

An Interview with Two Pioneers of Women's Studies at Vanier

In the early 1970s, a small group of women at Vanier started meeting informally to discuss women's issues. They went on to create the team-taught course *Alternatives for Women*, Vanier's first universal complementary course, and by 1978-1979, succeeded in getting the Women's Studies major approved by the Board of Governors. As part of my research project on the history of Women's Studies at Vanier, I have been going through the archives for the Women's Studies program (now called Women and Gender Studies), which cover almost fifty years of WS/WGS activities at Vanier. According to their proposal for the Women's Studies program, the founders stated the program's goals were to "elucidate and delineate belief systems and conceptual frameworks which have maintained and perpetuated certain misconceptions about women. And [...] to show] how these misconceptions restrict and limit the roles both men and women play in the evolution of society." They did this both inside and outside the classroom. In the process, they helped to shape Vanier's institutional structure. The impact of their work can be seen all across the college.

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Those involved in the Women's Studies program have left an impressive legacy, including an annual week-long International Women's Week program of events, one of Quebec's first Sexual Harassment policies, the Employment Equity Program, strong connections with community groups outside of Vanier, the Woman of the Year Award, and a Champagne Breakfast for women from all sectors of the college. Even before Women's Studies was officially a program, women at Vanier had been involved in feminist initiatives, most notably the Vanier Daycare. Greta Hoffman Nemiroff and future Women's Studies member Alanna Horner started the Vanier Daycare in 1972, in response to student demand. These were all hard-won gains. The women did all of this while forging deep and lasting friendships. They continue to inspire people of all genders working in Women and Gender Studies, to carry on the tradition of creating positive change at Vanier. Just recently, WGS was instrumental in designing the new Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Policy. The Open Door Network, which began in 2006, started as a Women's Studies Initiative. The ODN has led workshops, brought in guest speakers, and organized events to sensitize faculty and staff about sexual orientation and gender identity. WGS collaborated with the ODN and other groups to ensure that Gender Neutral Washrooms are available in all of the buildings at Vanier.

In the spring of 2019, I met with Arlene Steiger and Judith Crawley, two of the women who were involved with Women's Studies from

its early days, to talk to them about their experiences building the program and what it meant to them. Judith Crawley also generously provided photographs for this article. As a photographer, Judith has documented Women's Studies at Vanier from the 1970s to today.

A couple of times in the interview, Arlene and Judith reference a panel. The panel, titled "Founders of Women's Studies," took place during International Women's Week in March 2019 as part of the 40th Anniversary of Women's Studies/WGS. Arlene and Judith were joined by Joanne Morgan, Shirley Pettifer, and Evangeline Caldwell.

Lisa: What brought you into Women's Studies?

Arlene: Coming to Women's Studies corresponded with coming to women in general. In my university education, I had never been assigned a book or an article by a woman and I had never had a woman professor. Then a friend suggested that I read Simone de Beauvoir, so

I read Simone de Beauvoir. In my life I was coming to be interested in women. When I started to teach, it was something that I had thought about and was concerned about. At Snowdon [a former Vanier campus], I was hired because my background in Quebec Literature balanced their [Humanities] curriculum.

They already had someone teaching about women. When I came to Ste. Croix two semesters later, it all came together. My interest in women's issues had increased and I was becoming active politically in the women's movement. Then there was this little group of women who were starting a Women's Studies program. Once it started it absolutely snowballed. The more we did, the more involved we became, and then we had a group. I remember feeling wonderful in this group of women. There were hardly any women in Humanities. We were a big department, about forty people, but there were maybe four or five women.

Judith: On top of the program, we wanted to do things for us. We had spring meetings, we did hikes, had book discussions. We got together outside of doing things for the program. I don't know how I got into thinking about women. I came to Vanier in 1970 from Loyola, with no background in Women's Studies. Nothing was offered when I was in university and I didn't really notice. I had read George Eliot (and we knew she was a woman) and Emily Dickenson. So I can't say we didn't study any women. But we didn't study women as a category. In my early years as a teacher, overwhelmed with developing courses and figuring out how to teach and also new to marriage, I was too busy to be engaging in women's issues. The first course I designed at Vanier was called *Man Confronting Death*. It didn't even dawn on me that there was a problem with this. It didn't take long before my eyes were opened; I began to unpack the



International Women's Day Champagne Breakfast 1989
Photo credit Judith Lerner Crawley

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language, we all just accepted that “man” included everybody. I started paying attention to women’s issues. I sat in on my friend Greta [Hoffman Nemiroff]’s evening *Women’s Identity and Image* course at Sir George [now Concordia] and began looking at things from a women’s perspective.

A: One of the things that struck me when we were doing the panel was that we all came to Women’s Studies in different ways. I was involved in the women’s movement. I was doing *Wages for Housework*, but I felt like it was a more academic entry. It came through reading and stuff like that, whereas Shirley came, really, through activism.

