

Interview with Mollie Hoben

Interviewed by Kathryn Brewer

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KB: Mollie, because you are one of the founders of the Minnesota Women's Press I'd like to start at the very beginning. Can you describe how you first thought about or became aware of the idea of starting a "Women's Press"?

MH: I was teaching and I was ready to do something else. I was on a leave--a one year unpaid leave, which I extended to two. I was editing and business manager of the Park Bugle newspaper in the neighborhood of St. Paul where I lived. At the same time I was taking classes at the University [of Minnesota] in the feminist studies and literature subsection of the English department, as adult special student. So I was thinking about and learning about women's silences as women's words. I was trying to decide what to do next in my life.

Those two things came together and led me to ask, "What would news from women's point of view be like? Would that be different? If so how?" [It led me] to believe that it was something that was needed. So that was a dream kind of thing at the time. I didn't set out thinking I wanted to start something different; I just wanted to find a different path from teaching.

KB: You started out then with a question in your mind? Would news be different if looked at through women's eyes?

MH: Yes, and if women and women's experiences were more of the subjects of news.

KB: What was it about that time that made it a particularly good time? Or perhaps it wasn't a good time? Talk about the environment at that point.

MH: I think people we talked to at the time thought it was not a good time. It was the mid-1980's--Reaganomics. It was one of the times when they were saying feminism was past its date--that it was passe, a little bit naïve.

From the environment, I don't think it was necessarily a good time. We were past the highest excitement of the early wave of the 'second wave' of feminism of the 1970's and late 1960's. Some women's organizations were already at that point reaching a place

where shortly they would start to run into their problems of being past their time or needing to change. So it wasn't especially propitious a time from the environment.

It was certainly personally a right time, and that became the driving force. And our sense that if people were telling us that feminism had no place and that women wouldn't be interested in this, that wasn't true.

KB: What was the initial vision that you had of what the "Women's Press" could be?

MH: The initial vision was a weekly newspaper. That was in my mind all the time early on as we thought about it. It would be very visible around the Twin Cities. It would be covering and doing the kinds of things that we did end up doing--that didn't change much. Initially, I thought it would be easier to do than it was--to become credible and to be a force. That took longer than we anticipated.

KB: Had this been tried before?

MH: In the Twin Cities there was Twin Cities Woman which was published in the 1970s. We talked with the publishers of that, and people who had read it and had ideas about it. It was a broadsheet newspaper--bigger paper, very high quality paper and graphics and art.

KB: What about content?

MH: Content as I had recalled it was mixed. It had some good stuff. It was trying to appeal to the Edina set, because it was trying to appeal to the advertisers who would think that was what they needed--Hudson Jewelers and Dayton's.

KB: What you envisioned differed from that in what way?

MH: The Twin Cities Woman also had its fluff side--what to wear on a cruise kind of thing--because it felt it needed to at the time. We were not ever interested in that, nor in a publication that was aimed at a particular segment of readers. We wanted it to be accessible and of interest to people of all socio-economic statuses, all parts of the area geographically, [and all] ages.

Twin Cities Woman lasted two years I think, and in that time--we learned--went through half a million dollars and then went out of business, because they couldn't keep it going. They came in with the concept that you had to really look really prosperous to start with...and play the 'downtown game'. It didn't work for whatever reason, although they did some important things

KB: Did they give you advice when you visited with them?

MH: We went to visit the publisher, Victoria Sprague, and a woman who worked with her whose name I'm not remembering. She's still around. They did give us advice. The other woman told us at the end, "I don't think you guys can do this, because you're not mean enough." She said Victoria would really stamp her foot and yell if things weren't in on time. Their thought was, that was how you had to be to make it work. They were not very encouraging, although once we got going they were supportive and helpful. Elin Skinnard was the other woman. She's been very active in lots of women's things.

KB: Let's talk about once you had the notion of it and the vision of it. I'd like to talk about how you actually began to execute that vision. I understand that you had a series of meetings right in the beginning. Can you talk about that?

MH: I talked first with Glenda [Martin; co-founder and co-publisher] about it.

KB: Your relationship with Glenda was what at that point?

MH: I had been her student years ago in the University in the graduate program, and we had been working in the same school district. She was an administrator and I was a teacher. Then we worked on several projects together. I wrote a grant, and got some money. We were very close, personally as well as professionally. It was just logical that she would be part of this, even though she was still working full time and I was not--being on leave.

Then we gathered together a group--I think it was seven women--who were interested in exploring and planning it with us. We started meeting weekly. We still have a little notebook--we took notes at every meeting. We would outline what we needed to do--what were the questions, the information, the steps, and who we needed to talk to.

KB: Can you remember who was all on that group?

MH: It was Glenda and me, Kathy Magnuson [founder and business manager]--she and I were working at the "Bugle" together. [It included] Marcia Anderson [early editorial staff] who was in community journalism; Denise Sheibe [early distribution coordinator] who is still with us and was one of the early shareholders; and Diane Emerson, who is a shareholder who is now living in New Zealand. Maybe she wasn't part of that group.... There were seven I think. Terri Ezikial was an early shareholder who was working at the "Bugle" and is now working in New York; and there was one other whose name I'm obviously forgetting. We can find that book. [laughs]

So we would meet weekly, at least, at my house around the dining room table. Kathy would bring her little daughter and baby, and we'd meet and decide stuff, then all go off and do our thing.

KB: Can you talk about how it actually took shape during that process?

