

Interview with Kathy Magnuson

Interviewed by Kathryn Brewer

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KB: Well, Kathy, I'd like to start at the beginning, since you were involved with the beginning of the Minnesota Women's Press. Can you talk about how you first became aware of the idea of the Minnesota Women's Press?

KM: I was working at a community newspaper with Mollie Hoben [Co-founder, co-publisher], who was the editor. I was at that point, an ad sales rep, I believe. She mentioned that she might have a bigger project in mind. [laughter] I really didn't know what she was thinking of, but she was working on something. So that was my first hint. Mollie and I did not overlap more than a year or so when she left that position to spend a year researching this new venture she wanted to start up. About that point, I got involved as well. So that was my introduction to Minnesota Women's Press.

KB: Okay, great. Can you describe, very briefly, what your roles have been here at the Minnesota Women's Press, by way of outlining them? We'll talk more about them later.

KM: Initially we had what we called the planning group, which was a group of women who got together and talked about the idea for starters. ...To say, what if? What would it be like? Would this be a good idea? What would it have? What would it look like? Who would read it? Would anybody care? Would anybody buy ads? ...To start shaping some thinking about it.

I was a part of that planning group, and then from there became a paid staff member. I don't know if we called it anything, but it probably would have been advertising coordinator, or advertising manager--something like that--if it had a name. My piece was to research everything related to advertising. Was there a market for ads? Who would make up that market? What kind of pricing would the market bear? What kind of pricing would also reflect our values? Who would sell the ads? Where would we recruit those people from? What would the staffing be? How would we assign accounts? What would our ad sizes or our ad policies be? ...Things related to advertising.

When we started publishing, I continued in that role. Obviously we had some sales reps by then, and I worked with those people as well as selling accounts myself. Then I had a period of time when I was not with the "Women's Press" anymore, and on returning here, I came into that role again. I think at that point we probably called it something like

Sales and Marketing Director, so it had a bit of that marketing component--although that was not a big piece of what we did. In practical terms, it was the advertising sales again.

Then it evolved to include some business components. Someone who had been our business manager, Mary Jo Dickinson [business manager from 1989-1991], left, and I sort of evolved to pick up some of the activities she had. Then as Mollie left being editor, and was giving up more of the day to day operations, I picked up some of the business related things Mollie had been doing. Somewhere along the way we changed the name to General Manager, but we've never been really big into titles. We just sort of evolved into what needed to be done, and we did it. So that brings us pretty much current, I think.

KB: Good. Well, let's start, back to your first involvement then, and we'll start talking about the planning groups that you met with. Can you talk a little bit about those? How many people were involved in that, and what those meetings were like?

KM: Okay, well, I'm hoping you'll talk to some people who have a better memory than I do [laughter]...

KB: Most people make that caveat [laughter].

KM: Hopefully we can piece this together. A couple times we met in someone's posh condominium in downtown Minneapolis. A couple times I think we met at Mollie's house. There were a variety of places--of course we had no office space--there was no official gathering spot. We might have met at Glenda's [Martin; Co-founder, co-publisher] home--I'm just not sure.

KB: Was it a pretty constant group of people?

KM: Yes, my recollection is it was maybe five or six--or eight people--it was pretty consistent. These were women who had enough commitment to this concept to meet long-term as a somewhat cohesive group, and put ideas together. It just covered the whole gamut.

I remember looking at..... We worked with a designer to say, what would the front page look like? What would even the flag at the top of the page look like? I remember looking at the first design of that, and we chose [the color] Rubine Red. It was actually a hot, hot pink--to be the feminine piece, but the not too soft and cutesy pale pink--sort of a strong pink. That was a piece.

I remember talking about what would the name be. In fact, we went to a couple community festivals--one was in St. Anthony Park, and I think the other one probably was in the Powderhorn Community in Minneapolis.

We had a survey; one of the planning group women did market research, so she helped us write the survey. [We wanted] to get ideas; would people have an interest in this? Would they have suggestions? But one of the ones [questions] was about the name. What would we call it? There were a lot of cute things about 51%, or kind of obscure things. In the end we really said, "You know, we just have to say what it is. Don't do the cute thing. Just say it, and name it. This is the Minnesota Women's Press." We always knew that would be the corporate name, but we kind of worked to find something else for the newspaper, and there didn't need to be anything else. So I remember that piece.

I remember Mollie doing a ton of work on trying to put together a business plan, when you are so grabbing things just out of the air and making a best guess--which really was a guess. I remember her doing a big struggle about whether we should be weekly or be every other week, and trying to do projections out there. What would that mean, just from a financial standpoint? How frequently should we be doing this? On the weekly part, it just looked like we were going to lose way too much money, way too fast. So that went by the wayside, but certainly it was a consideration for quite a while.

KB: In general, the flavor of the groups was positive, optimistic?

KM: Well, yes, it was a self-selected group. They were interested in seeing this happen; they made a commitment and stuck with it. So there was plenty of questioning--about would this thing every really fly--but it was no question of interest or enthusiasm or commitment, or wanting to make it fly.

There were plenty of folks at these fairs, or just friends of ours, or when we got to the point of potential investors, we did not lack for people having plenty of advice. "This will never work. This makes no sense at all. I cannot believe you're thinking of doing this. This is so dumb. Don't ever put the name 'Women' in the name; it will be doomed for sure. It will just be way too threatening. This is sort of a waste of time and money, because it's not going to work." But in the planning group itself, there was a lot of excitement about the possibility this thing could really fly.

KB: What was it about your particular point in life that made this an attractive opportunity for you, if it was? I'm assuming it was.

KM: Oh yes. It was great. It was great. Different than almost everybody in the group, the hook that brought me in was the business piece--it wasn't the feminist piece. The challenge and the fun to me was shaping and developing the business from zero, to say, "Can we really make this thing go?" And the fascination of trying to make that happen was really the hook that brought me in. Along the way, the feminist piece got to be important as well. But for almost everybody else in the group, that was sort of reversed, or some people never really cared about the business piece.

