

Name: Jenni Ferrans

Date of Birth: 1957

Duration: 00:15:36

00:00:00 Yes, I'm Jenni Ferrans. I was born in 1957 and I moved to Milton Keynes in 1980.

(1st interviewer) So if I said to you now, could you tell us about your arrival in Milton Keynes and how you found it when you first arrived, roughly what year that was and...

Right.

(1st interviewer) Yes.

OK. I arrived in Milton Keynes in 1980. I moved up from North London with the company that I was working for at the time. At that point the new city was a series of islands of housing with mud around them where the building sites were and fields between that and the next island. There was no joined up city at all at that stage. Um and once you were on the estates you were quite isolated. The dial-a-bus stopped almost as I came up so the bus service was about every half hour at peak times and every hour at the rest of the time. Um I cycled everywhere.

(1st interviewer) Can you explain what the dial-a-bus service was?

Yes, the dial-a-bus was provided by the Development Corporation and you could literally dial a number and say I want a bus to take me from this place to that place. It would take its own sweet time at coming 'cause it had to service everybody else at the same time but it would get you there eventually and it meant literally there were buses from anywhere to anywhere at first. But that stopped in June 1980 just as I came up here. So after that it was a very sparse regular service (laughs).

(1st interviewer) And did you feel that you were living in the middle of one of these isolated....?

Very much so yeah. There was a community house with a little one room shop. The school hall initially wasn't open but it opened fairly soon afterwards, so that was the community hall.

There was going to be a local centre, this was on Neath Hill, but Neath Hill local centre was being built at the time so there were no amenities locally to speak of at all. The nearest launderette was Newport Pagnell. I think the nearest pub was the northern one in Great Linford and pubs tended not to serve unaccompanied women at that time very well either (laughs). So o yeah the first few years if you went to anything you'd have to organise it. No, you made your entertainment yourself, there were no clubs or anything.

(1st interviewer) You talk about being an unaccompanied woman...

(1st interviewer)...so what can you tell us about your actual lifestyle at the time and how you found....?

I was single, I was in my first flat on my own. The flat was great and the city around was becoming good and I enjoyed it but, as I said, there was no entertainment outside work. You either socialised with people you met at work or just very gradually began to go to things that people were organising for themselves and you gradually got into that network. There was no internet at that stage of course so you couldn't just look up what there is. Um the local paper did do reasonable listings but it was all stuff that people organised for themselves. Um I, I sang in a choir and I'm interested in music but every concert I went to for the first few years I knew the people who'd organised it.

(1st interviewer) So what were the major issues for women at that time? Obviously you were working but there must have been a lot of stay at home mothers at the time.

Yes. A lot of women had come up thinking that Milton Keynes was a great place to start a family and they could get housing here and that looked good. So they then took a few years off to start the family and then they tried to get back into the workplace and that's where the nightmare really began. The workplace was very segregated at the time. So I was working in engineering computing in a man's world, when I went to a meeting there was a 'girly' poster on the wall behind me, there were no women over section-leader level, you know, it was totally a man's world. There was one women's loo in the site of 400 people (laughs). and they wouldn't take you that seriously if you wanted to train and progress. You could eventually kick up a stink and get it because they were short of people (laughs) so you had to make a fuss. And I gather it was the same in administrative work but where it was higher level work they hit the same barrier. The

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Development Corporation people admitted to us that they had the same problem. Um for most women employment was still segregated so they were looking at catering, childcare, nursing, cleaning, office work. Office work was being transformed because word processing was coming in. Nursing, the General Certificate of Nursing was coming in. Cleaning, yes that went on all the time. Um catering, there was virtually no catering in Milton Keynes at all. There were about four pubs in the new city area that did food. There were no restaurants to speak of. John Lewis's was the first restaurant in the new city area (laughs). There were literally maybe half a dozen so there were 20 jobs or something in total.

Childminding, there was no registered childminding system in those days so either you went to a nursery or you used friends and family. And of course a lot of the women coming up didn't have friends and family. They had nobody they knew. So as they started to go back to work they found their qualifications were out of date, they had no childcare, they had no transport because their husband probably took the car to school...to work. It was a nightmare. And a lot of women were stuck at home doing...stuffing envelopes at 50p a thousand or something and that was it, that was all the work they could get because they couldn't leave the children and they couldn't get the training they needed. The training centre seemed to think its job was to train men. It actively wouldn't take women on 'introduction to computing' and introduction to a lot of the technical stuff because it said the employers wouldn't take them. That wasn't true but the training centre acted as a total barrier. And there was no training in word processing or anything like that at all in Milton Keynes. There was no nursing training for the new certificate. There was...you know....an awful lot of it was just missing.

(1st interviewer) But you got involved in various activities to change the status quo didn't you?

Yeah.

(1st interviewer) Can you tell us something about that?

I, yes, I joined 'Women and Work' group in 1983. I was looking for...helping get more women into science and engineering. But I very rapidly did some research that showed the whole scale of the problem. The school meals service closed down in 1983 just to help matters so that put several hundred women out of work straight away in Milton Keynes. And there was no catering for them to go into. So the 'Women and Work' group got some money, first to do research into what the women's employment situation was and that showed up that although men's employment...unemployment was 5% at the time, women's

unemployment or serious under employment was 40%. It was just massive and the Development Corporation hadn't noticed (laughs) so they weren't doing anything about it. The 'Women and Work' group produced the first childcare guide which consisted of one side of A4, that was it for 100,000 people (laughs) that's all it was. But that stirred the city council into setting up what was eventually six council run nurseries. So that made a big difference. At least you'd got somewhere for your child if you wanted to go back to work now. Um 'Women and Work' group got funding eventually through the European fund for 'back to work' courses in office work including 'introduction to word processing' and so on. Um they couldn't get nursing because at that time the hospital still wasn't open but eventually they got the hospital to do nursing training. They did eventually a 'back to work' in computing and moving...beginners work in IT in the actual engineering not just the use of the computer. And a whole lot of 'back to work' courses in setting up your own business. So a lot of the catering firms we've got today started off with those courses. Individual women started their own business after the school meals service had closed down. And that gradually over time made quite a big difference. We cracked the training centre by taking them to court twice for discrimination. We took Milton Keynes College once as well (laughs). And just eventually we managed to, to crack it so that the statistics in the last recession were much more even, although women still tend to be made part-time quicker than men are.