MH: We decided we needed to put together a prototype issue, so we could say to advertisers, "Here's what we're going to do. Here's why you're going to like it", and convince them to get ready to buy ads. It was a trial run. We worked on the prototype issue, which I think came out in November of the year before we actually started publishing.

At the same time I especially, but all of us, were working on a business plan. I attended an all day seminar at the SBA [U. S. Small Business Administration] put on about doing a business plan. I did some consulting with a woman at--it's now WomenVenture--Women's Economic Development Coordination, WEDCO at the time [organization formed to help women achieve economic independence]. I did lot's of library work. I looked at industry ratios. I was doing discussion meetings with people--informational interviews.

So we had a parallel tract: one being the content and the newspaper and one being the business side of it. As we went along, it was clear that we needed to raise capital. We got into another tract, which was the raising money side. All these were happening at the same time.

KB: Talk first about how that content developed--what your initial conceptions were, and how they moved forward into what you ultimately ended up with in your first real paper.

MH: I think the initial conceptions were pretty close to what we ended up with. We arrived at those among ourselves--the planning group--doing a lot of brainstorming, trying to write things, refine, and write descriptors of what we thought the paper would be about and like. Then we had several public meetings. We would just invite many numbers of women--I can't exactly remember how, it was probably people we knew--to come and help us think about it.

Some of them got involved in specific steps of the process after a while, and would help in gathering information or thinking about this idea. That's when Faye [Kommedahl; early copy editor and volunteer] got involved. She wasn't part of that first group, but she became key because she said she wanted to volunteer and work hard with us for a year.

We actually turned my living room into an office. We had a copy machine in the living room and dining room, and two desks. I put the other stuff upstairs. I was teaching half time by now; I had gone back for some money. Faye would come over and sit down and do work. And then we'd meet there; some of our group meetings were there. We had bigger meetings at Glenda's house and other people's houses--one at a church. We were asking people about content and direction

KB: Talk a little bit about the values that guided that content initially.

MH: First of all, obviously, we were interested in writing about women. We were aware that what we were trying to do was redefine what 'newsworthiness' meant. We wanted to have emphasis on the stories of women--that was key from the beginning. We wanted to pay attention to language, and be sure that we were using language thoughtfully and powerfully for women. We thought from the beginning that we wanted to look at anything that was going on and look at what that meant for women--what women's perspective would mean, and how that would touch women's lives. From the beginning, we wanted to have commentary and opinion and editorials. We thought that was an important statement to make. [We wanted to have] women's views of the arts, reviews of movies, that kind of thing, as well as more traditional news topics--politics, public policy, all those kinds of things. So story was big, individuals [were big]--letting women's own words be more of the news.

Hopefully--and this has been hard for us to do and we've never consistently done it over time, but it's a continual goal--we wanted to be a little more transparent as journalists. [We wanted to] have the writers bring more of themselves to the story, to what they were doing, and be explicit about that, so that the readers would know what the process was--how the news came to be how they saw it. That's what I remember right now.

KB: I'd actually like to do the same thing with the other pieces of the business that you talked about. You talked about the fundraising piece. Can you talk a little about how that process went in that initial conceptualization?

MH: In doing the business plan, we had to come up with five-year projections, which was laughable. But it was a good exercise. [laughter] It became clear that we wanted to start big. We didn't want to work our way up--start with a few pages to a few people and then expand if we could. We wanted to make a presence immediately. We were still at this point thinking about a weekly, and a fair size in terms of numbers of pages and a good print run to start with. I think we started at 30,000 or something. So we needed lots of money to do that.

As I was doing the projections, and we'd talk about them and refine them, it became clear that it was going to be a real problem to do that weekly. It didn't seem likely. We made the decision to go bi-weekly. It was hardest for me, I think, to make that [decision].

KB: The implications of that bi-weekly decision are what?

MH: The implications have to do with timeliness. It had to do with wanting to be on a par with the big guys, which were the [unclear] and City Pages [weekly free newspaper circulated in the Twin City area] at the time. The implications were on what it would demand: it's more than double the effort. You've got such a compressed timeline and deadlines. It just wasn't feasible. I think it's turned out to be fine. I was worried that we would not be present enough in the community. We'd look less powerful, and that

timeliness with things like employment ads and news would be a problem. It's turned out that's not true. We aren't a fast breaking news publication anyway. I think that's been good. So to raise this capital we explored like everyone does. We tried to see if we could get a SBA loan. Would it be easy to get a bank loan?

KB: Did you think about going after foundations at that point? This of course gets at the issue of profit vs. non-profit.

MH: Yes, thank you. We had already decided by this point that we were going to be a 'for-profit'. That was earlier in the process, not right at the beginning, but when we had to start thinking about creating a structure and incorporating. We did incorporate in 1984, kind of early on. That's when we had the discussion of whether we should do the traditional nonprofit route.

KB: Traditional in what sense?

MH: Traditional for women. That would be something that women would start out doing. Other newspapers we knew around the country...a number of them were nonprofit. Some were for-profit. Most of the women's activities in town were efforts of various kinds of nonprofit organizations. The "Bugle" was a nonprofit, which I had worked for.

Both Glenda and I really didn't want to play that game and be beholden to the funders, and to write grants. That seemed like such a diversion. We talked about what's the difference? You're beholden to advertisers, or you're beholden to funders. You've got to sell ads or write grants. But it did seem that we wanted to make the statement that we could make it on our own--that independence and the value of what we were doing. We had big dreams of changing the business climate in a way, and that advertisers would start to think differently about how they advertised because they'd want to be in us. We didn't have quite that impact, but it was part of our hopes at the time.