KB: Did you think of yourself as a feminist in those days?

KM: I'm not sure if I would have claimed that word or not. Certainly not in any radical sense, no. I wouldn't have hesitated at any kind of equality issues, but beyond that, I think that would have been pushing it for me. So I often times sort of felt like a voice crying in the wilderness, sort of a lone dissenting opinion... "But wait a minute! What about this?"

KB: Can you remember any of those issues that you had to shout out, "Wait a minute! What about this?"

KM: I'm not having specific ones, but I know they were out there. Molly was a piece of... She could certainly do that stuff. She crafted that business plan and it was great. She could work the numbers. She understood them; she knew what they had to be, and she could do it, but it was never her passion. She knew the reality that we had to be bringing in dollars or this thing was not going to last--so that was her motivation in that area. But her passion was always the editorial piece. She could do the business piece, and she knew it was important, but there was not a ton of excitement in that for her.

Another person--I think she was in the planning group stage--was Diane Emerson, the one who is in New Zealand now. She was the one who had done market research, so could help us with that piece. But she was at times able and interested in pushing that business piece as well. She was coming from a very corporate setting, and certainly had exposure to that kind of thinking. She realized the importance that we needed to be on that....

KB: So do think that there was then an appropriate emphasis on business initially?

KM: Well that depends on you define appropriate [laughter].

KB: In your own opinion, or according to your own definition.

KM: In an ideal...no. In an ideal world, we would have had a ton more resources to work with, and some of that could have been sent in a business direction. We used the resources--the time, and money, and energy--we had, and most of that went into the editorial product. If we didn't have a good product--it's a chicken and egg--the business piece would not have mattered a bit. But we really flew by the seat of our pants. We really did.

Before the first issue came out, we had people out selling ads. We called it something like, "You could be a charter advertiser". If they signed an ad contract for a certain number of ads in that first year, they got a huge discount. That was OK. That was part of our plan that we had to get people--some dollars in the door. But even more than that, you had to get some ads in that paper early on to use it as a selling piece to go out and

recruit more advertisers. If you're trying to sell from a piece and there are two ads in it, it's not real viable.

We had mostly recruited... I can't even remember what these people were paid in the beginning; if they were, it was pretty marginal stuff. We recruited people with not a whole lot of skills or experience, but were excited about the product. They did not hesitate to walk down Grand Avenue, and stop in every store and talk to folks, or get on the phone and call people up who had obviously never heard of this thing--because it didn't exist yet. But it worked. Could we have done better? Yes. Hindsight is always great. If we had put more of our time and energy into ad sales, and subscription and distribution, would it have gone better? Sure. Would the editorial piece have suffered? Well, if we had to take resources from that, probably. So we went with what we had.

KB: Was there anything particular from that time--the environment is really what I'm talking about--that made the formation of Minnesota Women's Press possible? Was it a good environment or a bad environment to start the paper, to start the business?

KM: I think it was good. I think it was just the fact of putting out something that had "women" in the name was pretty radical to a lot of people. It made people take a second take, or got attention that way, that I don't think necessarily would be true today. It was certainly something new and different, and one of a kind. People would choose to like it or not. Just by the name, that was strong enough then to get attention.

I'm probably jumping ahead chronologically, but I'm remembering a particular situation right now. I think it was the days when we had a staff meeting, and everybody came and everybody decided everything. We had already started publishing, because it was upstairs next door [Minnesota Women's Press, Inc first location in the Security Building] in that meeting room. We were hiring an ad rep--whether it was replacing somebody or adding somebody I don't remember. We had this resume' in hand from somebody from the Seward [Minneapolis] neighborhood, that was hand-written in pencil, and a cover letter in the same condition. It was somebody who had some, but a very small amount of experience. She was so passionate to come and work here.

I brought this to the table, and was thinking, "I don't think this person has the skills that we really need right now." And Glenda's take on it was exactly the opposite. [laughter] Can you imagine that? She read this very strongly written letter of why this woman really wanted to be a part of us, and she said, "Well, of course we have to hire her! Of course! She needs to be here." I went home and I don't think I slept at all that night. I just... "What are we going to do?" It was really kind of a feminist business dilemma. Here is a young woman who is so excited to come here--be involved. She wants to make a difference, but she doesn't really have any of the skills that we need in a job that is critical to our survival right now. What are we going to do here?

I came back the next day and told Glenda, "I don't think I can hire her. She needs us, and maybe we need her. I think we need somebody else more than we need her. If we are going to survive and stay around here, we cannot be a social service agency. We are a business. We have to make decisions as a business, as well as wanting to do good and be nice." We didn't hire her.

KB: So how were decisions like that resolved? That sounds like a real interesting debate, and I'm sure you had many. How did these things get resolved?

KM: Early on, it was very conversational; it was very time-consuming. It really was a consensus kind of thing. I don't think Glenda or Mollie--but Glenda felt real strongly about this particular one--ever would have said, "You will do this!" It wasn't that. It was, "I really think we must do this." Of course, anyone who differed with that, then that would become a conversation. Especially early on, they were not boxed in. "Okay, you're in charge of this. You will do this. Only you will do this", and, "It's yours."

If there was something about distribution, Denise was responsible. We'd probably all talk about it and see what we could figure out. If it was hiring a sales rep, several people would have a voice in this.

KB: So was there an ultimate decision-maker, if you ended up in an irresolvable conflict?

KM: Yes, it really would have been Mollie and/or Glenda. There was a time--and this is a little later chronologically, too--a time when we had to let somebody go--it was a personality conflict. Glenda still talks about how that was one of the most difficult things she ever had to do. It was somebody who she could work with--she was not necessarily campaigning to let this person go. Other people on the staff who had to work intimately with her, sort of in rebellion, said, "This is not working. She has to go, or we have to go, or something has to be different." In that case, I think probably Glenda and Mollie, or somehow Glenda was the person who had to tell her she needed to go. That was a hard thing.

