of them who've been here a short time, and then needed to take a leave of absence a couple of times, that was accommodated. She was kept on--doing a great job. We've had our payback for going along with what she needed at the time.

**KB:** Any other thoughts you have about how it might be different from other work environments, or business environments

**SD:** I think in the area of decision making... I think I usually get asked for my opinion on things, but even in this environment there have been times in the past when I've been frustrated that something has been decided and designed, and everything that impacts the area that I work on, and I didn't even know it was happening. My input was not sought when I should be the person that would have ideas on giving more input. So I think that kind of thing can still go on. I think probably it's happening less now for me personally; it's happening less than it used to. I think I'm more likely to be consulted now than I previously was.

**KB:** Do you think that's because of the change in the way that process is handled? Or do you think that's something more to do...?

**SD:** It mostly had to do with the marketing area, and we've not doing as much of that anymore. Maybe that's why I don't see it personally as much anymore. I do think that there are generally meetings of people involved in things. I'm not sure that's the case with the biggest company decisions--I think we do still have a hierarchy of decision makers--but I think they ask us what we think, too, and then they decide, which is what

they do have to do. Whereas especially that kind of area--especially at the State, the group that I worked for--the answer to all problems was, "Let's reorganize." [laughter]

**KB:** Any other things you'd like to say about that? ...About how "Women's Press" is different? ...Or the same as other work environments or business entities?

**SD:** I think just in setting up physical environment. I think that we do a lot to try to accommodate what people want. Just this last expansion when we added these offices, Norma and I had been sharing an office. It was the biggest office in the place and in fact the only reason there was an office there... We had been part of a larger area which included production. It had gotten to the point where it was too noisy. We couldn't do our accounting work with the noise level of the discussions that went on in the production area. So they built us a wall--a well sound insulated wall--so that we could work in that office. Well, when these offices were added, Norma was to move to one of the new offices and have a private office. I was given the option of staying in that big office--with one other person and the possibility of needing to make room also for an intern in that office at some time in the future--or taking a smaller office and having it to myself. ...That smaller office, however, being the largest private office there was in the whole place.

I chose that. [laughter] I think consideration was given to the fact of how long I've been here in allowing me that choice. Kathy and Mollie both have a lot smaller offices than I do. I see that as a real sign of respect for me, but also for the work that I do and the needs for record keeping and space that I have. Everyone was asked their opinion on where would you like to be in this new set-up. Maybe everyone didn't get what they wanted, but there was overall discussion of what's the best way to use this new space. People in the production area were in on, "How are we going to reshuffle things in the production area to use the new space?" I think that was one area where we mattered. [laughs]

For vacation leaves, basically people usually get what they request, and yet you do have to pass it by the other people that you work with to make sure there's not a conflict. There will always be someone to do that job, but I've never been turned down. Norma and I used to back each other up on a lot of things. There was one time when we just really both wanted to be gone in the same week, and it wasn't the best thing for the company, but we found a way around it. We were both doing things that only happened that week; we didn't really have a choice of if we wanted to do it. It was that week. So I think that [showed] respect for individuals with needs outside of this place. The happier we are in doing those things, the happier we will be to come back to work and do our job.

**KB:** That gets into an interesting question. What motivates those accommodations to employees? Do you think it is for the business? Is it due to certain values?

**SD:** I think it is mainly motivated by concern for the individuals, so that would be a value rather than the overall good of the business. I'm sure there's an awareness that valuing the

individual will make that individual more valuable to the business, too. You know, it will come around like that, but I do feel that what I need is primary over what the business needs. ...Say in terms of which vacation week I need--at that kind of a level.

**KB:** Well, if you could, talk about the values of the Minnesota Women's Press. And again, these are not the stated values, but just what you think of when you think of what motivates the organization. What's the basis for this organization's actions?

**SD:** I think providing a good product. I think that's the answer to why we've lasted so long, too. Just talking about the newspaper in particular, I think it's a very good newspaper. It's a very well done newspaper, and I think that's the primary reason that it has survived. I think a lot of the decision making comes from how that is going to happen with this particular issue or this particular year. So I think that's always the goal, even though that's not our only product anymore. It's the one most people are involved in-- [that] or the directory. Of course, that's a big chunk, too. But the newspaper is still pretty primary all year long, so I think that would probably be [primary].