So we had already decided to be a for-profit, not a nonprofit. We then figured out that we were going to have to raise money through getting people to invest in us. That's when we did the public offering. We got connected with Joan Gardner, who's a securities attorney way up at the top floor of the IDS building--with glass all around her. It was quite intimidating actually, but she walked us through it and set us up. Our original hope was to do a public offering, and get lots of people to put in little bits of money, so that it could be more widely shared.

This was a big tension at the time. Marcia Anderson was a voice on that planing group that was for this especially, but others of us were too. Because of the times, it was a feminist thing to be cooperative--wanting to make sure everybody could have everything--and we wanted everybody to have a piece of ownership. The place in Minneapolis called the "Blaisdell Club"--the women's club that had started in the early 1980's--had

started that way. People could buy five dollars of stock, and then become members. It became very complicated, and did not have long-lasting strength. So we wanted to try to do that anyway, but because of their experience partly and because of how really complicated it got to do that kind of thing--both from a money and time point of view--we decided we couldn't do that.

So then we had a private offering of stock. Over the second half of the planning time, and into when we were publishing already, we were continuing to do this--trying to sell the stock. You had to do it on a personal basis. That's one of the rules of the private offering. You can't just put out an ad and say, "Do you want to buy stock?" It has to be someone you know, or some connection. My recollection is that I did most of that stuff--in terms of contacting people and putting together packets.

People had teas for us, where they'd invite their friends. I went to a breakfast--one of our shareholders as it turned out, she wasn't then--was willing to sponsor this. I don't even remember how we connected. She invited all her friends. This was on the island in White Bear Lake, Manitou Island--old St. Paul monied families. All these women came. Most of them, it was so interesting, felt they didn't have any money that they could decide on. We were asking for a minimum of \$3,000 investment, and they all said, "I don't know that my husband would let me do this." [laughter] With their millions. The only one who ended up buying stock on her own was Joan Gardner--who put on the breakfast, and has been a faithful shareholder ever since. That was a real eye opener. We one by one got investors.

KB: You generated how many investors during that time then?

MH: At that period, the first go round, we got maybe fifteen. I could get exact numbers on this. Before we started we had maybe twelve to fifteen. We were carrying around this one offering, and added maybe five more. Later on in the early 1990's, we did a second offering and added seven or eight more.

KB: Were you suggesting to the stockholders that they would get a market return for their investment?

MH: No, we had to be really careful--legally and morally.

KB: Certainly, I understand legally you had to do that, but... talk a bit more about it.

MH: We did have this business plan projected that we would make profit within five years certainly, and maybe before that. At the same time we were very clear about the risks involved--which were considerable. Clearly people were investing, and we were looking for people to invest, who did not expect that this was going to be a financially lucrative thing to have done--certainly not in any short or even mid-range period of time.

KB: So the basis of their investment was ideological.

MH: The basis of their investment was supporting something they thought was of value. We had really gone to a lot of work to examine what it would mean to start this business. We had a well-done and impressive business plan, so they knew we were serious. It's not just, "We've got this good, ideological idea...give us some money." But it wasn't that they expected it would be a high return investment. We in fact set up an escrow account at the bank in which we put all the payments from the early shareholders. We set ourselves a goal, and said, "If we don't reach this goal within this period of time, we'll give you all your money back." We tried to assure them that this was serious.

KB: Was this some sort of circulation goal?

MH: No, it was a goal of raising money. If we didn't get enough investments to have \$50 thousand or something...so they could feel that their investment was part of something that could make a difference. Once we got started on the second offering we didn't go about it that way.

I hated doing that--that's not what I like to do. I'm not a sales person. [laughter].

KB: Better than writing a grant?

MH: No, it was equally bad but it wasn't a continual, ongoing, thing. [laughter] I remember one night we were in the office, the first office upstairs at the corner in the security building. I had several people I needed to call for stuff. I kept putting it off--I didn't want to call. Finally this woman named Deana Foster, who was giving us helpful advice, came over and said, "I'm just going to sit with you here while you call these people. It won't be bad. They'll only say no, or maybe yes." [laughs] She kind of held my hand while I did some of these calls, because it is not what I liked doing. We weren't great marketers of ourselves at that time--and probably never have been.

KB: The general time period of that was?

MH: That would be 1984. We were selling stock before our first publication. I can't remember how long that process lasted. There was an end-date that we had to put on it, but probably through 1985 we were still trying to add shareholders, I would guess.

KB: Give me your perception of the state of the organization right before you started publishing the first newspaper.

MH: Right at that time, as we were planning?

KB: Yes, kind of an overview of what the organization looked like at that point.

MH: I can't remember how many people were involved. We were committed to paying salaries to everybody who worked there. We were committed to paying freelancers reasonable freelance fees for anything they wrote for us. We had enthusiastic people ready to try to sell ads. We had very little sense about what we were doing about that, or how we were doing that. Kathy Magnuson had experience and had real ideas, and at that point they seemed too business-like to us

KB: That's interesting.

MH: Yes, and she'll tell you I'm sure about it.

KB: Well, you give me your perception.

MH: We had a culture of...it wasn't exactly a cooperative, but it was in the collective cooperative vein for sure. Glenda and I were really sick of the hierarchy of the school district we both worked for, and the discounting of people that happens in that. We wanted to do something different. For the first couple of years everybody got paid the same. In fact the business plan was based on that, and we counted on if the company grew, that everybody's salary would grow. We'd go with it, but we'd all be making the same amount. We didn't pay commissions to sales people at the beginning.