KB: Tell me your initial vision of the Minnesota Women's Press--not that group vision, but what was your initial vision?

KM: My initial vision was survival. That this would be a viable business that would be going. I remember we had a little open office gathering the night the first issue came out. There was such ecstasy in this room--in having this newspaper in our hands, to say, "Oh my gosh, it really happened!" So one was just to actually publish an issue and do this.

We did know there needed to be more. So my initial vision was really business related--that this thing could, A) get up and running, and B) keep going. So it was very different than other people's vision of what it would be.

KB: In 1984 then, Minnesota Women's Press published its first prototype. Now did you have ads in that prototype?

KM: We did not. What we had was--not even mock ads, but boxes shaped out that said, "This ad in our paper would cost so much, and the reason you want this...."--probably some promo kind of language in there. So we had some blocked out sizes to give prospective advertisers an idea of an ad would look like in here, but they were not 'bona fide' ads.

KB: What was the purpose of that prototype?

KM: Two purposes, I think. One was to recruit investors, and the other was to recruit advertisers, so we could have something concrete--something more than just an idea in somebody's head--something on a piece of paper to show, and to give a sample of what our editorial content might be like. ...To give those prospective advertisers and investors [something] a little more concrete to respond to. "Oh, I see. Oh, it will be like this. It will look this. I might see these kinds of things. It will have this many columns on the page. Oh, it's real--it's here in my hands."

KB: Tell me what it was like to take that newspaper in hand and go out and try to sell an ad.

KM: It was tough [laughter].

KB: Give me a couple of stories or examples about that process, if you recall.

KM: As I recall, we had a number of these volunteer or semi-volunteer people out in the community. They started out by going to businesses they frequented, or [where] they knew somebody in decision-making who was in that business. We sold it as a smart business decision, a smart advertising decision. This was going to be a 'going' thing, and if they could be in here from the beginning--what a coup to be smart enough to do that. [laughter]

I think at least some of those first advertisers who bought in, did it with charity in mind. They were enamored with this idea; they wanted to see it go. So they signed up for a contract. They weren't so sure it was going to really fly, or it would last, but it sounded like a neat idea. In fact, one of our still [current] advertisers, Joan McDermott, who is a financial planner, came in on that basis. She was one of our first advertisers, and she talks pretty openly about it. She didn't necessarily think this thing would go. The idea of buying ads was to support the idea--it was not that she was going to get any valid advertising returns from this.

Like investors: plenty of them were not convinced this thing was going to fly either, but they were willing to put their money where their mouth was. She came in, and it's turned out to be a fabulous advertising vehicle for her. The last two years that we've done feminist finds, she was voted a feminist find as a great place for women to go for financial planning. Both the directory and the newspaper have been a great source of clients for her, but she didn't come in thinking that would really be the case.

KB: Were many of your early advertisers, then, women-owned businesses?

KM: A lot were, yes--women-owned businesses. Now we can do a reader survey, and we have some history. We get letters to the editor. We've done focus groups. We have some sense of even demographics--"Who is that reader out there?" Well, we didn't have that then, so it was really kind of a stab in the dark. Who's going to be picking this up? Who's going to be reading it?

KB: How did you describe that reader?

KM: You know, I think we should go look at that prototype issue because I think one of the articles in there was something about, "Who is she?" I don't remember who wrote it, but as I'm recalling it was really pretty well done for not having anything to go on.

KM: That is indeed the message you conveyed, then, when you were trying to sell ads?

KB: Yes, and as I recall, we were not too far off. We suggested it was going to be a woman who was kind of an activist type: interested in what is going on out there in the world, a decision-maker, an influencer, probably someone fairly well-educated--who is making decisions in her life. That's certainly how we would describe our readership today, so I don't think we were very far off.

Another thing we did in selling ads was to identify what sort of category, or kind of business, might be interested. There was a ton of cold-calling: of looking in the Yellow Pages, and finding names of businesses and phone numbers, and calling them up. Of course, none of us had computers, so all of this was on pieces of papers stuck in file folders--we had boxes full of file folders with pieces of paper in them. That was kind of how we went at it. [laughter]

KM: During this time of advertising research, did you draw the conclusion, then, that there was going to be a way that ads could be sold? I know you had some ads in the first edition that ultimately came out. Had you developed some level of confidence that there was actually a market out there?

KB: Yes, we did. True to Mollie's style especially, if in writing the business plan we came to the conclusion that there's no way people would ever buy ads in this thing, I don't think we would have proceeded. We had a confidence level that people should want to

buy ads in this. So before we started selling ads, there was a certain level of confidence that people will buy it, and we will be able to sell it. We knew it might not be easy-going. There's always this unknown piece, but I don't think I ever believed that it wasn't going to work.

KB: Now, I think you said this earlier, but did you sell the feminist piece or the business piece when you were selling the ads? Maybe you didn't answer this question.

KM: I don't think so. I don't recall that we even used the "F" [feminist] word very much, because the "W" word for "Women" was real 'out there' [laughter]. We used it internally. I don't think we used the "F" word when we were out talking to advertisers. The product is this editorial piece that is about women, and has a feminist component--whether we used that word or not. We sold it as a smart business decision--that this was an audience that they needed to have their ad in front of.

We really didn't sell it as, "It's an editorial piece, and it's going to be important for women, and we really need your advertising support if this thing is ever going to happen." That was not our approach. We wanted them to make a sound business decision, and that is, buy ads in this paper.

KB: You talked earlier about working with sales representatives, and you described many of them as not having a tremendous amount of experience. How did all of that kind of shake out? Did those people turn into sales reps over time? Maybe the best way to do this would be to talk about what it was like about a year later--a year after you started publishing, what was that process like?

KM: I think, as you might expect, some of them stuck and some of the ad sales reps fell by the wayside. Partly in the beginning, it was so.... This was not like a job, a full-time career for somebody--partly because of the nature of the organization and where we were, and partly the financial piece. So it was viewed really as more of a volunteer kind of thing.