L to J: Your entry wasn’t through activism. How did you become interested in Women’s Studies?

J: It was slow. I sat in on Greta’s course. And then Lib Spry, my colleague, tells me about the women’s group at Vanier and brought me to a meeting. I felt like I could open up and breathe. It was a learning process. My artwork dealt with women. But that also just grew by photographing what we were doing.

A: That was one of the wonderful things about Women’s Studies, for me. It just allowed everything to be of a piece. It just all sort of came together. My teaching, my life, my social life, everything responded to that. When I had kids, it was also part of the feminist experience.

We would talk about what it meant to have children.

L: When you were starting Women’s Studies you didn’t really have any models for this because Women’s Studies programs were in their infancy at that time. Very few programs existed.

J: Pat Armstrong was the one who initiated the idea of *Alternatives for Women* as a college-wide complementary course. She taught a course with that name at Trent University, and she brought it here. Her MA thesis had explored the double-ghetto of women’s work – women having two jobs, both paid and unpaid labour. So she was a little ahead of us in that sense. When I went to my first meeting with the women’s group, not only did I fit right in, but it was more congenial than all the other groups I was working with. We were coming together because we were volunteering. So we were all more drawn to each other, whereas in the other programs, you’re thrown together.

A: It was the first time, for me, that I had worked with women. University, for me anyway, was really a man’s world. And our [Humanities] department at Vanier was mostly men.

J: There was a feeling that you were meeting women who were more like-minded. And that you were sharing. And that you were politically more together. The union was also brand new. Those were really heady times.



Team-taught Alternatives for Women class Fall 1991
Photo credit Judith Lerner Crawley



International Women's Day Faith Nolan workshop 1994
Photo credit Judith Lerner Crawley

L: Was there a connection between the union and Women's Studies from the beginning or was that something that you forged over time?

A: Part of the connection was personnel. The same people were involved. One of the things that happened was that people who were in Women's Studies carried their values and their concerns about women and Women's Studies wherever they went, and so it spread throughout the college. I think that Shirley made this point too [on the panel], we were present and active in so many different areas. Thirty and forty years later you see that there are Women's Studies people in leadership positions in the college right across the board.

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L: As you were establishing Women's Studies at Vanier, did you have a strong vision, or were you figuring things out as you went?

A: [shaking her head]. We didn't have a clearly articulated vision.

J: The women who wrote that whole proposal [Pat Armstrong, Sonja Grekol, Pauline Hansen, Kathleen Holden, Eleanor Tyndale, and

Regina Wall] for the program and lobbied the Board of Governors had a vision.

A: There were some basic things that we agreed upon and knew what we wanted in terms of the structure of the program. I don't think that ideologically there was a line, because we all had quite different approaches to feminism. Pat was/is basically a Marxist, and certainly not everybody in Women's Studies had a Marxist analysis. So, the vision that we all agreed on was that we wanted to do Women's Studies and we controlled ourselves. We didn't have a lot of conflict on ideological grounds. And we did have commitments that we all shared: to feminism, of course, albeit in various forms. We were all dedicated to being as inclusive as possible. We were all committed to an anti-racist approach.

L: How did the anti-racist approach manifest in your work?

A: Different people did different things in the classroom. We were always concerned to address issues that came out of our teaching experience and our work with students. For International Women's Week (IWW), from very early on, we always included speakers representing diverse groups who could speak to issues of racism, and an anti-racist approach was central to these events.

L: You were organizing International Women's Week before any



Team-taught Alternatives for Women class 1982
Photo credit Judith Lerner Crawley

other department or program was doing anything like this. Your work became the model for all of the festivals and symposia that came after.

A: Yes. It started with International Women's Day [which the United Nations introduced in 1975] and wanting to do something to mark the day. Before long it became a week. It was hard to get things together for just a day. We also got into decorating the college for the week. And then it grew. We really discussed the ideas and the themes and what we hoped to do.

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L: What kind of things were important for you to include in the *Alternatives* class? It's an academic course, but it also seems that you were trying to connect the course to students' own lives, their health, and those sorts of things.

A: The overarching vision of the course was determined by the

particular teacher running the course. People would propose what they wanted to teach. You would put together the schedule and organize it.

J: Sandra Glashan, a biology teacher, came in and did a lecture called XX YY. Alanna Horner, a creative arts teacher, had the class drawing self-portraits. We worked with the particular talents available. We took two classes at the beginning to orient the students, and after that it became a kind of parade of people.

J: Marilyn Bicher did a class on sexuality. She brought in diaphragms, condoms, and other things for people to see and touch. She also distributed the *Birth Control Handbook*. At the beginning, we attended *Alternatives* classes so that we could learn from each other.