I think running a company where the people are respected and paid as well as can be. We didn't use to make money, but there always was a goal of paying people commensurate with what they're worth and what they could be making in other places. Even though that wasn't happening for many years, I think they did as much as they could at all times. Then it kind of took off the last couple of years in terms of income, and that has been given back to us. So I think that providing a workplace that is a good place for people to be, I think is one of the values.

I think being long-term--being here for the long-term--is a value, so I think some of the decision making is based on that. That it's not going to do us the most good right now this year, but we need to worry about being here five years from now or ten years from now.

There's a lot more talk now about when Mollie and Glenda aren't here anymore. Will there still be a company? Both of them have been pretty much out of the day to day for the last couple of years, since Mollie stopped editing and kind of went into other areas. She's putting her energies other places now, and the company certainly has gone on. Kathy, as general manager, is greatly responsible for that. When Kathy's not here, it moves down to Norma and myself. So I think it's set up so that things will keep going, and on a more short term basis--say if Kathy had to be missing for a month or something--I think everyone knows their job, and everybody does their job.

I don't think anybody has to rely on somebody above them to know exactly what they're going to do today. ...Or this week. ...Or this month. I think we all know what our jobs are and we just go on and do them. That says a lot about how much responsibility people have been given, too. That says something about values and about how we're organized--to know that people are responsible for their own work. They know what they're responsible for and they're trusted. I'm trusted to make a lot of decisions without having

to go and ask anybody. If it's a bigger one, if I still think it's one I can make, I'll make note of it, and say to Kathy, "This is what I'm doing on this." But I feel there's a lot of trust in me to do things. It's the whole concept of responsibility and trust in their employees as a value.

**KB:** Where does feminism fit into the value system?

**SD:** [pause] Well, it fits into the product that we produce. Both BookWomen and the "Women's Press"...all of our products that we produce certainly are tied in with feminism. They are tied in with presenting women's lives, with writing about the concerns of women in the world. I think the values of trusting employees.... You can certainly trust male employees too, but I think it's a feminist value that's maybe more towards the collective side of distributing responsibilities, and being less hierarchical..

**KB:** Do you think that it's imperative for someone to be a feminist to work here?

**SD:** Pretty much. [laughter] I think someone who wasn't would not be very happy here--just in terms of the interests of the people who already work here. They wouldn't fit in. If they were in a position such as ad sales--or anyplace where they're really relating to people in the outside world--someone who was not a feminist would probably have trouble selling ads to a feminist newspaper. The fact that we are feminist newspaper is our strength. That's what we sell partly--who we are.

**KB:** There are a lot of different kinds of feminism. How do all those different kinds of feminisms get reconciled at the Minnesota Women's Press? Do you run into differences that are ideological differences so to speak, as opposed to... Or is it more common that they are they more closely meshed than that?

**SD:** Well, I think that having Cynthia Scott as the editor has made a difference. I see Cynthia as someone who questions everything--even the feminist principles that we, of my age group, anyway have believed in for years and years. She asks questions about that, too. She has questions about everything, and says, "Is this the way we have to see it?" So I think as far as say the newspaper content [and] the newspaper outlook, Cynthia has had a big influence.

Another factor is that we have so many young women, right out of college around here now. A lot of them are just interns, but even some of our fulltime employees are quite young. So we older ones get a chance to hear what they think about things now, too. I think that's really good for all of us to have that mix of age. I like that. I like hearing what their ideas are, too. I'd say the young women that we have are feminist in the sense that they don't take for granted the gains that women have made. I think they understand that they've been worked hard for, and that they still don't always apply. It doesn't happen for everybody, everywhere, you know. ...That they're able to move up in a place.

**KB:** And so these differences and these questions are OK? It works well in this environment? The environment is open and accepting of those questions?

**SD:** I feel that we're a lot more alike than different. I guess I don't have a big sense of differences even with the young women. I really don't. I've had different experiences than they have, but I seldom hear someone say anything that would [make me] say, "Wow, I really disagree with that." I think there's a lot of commonality.