KB: Were they paid?

KM: I can't remember if they were in the beginning or not. I think they were. They were. But we had several people doing it real part-time. So it was not a significant piece of income for any one of those people. Some of them were not in a position where they wanted to come in and sell ads full-time.

One woman who was an acquaintance of mine--I think her husband graduated from high school with my husband, or one of those things--but I knew she did graphic design. She had a couple little kids at home. So I mentioned this to her and she was kind of interested. "Well, Joyce, maybe you could sell some ads for us." [laughter] So on a part-

time basis, when this stay-at-home mom was with her kids, she kind of went around her neighborhood to see what kinds of businesses she could line up.

There was another woman who had been a community organizer in our neighborhood. She left that and wasn't really sure where she wanted to go. We knew she had wonderful people skills, and was great at organizing and planning. So we kind of hooked her into this, and she did some ad sales for a while. This was not the kind of thing she was looking at for a long-term full-time position, but at that point in time--it was kind of fun for her. She had never done sales; she had done a lot of community contact things.

Another person actually worked at the same community newspaper Mollie and I did. There were always two sales reps there--she was one of those sales reps--and came to sell for the "Women's Press" as well. She is one of our shareholders also. She did stay more long-term after we were publishing, and she was there for quite a while and was really good at what she did. It was a number of people--not quite a revolving door, but a fair amount of that going.

There was another woman, Becky Coleman, who I think is on your interview list. She was involved in the community newspapers--maybe that was how Mollie and I knew her. I don't remember how we first connected with her. She worked with us for quite a while, while she did this other community newspaper and had a couple kids. She was with us for quite a while. So they sort of came in the door by different methods, stayed different amounts of time, came with differing skill levels. But we worked with it.

KB: Talk about pricing your product. Talk about pricing your ads over that same time period, when you first initiated the cold calling, and what it might have been like a year later, relative to the rest of the market.

KM: Well that was a piece of that business plan. The original pricing was, "What are some other publications out there charging?" This was not an apples and apples situation--the reason we were doing this is, it doesn't already exist. You couldn't say, "Oh this other paper is like we will be...", because there wasn't one. We looked at a number of community newspapers, especially the larger ones, because at least they had a similar circulation size to what we would have. Different audience, different kind of loyalty, different kind of situation, but the circulation numbers matched.

We also looked at the two daily papers because they are metro-wide--which is what our distribution area was going to be. Certainly their numbers were different. We looked at--which is typical in the industry--cost per thousand. You can approach an apples and apples situation if you say, "What does this publication charge for a full-page ad per thousand readership?"

That's another piece. There's a publication number, like how many pages you print. A lot of papers also project a readership, like five people read every copy of our paper, or

two people. We didn't have that. So I don't recall if we just didn't use it, or if we guessed, and said, "Well, maybe two people will read every copy." But there's a published number of papers, and there's a readership number.

Frankly a lot of advertisers are pretty naive about that. They just kind of latch on to a number, and don't discern, "Is this readership? Is this printed copy?" A surprising number of advertisers didn't then, and still don't, think in terms of cost per thousand. They say, "Well I can buy an ad in my community newspaper for half that much. Why should I pay this much?"

It was more so then, but still is now, a fair amount of educating. I don't say that in a condescending way, but trying to teach the advertiser how to make smart decisions, and what exactly it is we're offering them. The difference between circulation and cost per thousand, and the difference between just plain old numbers--just a generic 10,000 or 40,000 or 80,000 readers versus a niche market, and a very focused kind of audience. What we felt and tried to sell has a different value than 80,000 in the StarTribune [Minneapolis daily newspaper].

I think one of early advertisers was Bravo Bras--they make custom bras. She doesn't need the kind of audience the Star Tribune has. She might use that geographic area because people come from all over the metro area. She doesn't need a lot of guys to market her product. So we had to explain that when you buy an ad in a community newspaper, or in the Star Tribune, or on the radio, or almost any other place--if we're talking to the right prospect--half of their message is wasted because they're talking to guys. Guys are probably not going to buy her product--it's not her target market.

So what we needed to do was be very smart about who we were talking to. If we were talking to the right people, we could have high confidence that this was a smart decision for them to make. They would come in, and hopefully--theoretically--stay as a satisfied customer because we had done some good matchmaking up front.

I think a piece that's always been very different for us--maybe it's a feminist business piece--is we saw selling as an education experience. We were teaching this prospect about what we had to offer, and what we could do for their business. If we did a good job informing them, they would probably say yes.

There are always factors you can't control, but I'm not hung up by the sales piece. To a lot of people, sales are sleaze--it's used cars, it's guys in plaid sportcoats [laughter]. I love sales; I think it's a great thing, so I don't have that hang up. I think that has been a piece that's differentiated us from car salespeople or selling lots of other things is we are not out to manipulate anybody. If we are doing a good job, then we are offering the people we're talking to a great service.

KB: This is a fascinating topic. Continue with that talk about feminist business and start thinking about the types of people that you were talking to. Were there any links between the whole notion of, "This is a feminist business", and the types of advertisers that you were going after--advertising content--in that early period of time? Remember, we're talking about the very first issue roughly through another year of publishing.

KM: Certainly there was a, "Oh, my gosh, who could we call that would say yes?" It is smart thinking if you're selling; you want to talk to the people who are going to be most likely to say yes. You don't want to make this difficult for yourself. A piece of that certainly was, "Who would like what we are?" Because we called--more so in the early days, still a little bit now, but not nearly what it was--we called businesses that should have been a good prospect for us. This was way too scary. This was just too threatening, and they weren't sure they were ready for their business to be seen in a publication that had 'women' in the name, because this could maybe have really negative consequences.