A: The interests changed over time. What was important to me and what was different from my teaching in Humanities, was that I wanted the students to feel that I was in it with them. It was kind of like a seminar. The person would come in and lecture. I would always try to reserve some time where we could sit around them and we could talk in a graduate student kind of way, not in an academic sense necessarily, but in that, we were sharing in something rather than just receiving. The last several weeks of the course, students did presentations. They were often amazing.



Report on Canadian Assoc Against Sexual Harassment in Higher Education conference 1994
Photo credit Judith Lerner Crowley

Students really did things that were personal and important.

J: Students had to keep a journal and write reflections on the different presentations to discuss how the material impacted them and the connections they could make. We were trying to get them to think about how the personal is political.

A: There were some wonderfully interesting moments. One of the courses was an “action-demonstration” from the Montreal Assault Prevention Centre. We thought that was important. They were fun because one part of the demonstration was that everyone would learn the self-defence shout, which was very loud. And then they would learn a few moves. There was a demo. The Montreal Assault Prevention Centre always contextualized their presentation in a feminist way, talking about how you feel about your body. And we would talk about it afterwards, how hard it was to shout.

J: We learned about how we were socialized.

L: How did you see the topics covered in *Alternatives* change over time?

A: It always reflected people’s interests. In general, people’s interests in their own departments often couldn’t find a place in their standard departmental material. So, they were happy to develop these new courses that they were excited about in the same way that we were. When I was teaching *Alternatives*, I liked that people were

teaching different topics. I tried to get the students to see that different people had different ways of looking at issues. So I would say, “did you notice that this speaker really focused on people’s beliefs, and this speaker today is really focused on economic structures?” Students could understand that people had different approaches to feminism.

L: What obstacles did you face in building the program?

A: At the beginning, there were obstacles everywhere. Some of them were benign. In the sense that they weren’t people who were actively engaged in fighting women. But they just didn’t help. We had to fight to get release time every semester. As other majors came up, we had to compete with them. It took a long time before there was a sense in the college, which we worked to bring forth, that Women’s Studies was just not like any other “studies.” Women’s Studies represented half of the college population and had an approach that was not just subject matter.

L: What were some of the central issues that you debated?

A: One of the big issues in the college was sexual harassment. There was an incredible amount of strategizing around that discussion because it brought us into conflict with the union. And there was a lot of energy devoted to this issue, especially by Shirley Pettifer and Fran Davis. It took a long time and the work went slowly. There were a lot of one-on-one meetings. They developed a policy that included

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mediators made up of teachers and support staff who were extremely respected and not seen as being in anyone's camp. They were seen as very fair-minded people. It took a while, but when actual cases came forward, the union was comfortable with the idea that people's rights would be respected but that they were not going to defend harassers. Our harassment policy became the basis for harassment policies in other colleges.

J: And then the whole society became involved. There was some legislation introduced that made institutions responsible for their employees. And the harassment policy expanded to include all forms of harassment.

L: You were so ahead on this issue. Some colleges and universities are only now developing sexual harassment policies.

A: It was one of the things that galvanized a lot of our energy. Also, we were the first college to get a grant from Quebec to study the employment equity situation at Vanier. Pat Armstrong applied for the grant and Susan Gottheil did the research.

J: It was ground-breaking research.

A: Susan's report included complex statistics. It revealed that we had a terrible imbalance in gender on the administration. There were zero women. It was easy to calculate. The report resulted in a signed Employment Equity policy in 1987.

J: Women's Studies organized a display in the Carrefour to highlight the lack of women in positions of power at Vanier. After that there was a pilot project. It became part of the civil service commitment to affirmative action. In the past 10 to 15 years, all government agencies have had to do a gender equity study every couple of years.

J: The role of men in Women's Studies was also something that we debated.

A: It was a wedge of change. We had always felt that men could teach feminist material. But we felt that women needed a space of our own. Some new people in the 2000s didn't like it. We had debates about the subject. [Men were invited to attend meetings in 2009.] I think that those changes ushered in a quite fundamental change in the vision of women and what constitutes Women's Studies. It seems to me that there is more discomfort now in talking about women and women's issues in a general way. Perhaps more focus on looking at how the patriarchy is damaging for all kinds of people.

L: How did being involved with Women's Studies affect your lives?

A: It was my life.

J: It was an important part of my connection to Vanier and to everything I did. It was where real, long-lasting friendships were formed.

L: What advice do you have for us who are still here?



A and J (in unison!): Keep going!

J: Keep up the fight.

A: Insist on the extent to which women's issues still count. I think that there's always a tendency to allow other issues to come before women's issues.

WOMEN AND MEN, AT VANIER

WHO WIELDS THE POWER?



International Women's Day 1986
Photo credit Judith Lerner Crawley

For more information about the Women and Gender Studies Program today, contact current WGS co-ordinator Maggie Kathwaroon (kathwarm@vanier.college)

You may find more of Judith Lerner's photographs of Women's Studies at Vanier at her website, www.judithcrawley.ca.



Lisa Jorgensen
is a Humanities teacher.