We expected people to be doing it out of the excitement and commitment to the cause we had. Anybody who has ever worked for us has brought that along, but we were hoping we would be paying pretty adequate salaries early on, and that wasn't true. That was a hard road.

I was scared about it. I kept thinking, "Well we don't have to do this until we publish the first issue." Then it was, "Well, we're committed now." It was a small group--much smaller than this--and very informal. Everybody answered the phones; we'd have meetings where we'd all be in on the decision making. The advertising people were reaching out where ever they could.

KB: Talk about why you thought Kathy Magnuson's approach to advertising might be a little bit too business-like.

MH: Because of the culture... Although we had made the commitment to be a business, and were clear about that and committed to that, most of us in the early planning group came from a social-science background--service careers. That was real hard to change.

Glenda and I worked in the school district where we didn't have to worry about the money side of stuff, and we did want to worry about the people side. The structure didn't let that happen. Marcia Anderson came from a similar kind of background. Denise did [as well]. So we said we wanted to be a business and we made some first steps, but we really knew nothing about what that meant and had no orientation in that direction. We

were creating a culture that was kind of fragmented. On one hand we were talking about being a business, and on the other hand we were acting like a social service--a feminist-nonprofit agency. [laughter]

KB: Interesting

MH: Kathy was the least... buying into that. She's always had more of an understanding of business, and been interested in going at things that way. So there was definitely some tension about that. It was not that it changed suddenly, but over time we were smart enough to at least keep listening to people who were telling us other things. Some of the people who came in, like Michele Holzwarth who came in as an ad coordinator and started nudging us in a professional direction, really set a foundation. Mary Jo Dickinson [early business manager] did the same thing. This was in the late 1980's, when we were in real trouble financially. Mary Jo Dickinson came in and started doing the same things from a business side--started setting up some first steps of accounting in-house instead of having someone else do it, and learning what that meant. Carol Pine [advisory board] and our other advisors kept gently nudging us in that direction. It was fortunate that we had friends to turn to, and we were willing to listen to, even though it was not easy. [laughter]

KB: Let's talk about producing the first newspaper. Maybe we should talk about content first. Now you spent a lot of time working on content prior [to publishing] but talk a bit about content in the first newspaper.

MH: The first newspaper is kind of vague to me, I must say.

KB: Well let's call it the first couple newspapers then.

MH: Well, the first year is kind of vague. [laughter] We wanted to be sure that women of all kinds were being reflected. It happened at the time of Secretary's Day, and it was important to us to do something with that. We felt that women who weren't professionals tended even less than professional women to ever be seen as newsworthy, or what they were doing as valuable.

We wanted to pay attention to the political world and the public policy world. I don't know if we started right off with book reviews, but early on we did. Movie reviews, stories, we had history in the first issue. I remember we tried to at least occasionally to look back, because there was so much that people didn't know. We wanted to say what grassroots women were doing organizationally--like the various organizations around town--and give them more attention than they had gotten in the news generally.

We started off the very first issue with the idea of the Profile [story of an individual woman appearing in every issue] on the front page as a really important statement. We've never deviated from that. There would be news in a more traditional way on the front

page, but there would also be an individual woman's story on the front page. That was a statement about what constitutes news--what's important. That's probably the most basic statement or signature of the "Women's Press" newspaper that there is, and it has been throughout. That and the commentary and opinion page, which I always felt was very important. A lot of women's papers don't, or at that time didn't do that. It was like we don't want to be 'out there' taking stands on stuff; we just want to be a conveyer. So that seemed important to us.

KB: Were you successful at making the articles transparent as you talked about earlier?

MH: Not to the extent that I had hoped. I was encouraging writers to include something with their stories...something we called the writer's perspective. They would say why the story ended up the way it did--what they brought to it. Some of that happened, but it was hard to maintain that; it's hard for writers to do that. It's a very vulnerable position to be in. It's not very typical, and in the press of other things, a lot of that got lost. I think we did encourage writers to be more personal just in their style generally, and in the ways they interviewed the people they sought out to interview. In that way we were successful, and learned about that as we went along.

KB: Talk about some of the operating aspects of producing that paper. You were in your home at this point?

MH: No. Right before the first issue, we moved into the office at the Security Building [on Raymond Avenue in St. Paul] on the corner here--upstairs, just a big office room. We did none of the production in-house; this was before desktop publishing was widely being used.

We didn't have a computer, so we would type up the stories and edit them and type them over again. [laughter] Then we'd get in our car and drive over to Minneapolis with the copy and take it to a typesetting company--a woman who owned a company over by Lake of the Isles. A couple days later we'd drive over and pick up the galleys, which were long, column-wide. We'd proof then and cut them by hand. We'd lay them out on mock pages and then we'd run back over there with them. She'd make corrections and then she'd start laying them out... No, we took them somewhere else and then laid them out, I think... Anyway it was a very labor-intensive process, which we had not much control over, and lots of time deadlines of other people we had to meet.

KB: Making a weekly paper impossible.

MH: Yes, as we looked back, it was clear that it would never have worked. Changes got very tricky. At the last minute you were laying out this type, and you saw that there was a typo. I can remember cutting out a teeny "e" with an exacto knife from some wasted type, and pasting it where there was none. [laughter] They [the newspapers] don't look bad, given that none of us had any technical training.

KB: Was that typical for a small bi-monthly newspaper? That process?