So there was a piece of educating what we were and what we were not, and you kind of walked the line of... It's sort of like when you go to the bank for a loan. You have to look like you don't need it. You flip that, and you sell it either way. There were folks we talked to who we wanted them to understand that we were going to be out there and pushing some edges....maybe even the "r"--radical--word.

Then there was this piece of educating that wasn't dishonest, but it's also the piece of, "You know, this is not this risky. We are not really this scary; we're kind of like your customers. This is not something you need to be afraid of; it's smart thing to do. It's not a dumb thing to do." There were a lot of businesses that could have really benefited from having an ad in this paper, and it was just way too scary. They were not going to do this.

There was this illusion in the beginning about department stores--that we were going to have Dayton's and, at that time, it was Donaldson's, and Target [local department stores and discount stores]. Who goes to the stores and buys this stuff, right? Women! So, of course! They'd want to advertise in our paper [laughter]. And that was an education experience as well as...

KB: Did you call them?

KM: Well, yes! We knew they'd be interested--of course we called them! [laughter] Same thing with...

KB: What was the reaction of Dayton's or Donaldson's?

KM: They politely said that they did not go in anything that new, and they would need to watch us for a year or two and really see what the performance and what the product was. So we dutifully put all these contacts on a mailing list, and would regularly send them copies of the paper. Maybe every few months, or a couple times a year, we would

check in. "Where are you in your planning?" That went on for a long time--needing to watch us to see, and thinking about us...

KB: By a long time, what do you mean?

KM: Years. [laughter]. It took us a long time to realize these folks are never going to come in. They are not going to advertise in this paper. Then after a while, we got to the point of saying, "These people are not going to advertise in this paper, and this is a good sign." But it took us a long time to say, "Oh--they really aren't going to do this. We are too scary. We're too threatening." This was at a point when we didn't think we were that 'out there'. But it was obvious we were not mainstream enough to be a place they wanted to be associated with. This was just too risky, and too 'out there', and would have been--in their minds--a PR disaster. I don't think we could have given them an ad--this was not a money thing. If we gave them ads for free, they would not run these ads.

So when that realization came, we still stuck at it. In fact, there was a point in time when we hired somebody--all our salespeople were commissioned--but we hired somebody on a base salary for a year to go after major accounts--department stores, educational institutions, and health care institutions. We needed to give this a serious go. We needed to commit to this for a year to find out, "Are these folks ever going to come in, or not?"

KB: What point was that in the history of the organization?

KM: It was during the period when I was gone. It was about... I'd have to go back and look at the chronology. When I came in my second life in here, we were just finishing a year of that.

KB: So maybe the late 1980s, would you guess?

KM: Yes, something like that. Her name was Kay Trinkle, and we hired her for a year on salary to do this. I was not in on the setting it up, but I was in on sort of the conclusion of the year. I remember Mollie and Glenda being pretty satisfied, not ecstatic, but satisfied about the year--not so much because what she brought in, but because of what we learned.

She did bring in a lot of the educational institutions, which are just a fabulous match for our readership, and they're still with us. We get a lot of advertising from colleges and universities. She brought in some of the health care--the Abbott Northwestern, some of those folks. But she did not bring in department stores. She did not bring in the Blue Cross...well, no that's not right. We had some Blue Cross stuff, hunks of it for quite a while. We had some 3M, sort of big image kind of ads for a while. She brought in a lot of good pieces.

In her mind, it was a pretty disappointing year; it did not meet her expectations. She was invested in all of these categories, including the department stores, and was pretty disappointed that that didn't happen. So after that year was wrapped up, she moved away to go to graduate school. It did not meet her expectations. I think as an institution, it did meet ours--partly because of what she brought in, partly because of what we learned. We said, "These folks are not ever going to come in, so we are going to let go of this. We are not going to keep putting energy in; we're going to move on to other things. This is okay. We know we gave it a fair shot, and now we can let go, finally, and forget about them."

Then after a while, we actually got to the point of saying, "Oh, my gosh. This is great that these people are not in here. If they were in here, we would be way too mainstream. We would be missing the mark. If these people start buying ads from us, this would be a bad sign, and we had better take another look at what we're doing." It took a long time to figure that out and to get there in our thinking.

KB: Talk more about that whole notion that there are some advertisers that you simply don't want, and go back to the beginning of the organization. When you started out selling ads, did you say there are some advertisers we simply will not talk to?

KM: We said we did not want tobacco or liquor; we will not take those ads.

KB: Were there any advertisers that might advertise products for women, specifically, that you were not interested in?

KM: Yes, in our media kit, and I don't have the words here but I can pull it, there's real fine print--many paragraphs that are generic to print advertising rate cards of policies and procedures. So we picked up on that, but we tailored some it. There's a piece about advertising that does not discriminate; we added words about demeaning women. If an ad came in, and we said, "This is insulting to women,"--and that has happened--then it's the education piece.

We can either say, "We're not running this ad," or, more often, we would call the advertiser back and go back to school with them. "You know what? It is not going to be in your best interest to run this ad in our paper, and here's why. When our readers see this, they are not going to respond favorably." "You have a product...." I'm making this up, this is not a real situation--say it's a Ford, with a woman in a slinky evening gown over the hood. We could say, "You have a product that women buy, and they're interested in what you have, but the way you're presenting it is not going to make our reader come there. So we need to work on this. We need to redesign this ad, and we need to make it respectful of women."

KB: Can you think of any specific examples of that where it actually happened?

KM: There was...are we going to do a second interview? I can do some homework on this.

KB: Sure. We're kind of heading off into the future, and perhaps it would be better to head back to just that first period of time. Maybe that's a better question: if you think about that first time, did you have this language about insulting or demeaning women?

KM: Yes, that was from day one. We put that in there...

KB: Obviously that's a judgment question. How do you resolve issues?

KM: Well, in those days, it was probably by a consensus. We would all have to talk about it.

KB: Did you have specific situations do you think?