**KB:** Well, I'd like to move into the impact of the Minnesota Women's Press. What do you think has been the impact of this newspaper and the other businesses? You can think about it in many different ways--to the community in general, journalism, feminists, to yourself--however you'd like. You can think about it in more than one way.

**SD:** I think the fact that we've been a woman-owned business and a feminist business that has kept producing all of these years... It's a real plus for society's view of women, or for St. Paul and Minneapolis' view of women. It's a well respected newspaper that hasn't been overly radical so that it's gotten a lot of put-downs anywhere either. I worry that it still hasn't had enough impact because so many people still haven't heard of it. That always amazes me that women that are feminist in the Twin Cities haven't heard of it. I think there's an awful large percentage; so in some ways, I say we're still not visible enough even after all these years.

Apparently we're visible enough for advertisers to feel that it's worth their money to advertise with us, so obviously they get business from people who read the newspaper. It's distributed successfully in that sense. I think the impact on people in outstate Minnesota--who don't have opportunities to go to women's places in the Twin Cities, who just can't get to as many things because they're further out--is to be able to feel connected through the newspaper. They know that there are other people out there who think as they do, and they may be the only one on their small town who thinks as they do. They can find out about events that are going on. I think that's real important. Even people who are in the Twin Cities...

**KB:** How much of the distribution is outstate?

**SD:** The free distribution...not a whole lot. A lot of the sites that we send to are college, women studies departments, and they only get twenty-five [newspapers], most of them. You'd think they'd use a lot more, but they don't. I still say that should be--I always thought that our biggest area of growth in subscriptions--to find the women in outstate Minnesota who would like to be reading it. First of all, we don't know how to find them--we've tried going through libraries. We've done like campaigns--subscription campaigns to all the libraries in the state of Minnesota, with practically no results.

**KB:** Really...

**SD:** Yes. If there's one copy in the library, that's a way then for women in that town to find out there is such a thing. Then they can subscribe. But we can't get into the libraries so it's difficult to reach the outstate Minnesota people.

**KB:** Interesting...

**SD:** We've never had a good idea for how to do that. We bought MS [Magazine] labels for the five-state area one time and sent information out about the "Women's Press" to all those people. I distinctly remember, I was the one matching up the "MS" labels with our own subscription list to make sure we weren't sending this to people who already subscribed. There was one town in particular where there was one person who subscribed to both our newspaper and "MS". She was the only one in town, so I thought she must be really lonely. She must not have anyone to talk to... [laughter]

**KB:** She'd be a good person to interview actually for this project.

**SD:** Yes, I wouldn't have any idea who that would be anymore. That was interesting to see.

**KB:** So, any more on impact that you can think about?

**SD:** I think it's impacted me personally in the sense of being 'my place' in a way. I've been here almost ten years. I'm fifty-seven. I would hope to be here until I retire, and hopefully I'm part of the process of making sure that it stays here that long that I can do that. So it's a place where I felt like I belonged and I think that's true for a lot of people-- we have quite a few long-term people...

**KB:** Well, back to the conversation we were having about out-state. Since it is one of the few feminist presses that has survived in the country, why do you think that is? Is there something to this state or this region or this locale that has made this feasible, or has contributed to it?

**SD:** I think the Twin Cities area is a pretty progressive area in terms of alternative things in general and I think the other reason is that we produce a good product. I think it's an interesting newspaper to read. I think we produce things that people do want to read about and they want to read about it the next time and the next time, too.

**KB:** Well, are there any other things that you think are important to talk about that you haven't had the chance to say yet? ...Examples or stories or things you think would be important to have on the record, or points you'd like to make about the story of the Minnesota Women's Press that you haven't talked about yet?

**SD:** Well, I think the fact that from the start we were a business and not a nonprofit. I think it is real important. I think maybe that's one reason that we've had impact, too. I

think we're more visible because we're not a nonprofit. I think that's important to me personally--that I'm working to produce this product that has an impact, and that I like the product, and I believe in what the product does.

**KB:** Well, thank you very much.

Minnesota Women's Press Inc. Oral History Project  
Minnesota Historical Society