MH: At that point, yes, I think so. There were a few that were into experimenting--doing some of it with computers--but I think we were pretty common--although it was soon changing, and typesetters were starting to go out of business. We got our first computer maybe a year or two after we started, and we started to do some pieces of it ourselves. Slowly, over time, we moved into doing it all. It was a very hands-on process.

KB: How did you define your audience at that point? First of all, was it all Twin City based? Did you go out-state at all?

MH: At that point, I think we were probably just Twin City based, although I'm not sure. We defined our audience as every woman--and any guys who were interested at that point--but that we should be trying to reach all women.

KB: Do you still define your audience that way?

MH: No. Although it's interesting, we had a staff discussion about that topic not too long ago. Some people on staff still wish that could be or think that that should be our goal. I don't know how we defined our audience... That's not true...it's in the prototype. There's some stuff about who we thought would be readers.

Early on we thought that they would be active women. We hoped they would be, and thought they would be, of all ages and all demographic kind of categories, but they would be out there doing things for the world--doing their thing to make it better--and being involved. I think that's pretty much stayed throughout. What's gone along with that has been the education level, which we didn't articulate in the beginning. That's clearly who we've attracted--women who are more educated; that goes along with the activists, and being readers and interested in ideas.

KB: You mentioned earlier the woman typesetter; you talked about female stockholders. Can you talk about your ideas about working with women and men at that early stage?

MH: At the early stage--and still, when we can--we try to work with women and give our business to women-owned businesses. It's a pretty conscious thing. Or [we try to work with] independent businesses--that's the next step, if there isn't a woman-owned business that fits.

I think we probably had some discussion and debate early on about whether men should be stockholders or not. They are. We have several men who are, and that really hasn't felt like a problem. I think it did a bit, as I said, at the beginning. I can't remember how we resolved that, but clearly we did. Part of it is Kathy mentioned the other day that we maintained control over the stock--Glenda and I. Nobody--man or woman--could grab

control away from us. That gives us freedom on that. We hoped that men would read the newspaper, but we did not want to keep them in mind as an audience. We wanted to not worry about that. We wanted to direct ourselves and think of our audience as women.

KB: Was there a point during that first year that you knew this was going to work?

MH: That first year of planning? Or of publishing?

KB: Of publishing.

MH: No, I think it got more and more tenuous, less and less sure as we went along. [laughter] That is my recollection. By 1988, I think it was, we were close to going out of business. We started with this pool of money, and we kept using it up. [laughter] We weren't growing the way we projected. We were cutting salaries back, because we had started more ambitiously than we thought. We knew we had to keep going...

KB: So was that a problem of revenues? Of expenses? Both, I assume?

MH: It was both, but more of revenues. We were and always had been exceedingly frugal, on the expense side--sometimes to our detriment probably. The revenues--selling the ads--was just a lot harder than we expected. One of the reasons we started doing the bookgroups and stuff was to be able to create another revenue stream. That was behind the Directory [Minnesota Women's Press Directory; business and women's resource guide]. It didn't start that way, but once we did a couple pages of listings, we realized this might be something we could develop.

KB: Let's talk about the revenues associated with advertising. What do you attribute the difficulty in accomplishing a high level of advertising revenues early on?

MH: I think it was several things. One was clearly the times, as people in business saw them. We talked about it earlier: it was seen as a time when women's things were a little bit passe' and a little bit naive. We were a new publication, no matter what our topic. There were lots of publications around; we certainly hadn't proved ourselves in any way. There were advertisers clearly scared of us, I think--of this paper called the "Women's Press" you knew had to be pretty radical and angry. They were worried about being associated with that.

So there was the environmental stuff, and then there was the fact that we really weren't very good at selling ads yet. We didn't know what we were doing a whole lot. The people who did--like Kathy Magnuson--got frustrated because we wanted to do it on this cooperative, collaborative, "Don't push yourself too hard" kind of way. None of us really had a marketing kind of attitude, or a selling attitude. I shouldn't say none of us did, because one of our early salespeople--who was a good salesperson but in a totally traditional way--really wanted the content to be used to make sales possible. Sales were

the goal, and the content was the tool, instead of the other way around, as we saw it. So those who brought some of that skill didn't really fit well with the culture that we were trying to create: a mission-driven thing. They'd get frustrated. So it was both those things.

KB: Were there any advertisements that you would or would not go after? I think back to Ms. magazine and their unwillingness to put some advertisements...

MH: Right. We talked about that a lot in the planning and we were clear we wouldn't go after... wouldn't accept tobacco ads. There was no hope that we'd ever get one, so that was... but we took it seriously. [laughter] We talked about whether we should or not. I think we probably decided hard liquor, no; wine, if we could get it--we might think about that--and beer. I don't think we ever had any of those either.

We said we wanted ads that were respectful of women. That really became a case by case basis. If an ad didn't seem to us to be that way, we would reject it, and we did. There was one ad...

KB: Can you talk about that?

MH: Yes. I can remember Mary Jane Rackner, a perennial candidate for office, who changed her last name to Reagan, in honor of our President--so you know something about her. She was a strange woman. She was running for something, and came in with a thousand dollars cash in her hand to give us to run her ad, and we felt it was discriminatory against women and against gays, both--which she was, that's how she talked. She wanted to pay us to run that ad, and we were desperately poor at that time. We said, "No, we can't take your money." She took her thousand dollars--which was a lot to us in those days--and went away.