KM: You know, I'm not thinking of specifics, but I'm sure we did. Consensus was not a bad thing because we were breaking new ground for us, and for any business in new stages. We were sort of a unique product and situation, and having each other to bounce those ideas off, and to say, "Okay, the media kit says 'not demeaning to women', and we have this ad here. Now what? What do we do about it?" So it was helpful to get many voices--a multitude of ideas and perspectives--because we were shaping policies.

KB: It sounds like it was mostly in the structure of the ads themselves where you ran into issues, rather than the advertisers.

KM: Yes, we really thought, and it turned out to be right, that for the most part, that [advertisers] were going to be self-selecting. If we saw something out there that we thought was not the kind of ad we thought was appropriate, or even wanted, we wouldn't go after them. So they would've had to come to us, and if it was a product... I know we talked about a hypothetical situation of a strip club. We would not want this ad in our paper, but you know what? They wouldn't want our audience. It would be self-selecting--they would never call us to say we want to advertise this. So there was a certain amount of self-selecting going on.

KB: Did you have any issues that first year, where you questioned, "Is this advertiser particularly correct?" ...That you can remember?

KM: You know, I'm going to have to do homework on that, and really do some thinking or maybe go look at some of those first issues. I'm not coming up with specific situations.

This is related, but different. We did then--and we still do--have situations where, because somebody runs an ad in our paper, it's like the "Good Housekeeping Seal of

Approval". [Monthly magazine that rates products] If it's in the "Women's Press", they must be honest, do great work, have fair prices, give good service, say 'please' and 'thank you'. If they don't, it's shocking. We get phone calls from people who say, "I used this home repair service. They advertise in your paper, and they did a crummy job. I can't believe you let these people run ads. How could you do this? This is just not a good service to women, so why are you running their ads?"

KB: That's fascinating. Do other newspapers get those kinds of calls?

KM: I don't think so. There's a loyalty...there's a feeling of ownership about this paper, that if it's in the "Women's Press", we must have endorsed this place. It came up in one of our first Feminist Business Discussion Groups. I know Lisa and I were looking at each other across the table like, "OOHH!" We didn't pursue it, but somebody around the table said something about, "Well, they used this advertiser from the Women' Press. Of course, they knew she would be the best around--she had to be the ultimate, because her ad was in the 'Women's Press'." You know, we don't have that kind of control. But there's this perception...

It's out there, and we talk about that when we're selling ads. It's a reality; it's not something we created purposefully--it's just there. It exists. When somebody places an ad in our paper, it should perform like any other place you place a print ad. It's going to get in front of readers, they read your message, and they respond.

An added value we have is when people put an ad in the "Women's Press", they are making a statement at the same time--of their support for women, interest in women, care about women's issues. That doesn't happen in Minneapolis/St. Paul [local monthly publication], or the StarTribune, or the community papers. There's an extra positive statement that goes with the ad that readers respond to. They make a point of wanting to do business with other women, or with other businesses that support women. We have plenty of 'guy' businesses--or businesses with photos of guys in the ad--but because their ad is in our paper, it's saying something about that guy in business. Readers respond differently than they would to ads in other publications.

KB: Do you think it's really true that people advertise because they are making a statement about women? I mean there's a perception about that, but is it true?

KM: I think it's a piece of it. I don't think it's the driving force, and it shouldn't be the number one.... A place that manufactures bolts shouldn't advertise in our paper because they want to make a statement about women--we are not their market. The first consideration should be, and I think is, "Is this my market?" The value-added piece is, "I'm both reaching the market I want to talk to, and I'm saying something about my business at the same time that is a positive in these people's minds." Does that make sense?

KB: Yes. One of the things that I'd like to have you talk a little bit about is the physical location of the business in the very early days--during the planning session, in the first years--and what that was like. This is a quite dramatic shift away from advertisers, but I'm trying to do this chronologically somewhat, and so that's the reason I'm sticking to the first year.

KM: It was very homey. In fact it was in Mollie's home. She cleared out her living room, put in a desk. Her living room and dining room is kind of an "L" shape, so the living room was one or two desks, and the dining room was still her dining room table, but it was our work table, our lunch table, our meeting table. We all got well acquainted with her back door. We just let ourselves in and out there, and walk through the kitchen, and pick up some tea on the way if we wanted, and put our bag lunch in her refrigerator.

At one point, we got a copy machine that we could lease on trial. They'll take it out [to you] so you could try it out and demonstrate it. We were just blown away that this place would actually bring us this copy machine and leave it for a whole week! It was like, "Oh, we get a copy machine!" So this sat in her living room as well, and we did our thing. That was our office equipment: this copy machine. None of us had computers, so we were all doing this on pieces of paper. We had boxes of papers and stuff all over, and that was our workplace.

KB: Now was that throughout through the planning period or was that...

KM: It was up until just shortly before the first issue came out. By the time the first issue came out, we had had our first office outside of Mollie's home--but not much before that. So we did a lot of hanging around her house. I would go there and... It must have been Julie [daughter], who was in nursery school then. She would have her nursery school carpool drop her off. She would come up to Mollie's house, bring her lunch box, and by that point, we'd be at the dining room table. She'd sit up to the table with us and open up her lunch box and eat lunch. Then we'd go back to work, and she'd probably sit under the dining room table and color or play with stickers or something. [laughter] Then she and I would traipse home. So yes, it was a real homey environment. [laughter]

Then we did move to the University and Raymond office upstairs [Security Building], and that was one large room that we all shared. We had more than one telephone, but it was everybody in one room. We used to take turns signing up to staff it because we wanted to have somebody there all the time in case the phone rang, or in case somebody showed up. We wanted to make sure somebody would be there. So we would sign up for shifts so we always knew there would be a person in the office and somebody to answer the phone.

I think the next expansion was when we added a little room down the hallway that was Mollie's very own office. She must have been going nuts in this room with everything going on, and needed a place to actually think. So that was kind of down the hall. Then

once we started the library, then we picked up another little tiny room across the hall from the first room. That was where Glenda started bringing in all her books from home. So that was this little tiny...sort of a large closet was the library at that point.