There was a gun ad one time that we didn't take. Mostly that hasn't been the issue for us that it has been for Ms. The pressures that we faced weren't the pressures that Ms. faced, because they were dealing with national advertisers. We were hardly ever dealing with national advertisers, and people who would even listen to us already had a sort of self-selected quality about them, because they knew who we were. "De Ja Vu" [Minneapolis strip bar] was not going to come to us for an ad. [laughter] So our principles didn't get tested a lot. But we did think about it, and we would have been true to them if we had the chance, I think.

KB: Talk about the bad times a little bit then--1988--so this was about two to three years after you first started.

MH: Right. We lost \$50 thousand the first year--which was right on what we projected, so that wasn't so bad. But then we lost more, not more than that, but much more than we projected the next couple of years. The growth of income just wasn't there. We were

pretty much running out of the capital that we'd amassed--we had about \$100 thousand I think, to start with.

We cut back so that all staff people were earning \$300 a month--it was hardly anything. There were times when we were way behind on our printing bill, and we had tried to keep up with all of those things. It was very clear this couldn't go on too much longer. We didn't feel in a good enough place to try to get more capital, because that would be a real leap of faith.

KB: Were your existing stockholders supportive of you during that time?

MH: They did. There was no bad stuff coming from them.

KB: What did you do about all this?

MH: Well, we had this advisory board--which included people like Carol Pine [Minneapolis journalist and entrepreneur] and Judy Corrao [Minneapolis public affairs programming], and some others. We asked them to think through this with us. The biggest thing that we did was to make the decision to go public about it. That was a big decision--whether to say in the paper, "We're in trouble; we need your help." The downside of that, we feared, was it would scare away whatever few advertisers we had, and would be seen as a sign of weakness, and of failure, all those things. But we felt it would be really awful to just go out of business without having told people what was happening, and giving them a chance to say whether that should happen or not.

So we did put a plea in the paper, and said, "We need help. If you can, give subscriptions..." We set up a real volunteer process at that time, which we hadn't ever done. Judy Corrao coordinated it from our advisory board--brought in people--and it was very organized and professional. We asked them what they needed, and we told them what we needed, and tried to make a fit. For about a year, we had people really actively working with us on a volunteer basis.

KB: Doing basic business?

MH: Doing important things, yes. One woman set up a subscription database for us, because we'd done it just on cards at that point. We were asking people to subscribe more, and she kept that updated. She came in every week, or every two weeks. Others worked on... I can't even remember... Some were answering the phone and doing 'keep the business going' kinds of stuff, and doing some accounting kinds of things.

At that same time Mary Jo [Dickinson; business manager] and Michelle [Holzwarth; ad sales coordinator] both came on, and started working. Both of them were working for a job, and we were offering them \$300 a week in this non-air-conditioned office. It was one of the hottest summers I remember. [laughter] That was really bad....in this kind of

scroungy place. We were just barely getting by. For dividers between desks, we'd stack up old bundles of newspaper. Everything was scrounged.

It wasn't that the plea brought in tons of money, but it did change the dynamic somehow. It did bring in some, but it was more the kind of statement it made. I can't even exactly describe what it was, but it was a turning point, I think.

KB: How did your advertisers react?

MH: Nobody pulled out, or left us--at least that I recall. It certainly wasn't a big move, if anybody did.

KB: Did your advertising and marketing efforts turn around at this point then?

MH: I wouldn't say they turned around, but they started to go in a different direction. It wasn't like after that suddenly we had money coming in. We struggled still for years and years. We went to our printer and worked out a deal with them. This was Shakopee Valley Printing, and they were very supportive. They had carried us for a while and were willing to work with us, and that made a big difference. Our advisors helped us think about how to do that kind of thing--how to stretch stuff. But we'd be watching the mail and trying to decide which bills could we put off the longest. It was painful from the business side of it, for quite a while. But we didn't go under, and that was the key.

KB: Your advisory board was playing a fairly active role at this point as well. Can you talk a little about that?

MH: Carol especially, but all of them, were trying to tell us we had to think more about profit--that profit was a good thing. This was even a problem, especially for me more than anybody else, I would guess. Not that we didn't want to have money, but we didn't want to act like a business, and what we saw as the negative things of business to get it.

KB: Going back to those things you talked about earlier, the hierarchical structure...

MH: Yes, right, and the impersonality, and the decisions made based on bottom line rather than people, and conformity, and centralization...all those things.

So we had an all day planning session at Carol Pine's house. Wonderful spot to do it. I can't even remember what we did, but Carol volunteered to lead us through a process to identify some goals and some strategies. It was a very effective process. It forced us to really set down, "Here's what we want to make happen." We had never, despite our year of planning and lots of talking and writing, really come up with a clear statement of mission and goals as a business.

The fun thing was that she kept--in her very gentle but firm way--asking us and pushing us to think about how we were going to make a real profit and be a real business. When we finally did make a real profit, Kathy and I took her out to lunch. She was so happy to know that we were using the profit word, because that was kind of a naughty word in the early days.

KB: The year that you made the first profit was what year roughly?

MH: Well, a significant profit was just two years ago, 1997. We made little bits of profit before then, but...

KB: Well, I'd like to still go back now again to some of the early years, and perhaps stay within the framework of the first five to six years of the organization. What were some of the important business decisions that you made during that time period that had a significant impact? ...Editorial content, processes, other businesses?

MH: One was that decision we made when we were really on the edge--which we just talked about--the thing of going public as a business and saying we need help. One was to begin to do more production in-house. One was to bring in a designer to work with the paper, that was Fran Cottle. The move, which we did after five years, from the Security Building here to here--to a storefront, visible place was an important decision. We weren't sure we could afford to do it; we were a little nervous about being so visible, actually from a safety point of view. Yet that was very important to do.