So we had three different rooms going on the same floor of this just horrible building. It was so dirty; it was so icky and creepy. The rent must have been cheap; why would we have been there otherwise? It was all we could afford. But the worst was if you had to go there at night--it was so creepy in there. There was this rickety old elevator--it was way faster to just take the stairs up to the second floor--you really didn't know if you were going to make it or not. All kinds of strange characters were up and down the hallway, and so you'd go in and lock the door right away after yourself. [laughter]

There was somebody who officed upstairs that had a... Somehow we let go of the copy machine at some point, because we didn't have one in there... Upstairs there was an office that had a copy machine, and they would let us use it. Whenever we needed a copy, we'd go in the hallway, up the stairway, down the other hall to the copy machine and make the copy then.

So we were there, and then--this was during the period when I wasn't here--moved into our current space at 771 Raymond. We've done actually two additions of space since we've been here--adding on to accommodate growing staff and additional needs. So that's been our office evolution.

KB: Well talk a little bit about how, particularly those very early offices in Mollie's home and also in the Security Building, how that affected the way people interacted with one another, and how the business was done.

KM: When we were at Mollie's home, I would say a lot of the work never happened there. I did most of what I did at my home, on my own. We would come there when we all needed to gather for meetings, or whatever we were coming together to do. So I think a lot of work happened in a lot of homes all over the place, and then we'd come together there.

In the other office, it was certainly a lot of sharing. There was no privacy, because it was one big room and everybody was in there. You listened to everyone else's phone conversation, and you certainly knew everything that was going on. We probably didn't have a very extensive "Office Talk" newsletter then, because everybody already knew everything, ever since you'd been in the office, because it was going on there.

What else can I say about that? We did not have a lot of division of labor then. Even so, I think a lot of things still got done at home. I think I still worked a lot at home. Denise was doing distribution and ad sales, and a lot of what she did was at home--she had a computer in her house. [laughter] Certainly the ad sales reps mostly did not work in that

office; they did their work from home. So it was still not like people showed up there all day, every day, to do what they needed to do.

KB: Was there a unity? Was there still a unity despite the fact that everybody was working so...in such diversified...?

KM: I think there wasn't the same 'getting to know each other on a personal level', as when most of us are here, all day, every day now. You just missed the everyday life things that people were involved in outside of their "Women's Press" work. You also have to remember, we did have these, I think they were weekly, staff meetings. Everybody came, and everybody talked about everything we needed to decide. So there was a different kind of unity. Whereas now, people are here all day, every day, but everybody is not working on everything. Everybody is not deciding everything. So it's a different kind of cohesiveness and shared knowing, I think.

KB: Tell me about the staff meetings. How did they go? This is still back in the early...

KM: I remember there were...maybe ten of us... It was a sizable group, and we all sat around the table, and for a while, it was kind of an issue review?

KB: ...Just go around the table?

KM: Yeah, I think so. I can just remember whatever we needed to deal with, we just brought to the meeting.

KB: How long did they last?

KM: Probably as long as they needed to. [laughter] An hour or two, maybe. [pause] Certainly there was an ebb and flow, but there was such a shared commitment, and at the same time, just pretty stressful times. There was so much to do, and so few resources to do them with. I remember meetings with tears around that table because people were just stressed about the amount of stuff that had to get done, and the frustration of the resources we had to do it with.

KB: When you refer to resources, you're mainly talking about people, is that it?

KM: Well, talking about people but you know what? It's related to money. If we had more money, we would have gone out and gotten more people resources. So it was one and the same. When you go back and read some of those "Office Talks," you won't believe...

We saved the string that the mail came in, and we talked about who was going to wind up the string every day. We had air conditioning, but we had to pay when it ran, so were we going to run the air conditioner or not? How much heat could we endure to save the

money that it would cost to run the air conditioner? Of course, if we opened the window sometimes--it was right above Raymond and University--it was so loud, you could hardly talk on the phone if you had the window open. That was an issue of: who got to have that air conditioner on, and who didn't, and how much were we going to run it because it cost us money. It was so destitute.

KB: Talk more about that; that's fascinating. So what did you use the string for that you saved?

KM: I have no idea. It was something we couldn't waste. I'm sure people brought their own pencils and pens and tablets--we just didn't buy that kind of thing. If there was a way to cut corners, we did. For a long time, after we moved into 771 [Raymond Avenue], we didn't have garbage pick up. Mollie and Faye would bring the garbage home, and have it picked up with their garbage pick-up at home, because it costs money to get that service. If there was a way to do anything that did not cost money, we would do it the free or very cheap way. Nobody really questioned it--it just seemed like the smart thing to do because, how could we spend money on that? So there was just an assumed sense of utter frugality. It was a given.

KB: How did you feel about the likelihood of success during that first year when you were in such a state of frugality?

KM: My perception is...

KB: Tell me yours, and then respond, too, how you think the rest of the group felt.

KM: It's easy to think everybody thinks like you do. I thought, and I think the group believed that this would happen, but it was not going to be easy. We had to be really careful with money. We had to be very smart, and absolutely careful about what we did, but it would go.

There was such a dichotomy of liberal politics and conservative financial decision-making and attitudes. Had we done it differently, would it have grown faster, or better, or differently? Well, I don't know. Maybe we would have gone out of business. I really don't know. But at the time, there was not much question that this was the way to go at it.

There was a newspaper, Michigan Women Times, that at some point in our history was evolving and trying to grow. They were having their struggles. They had fabulous computer equipment for everybody in the office--state of the art--and all the supplies they needed. It was their approach that they really needed to give themselves the tools they needed to do the job. They ultimately went out of business. Now, had they done it differently, would they have lasted? I don't know. Had we done it differently, would that have made a positive or negative difference? I don't know. Clearly other organizations

similar to ours took a very different approach than we did; that happened to be the road we took.

KB: Well, I'd like to move beyond that first year, into the next five years or so.