KB: At this point, you didn't have the bookstore, or did you?

MH: We were doing book groups in the space. We had added a little room finally in the Security Building. So we had the 'bigish' room, which was the main office, and then a smaller room. Glenda was doing book groups in there, and had some books--a little bit of a library started and some books for sale, just purely out of the book groups I think. So we were selling a few books. When we moved here, the idea was to expand and make a retail space and expanded space for the library. I can't think what else. I'm sure there are other important business things.

One important one--which was a negative decision but we were having such a hard time selling ads--we increased the commission that we paid to [salespeople]. We did at some point get into paying commissions, and I can't remember exactly when and how that happened. Then we increased it quite a bit, so that we were paying twenty- percent commission--which was way beyond the norm. We felt we needed to be doing that to give people incentive and reward, because it was so hard to sell ads for the paper.

This was an important step at that time when we were really struggling. Mary Ziegenhagen [advisor], who was a publisher--she started the Burnsville Current, which became a chain of papers in the southern suburbs--had been very active in women's

things. She had gone off to be the publisher of a big chain in the East, and then had come back. She volunteered to do an analysis of our business for us. She did; she came and spent several days with us--interviewing people, talking to us, and then wrote up a report. It was very helpful.

One of the things she said at that point was, "You can't be paying your ad reps this kind of percentage. No business can survive doing that." Although we didn't immediately shift, that became a key impetus to rethinking how we did that, and to be more realistic about that. Eventually...in fact at this point, over some painful steps we moved back from where we were. That's a key part of why we're more successful. The ad reps are doing great, so it hasn't turned out to be a problem.

KB: Let's talk a little bit about the other businesses. We've touched on them a little bit. You mentioned book groups. Can you talk about some of impetus for the book groups, and how significant they were?

MH: Yes. The real impetus came from Glenda, so when she talks... There are many things that had to do with what was happening in her life at the time, and where I was in my life at the time. Also, we were committed to women's words, and it was a logical step.

Book groups and selling books were an important cashflow piece, especially in those hard years, and the early years of the book groups. We marketed them, if you will, as a way to support the "Women's Press". Because they were consistent--not huge amounts of money--but consistent money coming in. The book groups paid every quarter or every three to four months. Glenda at one point--this would be in the early 1990s--was really putting in a lot of time at that, and had twenty-five book groups going at once. The store was busy, and she was spending more time there than she does now for sure. A piece of it was to keep the business strong and going--the overall business, the company, and the paper. It also had the advantage of giving more people a sense of connection to us and what we were doing, and to the paper as well as the book stuff. It created a sense of community, which was important to us--important to our mission. Although I don't think we articulated it as part of our mission yet, but it's clear that it was something we wanted to be doing.

KB: Talk about your customer base at the end of five years. How big do you think it was at that point? Did you keep records at that point?

MH: Not very well.

KB: Five or six years?

MH: I have no idea, to tell you the truth. From advertisers, or anything?

KB: When I was thinking of customers, I was thinking of readers actually.

MH: Oh, readers. We did a regular--and we still will be doing this year--a reader survey. It is minimally scientific, because it's one we ask people to turn in their replies to a questionnaire. We started doing that pretty early, I think. It didn't give us numbers but it gave us descriptors of the readers of the "Women's Press"--which have been pretty consistent over time. I don't know how many we were publishing then, probably still around thirty thousand to thirty-five thousand and now we publish maybe forty thousand. It hasn't been a goal to increase circulation, as much as to have really effective circulation, and make sure it's getting to the people who are going to be loyal readers. That's where our emphasis has gone on that.

KB: Are there any other new businesses that were started in that period of time, in addition to the books, the book groups?

MH: The "Directory" became an effort of its own around that time. I'm not sure of the years.

KB: First of all, why don't you describe the "Directory"?

MH: Yes, the "Directory" is an annual listing of resources for women. It started as a listing of women's organizations and resources, and then we added women in business, because we wanted to be able to sell ads and because we wanted to encourage other women to use women in business, as we did. It's grown from the beginning of four pages within the paper, to its current maybe 120 pages--a stand-alone piece.

It was very much an evolving thing, which is clearly one of our styles as a business. Instead of saying, "We've got this idea. We're going to make it a stand-alone with a hard cover and perfect binding." ... That kind of thing. Each year we'd work a little bit closer to that and say, "We can afford to do this next step." It's been fun to watch. It was always frustrating I think to sales people, because they'd like to have had a final product--the way we wanted it to be. It's always a philosophical question.

KB: Now has that been a revenue producer?

MH: Yes. It has.

KB: I'm interested in getting a sense of your relationships within the community. So, for example, can you talk about your relationships with other feminist groups, either on a national or on a local basis? Or women's groups? Why don't we make it either?

MH: When we started, none of us involved really had very active relationships with ongoing organizations. That was seen by them--the people outside--as a weakness. The

Minnesota Women's Consortium [a coalition of organizations interested in women's rights; formed in 1980] was kind of in its heyday at that point. There was always kind of a strained--at least I felt it that way--relationship between us and the Consortium, because they had a newsletter, which they still do. They weren't trying to be a newspaper or anything, but it was a weekly newsletter of information that women would want to know. We came in without having sort of 'paid our dues', if you will, in being an organization--kind of stepping on some toes, I think it was seen as. We tried not to, but we also wanted to not be tied to organizations.