KM: Can I interject one story?

KB: You certainly can!

KM: It kind of goes back to your question about what it was like at Mollie's house. We already had the office up here, but we didn't have any kind of warehouse space. When these 40,000 newspapers show up, what in the heck are we going to do with these things? So in the beginning--and I remember vividly the very first issue--the printer had to deliver these papers someplace. So they came to Mollie's garage, in her alley.

KB: How big of a space did that take up?

KM: Oh, probably like this room. It was a single car garage--it's not huge. Denise was in charge of distribution, so she had recruited--and I don't remember if they were paid or not, they probably were, but marginally--and they had routes. They had to get so many papers, and they had a list of where they had to go, and how many to leave at each place. It was probably a lot like our ad reps--recruited, and they knew a certain area of the town, and so that was the list they got.

Well, it was the first time around. There were some glitches, so the printer was late. There were twenty of us or so sitting around in Mollie's alley in the back of her house, with all these garages and people's gardens, and our cars because we want to load up and get going to do the deliveries. It was a sunny April day. So we were enjoying the weather outside, but we were sitting around in this alley outside for a couple hours. Finally, this big truck that said, "Shakopee Valley Printing" on the side turned into this little tiny, narrow alley. We all just cheered; we were so excited! "Oh, my gosh! It really did come!" [laughter]

So then we all had to take all these papers out of the truck and into the garage. Then each one had to pack so many in their car, and they got in and started driving these things around

KB: How long did you do that?

KM: I can't remember how long we worked out of her garage, but ultimately, we did find some warehouse space. We only needed it for a few hours every other week. But we found some warehouse space with a loading dock, so the truck could drive off and you could take these things off on pallets or something, and unload and load. I don't think it took us too long to find that. Then eventually in the evolution, we hired a

distribution company, so the papers could get delivered to them at their warehouse. They staffed; they did the delivery people--and this was out of our hair! [laughter]

KB: Well, what I'd like to talk about now, as I said earlier, is the next five years. What makes it complicated is that at some point, I believe, within the first five to six years of the business, you left for a while.

KM: I was with the planning stage about a year before we started publishing, and then my memory tells me I stayed about a year after we started publishing.

KB: So that would make it probably mid-1986 that you left. When did you come back?

KM: I came back [pause] in 1991.

KB: So when you came back, then, the organization had changed quite dramatically. Talk about how you reacted to that. First of all, did you stay in touch with the organization during your...

KM: I did for a while. I said that I left, but there was a period in there where I did the bulk mailing. Every other week, when we get a new paper, we needed to do a bulk mailing to everybody on the subscriber list. So for--I bet a couple years--I came in every other Tuesday morning and did the bulk mailing. That was a fun way for me to get in the office for a little bit, kind of see what was going on...stay involved. So there was a piece in there when I did that. Of course, I'd pick up the paper and read it, and I would see... Mollie and Glenda were in the neighborhood, and Carol--one of the ad reps--was in the neighborhood. So peripherally, I kind of kept in touch with what was going on.

KB: When you came back to the paper, what were your thoughts on how the paper had changed over that last five year period roughly?

KM: I was not 100 percent enthused about coming back. I was re-entering the job market, and it happened that Michelle Holzwarth, who had been the sales director, had left about the same time. So we reconnected and had some conversations. I was interviewing some other places, too. I was at a point in my life where I was ready to do something new and different, and I already had done this. So there was a fair amount of hesitation about, "Do I really want to do this again? I've already done this; I've been there."

But for a number of reasons, it was what I chose to do. I was pleasantly, really pleasantly, surprised that this was not the same place I had left a few years before. There wasn't any, "Well, that's not the way we do it." It was, "Oh, great. We're doing it different!" The organization, the people, just the process--so much of it was so different that it was not like the same old thing again; it was a new adventure.

KB: Talk about some of the differences that you noticed.

KM: Well, for one, staffing.... There were so many more people. There was a real different division of labor than there had been, just because of volume. The fact that we had more ads that we had to invoice every issue, [meant that] someone else had to devote a bigger chunk of time to making sure that happened. The fact that we had a bigger staff [meant that it took] somebody more time to do payroll, and administer things like that. We're still talking about a staff of fifteen or ten maybe, at that time. We're not talking hundreds of thousands of people, but the scope of it was very different.

It had started to evolve some better systems--ways of going at things and doing things. Although I can't say that we had turned the corner... We were close, but we really had not turned the corner economically. I still remember after coming back the days we would wait for the mail to come. People were calling us to collect what we owed--our vendors--and we'd see how much money we got in the mail that day. Then we knew who we would pay and who we wouldn't pay. That was just a reality--we'd wait for the mail to see how much money we got that day. So some things had changed, and some things had not broken through.

KB: What about businesses? You had expanded the number of businesses that you were involved in--or Minnesota Women's Press had--library, directory [Minnesota Women's Press Directory; business and other resources for women]. Can you react to some of those new business ventures?

KM: Directory either was just about to or had just become a stand-alone piece. For the first number of years when we did the directory, it was still a part of the newspaper. It was a while until it was a separate publication. So that was still evolving and growing. The book store.... I liked the number of things we had expanded into, and in fact I pushed us over time to do more of that--to get a broad base from a business standpoint, and not count on one product with a traditionally very teeny-tiny margin.

So I liked the fact that we were diversifying and going in some other directions. I didn't think it was always done with the kind of business planning that I might have taken for granted. However we had evolved to other kinds of activities, it had, and I thought that was a good idea. It was often, or nearly always, 'mission-driven' rather than 'business-driven'. To say, "Oh, how about this? Let's go in this direction." It was mission-driven...

KB: That was true in 1991 as well?

KM: I think so.

KB: Interesting. Where were you with your personal mission about feminism at that point when you came back? Had you...

KM: A little further along, but not much. [laughter] There were some other things in my personal life though that really did give me quite a boost along that road in that point in time. [laughter]

KB: Thank you.

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