We felt we needed to be more of an independent reporter and observer of what organized women were doing. At the same time, we wanted to really promote and support what women were doing in organizations. For quite a while, we gave the Consortium a column in the paper. They would write about whatever seemed important from their perspective of all these organizations working together. We covered Women's Political Caucus [National Women's Political Caucus; formed in 1971 to support women's issues], and NARAL [National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League]--all the active women's organizations--Women against Pornography, and so on. We tried to really cover them well.

KB: Was anyone else providing that coverage?

MH: No, except rarely. If they did something that really made a huge impact, the daily papers had to pay attention, but that was pretty unusual. I think it was in 1990 or so when we ran the series in the paper about women's organizations. We tried to look at their history and what was happening to them in the Twin Cities. That led to the book, The Need to Thrive [Judy Remington, published by Minnesota Women's Press, Inc.] which I think came out in 1991. So the series was probably in 1989. So we tried to keep our distance in a way and our independence, while also being supportive and promotional in a way, by deciding to be actively covering them. We felt that was an important part of the news.

KB: Can you talk a little bit about your relationships with other news organizations, at the time, if any?

MH: When we started, there was an organization called National Association of Regional Women's Publications--the unfortunate acronym of NARWP. [laughter] I went to a convention or a gathering out in Connecticut about our second year. There were maybe thirty publications represented there from around the country. These were almost all organized as businesses. They were all monthly, and they were almost all lifestyle organizations--none of them would have called themselves feminist I think. It was a very uncomfortable time, for me. [laughter] They were trying to come up with a theme that everybody would write about at a certain time, to try to get a national presence, and also to try to attract national advertisers who would buy into all the papers. It got to be really

hot and heavy about whether we could write about the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment], which was still pretty far out. So there was no replacement for that.

We've been members of the Minnesota Newspaper Association almost from the beginning, which has been just for a professional statement. It tends not to be so useful for us as far as small town connections, but it does give us access to legal services and libel insurance, which is really important. We belong to the National Newspaper Association as well. I belonged and was active for a while in a Journalism and Women's Symposium, which is a national organization known as JAWS. It meets once a year--mostly women in daily journalism. That was interesting. We didn't really fit there as well, but it was a more congenial group--some high-powered daily reporters from around the country.

We've done this media survey since 1987, where we count the women's representation in the dailies - the Pioneer Press [St. Paul daily newspaper] and the "Strib" [StarTribune; Minneapolis daily newspaper].

KB: Talk about that some.

MH: It's certainly made us visible at the dailies. People there in the news rooms tell us that it goes up on the bulletin board, when it [unclear]. Now I think we're coming to a point where we need to go at that somewhat differently, or make some changes, because we've made a point and not much has changed over the time.

KB: What have you found?

MH: We've found that women as names in the news are a small proportion of the names--even as women have become more active in all kinds of arenas. When we did it the first time I think women's names over all were eighteen percent of the names in the news, with the 'sports' and 'business' being the worst and the 'metro' and 'express' or 'variety' pages being the best. This last time it was up to somewhere in the twenty percent--high twenties maybe--still over ten to twelve years, that's not bad. 'Business' is still terrible and 'sports' is still terrible. In 'variety' there are more women there. This coincides with national studies, which find the same thing; we're pretty good compared with a lot of areas around the country.

KB: What I'd like to do now is still stay within this time period, and think about the most important values of Minnesota Women's Press during that early period. What were the most important values, and how did they pan out in the businesses that you had?

MH: The value of telling women's stories--guiding how a paper looks and what decisions we make content-wise. It influenced the books part of things, so it wasn't telling as much as becoming acquainted with women's' stories...reading women's stories.

The value of survival was certainly key in the sense of responsibility in the women's community. We had the sense of setting things up to show that a women's newspaper could really carry this through.

The basic values of our mission, which were promoting women's words, trying to create community, guided us in things like the book groups and even how we set-up the directory, and our relationships with people who came to us.

Our values, which we clarified at the retreat at Carol Pine's [included] wanting to be a business that was successful economically, so that we could continue paying people well and [providing] returns to shareholders--so we could be long lived and not on the edge all the time. It was just a beginning. We started putting words to it, and didn't know how to translate it very well into action--to incorporate the latitudes of the culture and thinking.

Those were all variations on women's stories, and the value of telling these differently, which was the basis of our entire content and recognition of the contributions of everybody to whatever we ended up doing.

KB: I don't know if you can analyze this because it's been such an integral part of the business, but do you think these values were an advantage or disadvantage in establishing and maintaining your business? Do you think you suffered more or gained more as a result of having such a value-based business.

MH: I think we gained more, I don't think we would have survived if we didn't have that. I think that's what happened, for instance, to that women's newspaper in the 1970's in the Twin Cities [Twin Cities Woman]. Accomplishing a mission was so important to us, that at times it was a detriment in terms of our financial survival. We were slow to understand our early development, because it seemed that you either had to do one or the other--either be socially responsible or successful financially. We knew the mission had to be first, but it took quite a while to understand that you could do both. So, in that way, we struggled with that. But if we hadn't had that mission focus, given who we were... If we had our primary emphasis on financial strength as a business, I don't think we would have made it. You've got to be passionate about your business to keep it going and to engage people--unless you're off in some service or product people can't do without. Something like us...we are what brings people in.

KB: Are there any other areas we should deal with that you think are important when you think about the inception and origination of your organization in the beginning years? Is there anything that comes up that you think you need the opportunity to bring up?

MH: No.

KB: Thank you.