(1st interviewer) Obviously you're looking at this from a feminist agenda but I was thinking what do you think are the successes of Milton Keynes now and possibly what do you think of its failure, of where we stand now, you know?

For employment I think it's much better and we've got a very broad profile of employment, not dependent on one industry or a few very large firms, so that we can ride out recessions, we can....but we can take advantage of booms and I think it's working very well. Generally speaking the trading is open to everybody now if they can meet the requirements. For other aspects the big problem at the moment is housing. Um the government doesn't allow us any powers at all to push, to get the developers to actually build the houses they'd planned. And we've fallen behind because they find it convenient to bank the Milton Keynes sites because they will get a bit higher in value, so we lose housing. So at the moment somebody who moved in in the position I moved in could barely afford to rent and certainly couldn't afford to buy. And that's true for almost everybody in a house now, if you work out what somebody in the position you were when you moved in, they probably couldn't buy your house. So it's becoming unsustainable, we have to

crack that. As a councillor I've been working in the last year on every initiative I can find to get more housing built and more housing is starting to come through and there's more in the plan.

(1st interviewer) So I'm thinking now following on from what you said, if you had unlimited funds and a magic wand, what would be your plan of action for Milton Keynes?

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Buy some of the land that is next on the list so that we can control the rate of housing development on it (laughs). That is the thing that would make the biggest difference.

(1st interviewer) Yeah.

'Cause it would also make a huge difference to the child poverty in the area 'cause most of that is housing related. We don't have too much pensioner poverty but again that's often housing related. You know, housing really is the major problem for the city now.

(1st interviewer) Well having been in Milton Keynes for some time now, a good few decades, how do you imagine the future as in the next 50 years or the next 100 years.

Yeah.

(1st interviewer) What do you think we will find here?

I hope our cultural offering will get more visible. It's already very varied but it's largely hidden at the moment so people take a long time to find it. I hope that will get more visible and I hope that we will develop it into a big city offering to match the size that we are becoming. I hope that we will get the housing back in balance and, and be able to house...and aim at being reasonably self-sufficient at housing all our people. At the moment too many have to come in from outside. Um I hope we'll find some form of transport that's more acceptable and more efficient for most people than cars because we are losing the good mobility around the city as our roads are completely clogging up. Um most people are not happy with buses and I can understand why at the moment. But buses are getting better, if we can just get more of them (laughs) and that means getting more people on them. Um and I hope that we will continue with the green city that we've got. I think it will get higher, in general the average height of housing will get higher but I hope we've still got the green spaces in between and well-designed green spaces that everybody can really enjoy.

(1st interviewer) So if you had to put it into a phrase and I know this is throwing a bit of a googly, what would you say Milton Keynes means to you now?

Opportunity. I, I grew up in Coventry as the car industry was closing down and the city was just shutting down and the opportunity in Milton Keynes grabbed me at the beginning and it still grabs me today.

(1st interviewer) Right, Ok. Thank you very much.

Thank you.

(1st interviewer) Thank you very much, that's lovely, that's loads of stuff there, thank you very much.

(2nd interviewer) Anyone else got any burning questions?

(3rd interviewer) Yes, when you first came Jennie what was it like...were people feeling quite isolated when you first arrived?

Sorry...were people feeling...?

(3rd interviewer) Sorry, when, when you first arrived...

(3rd interviewer)...did you feel quite isolated and it was like being, you know, in sort of spacey?

It could be, yeah, that feeling of being on the moon in a sea of martians (coughs) was there but at the same time once you'd found your way into the various groups there were, there were a lot of people of our sort of age. So that there were a lot of people experiencing the same thing and talking about it together. But you had to have some ability and some money effectively to, to get into things and, and travel to go to things 'cause there would be very little on any one estate. You know I ended....I was lucky in that I met some people from the Development Corporation early on and they introduced me to others and of course there were thousands of them and so that immediately gave me an entry to a lot of different things. But people who weren't lucky with that sort of random contact, it was very difficult to find their way in.

(3rd interviewer) how do you think a lot of mothers, young mothers felt? What, what was the situation for them?

There are odd bits in the Living Archive's records and odd bits in the CDC's records that talk about the feeling of absolute

desperation in those days. 'Cause the other thing was...that I didn't mention was that inflation was quite high so that not only were they in this bad position but their finances were being squeezed more and more as well. Um and they...you know, they had no money for taxis, no money to move anywhere, they'd got the kids to deal with wherever they were, they couldn't get time for themselves, they were desperate. The suicide rate was quite high, the marital breakdown rate was high because the strains put on them and the very different experiences of men and women were breaking marriages. You know, neither could understand why it was so different, why the other one thought it was either atrocious or good.

(3rd interviewer) What do you think changed? What, what happened?

We got a lot more women into work (laughs). I'm really serious, the things that we were doing had quite a big effect. They literally put thousands of women into work over a period of ten years probably. Um so that that meant the finances were easier, it meant that men's and women's experiences were more common, we got much more childcare so the women could get a break from the childcare. Um and more men began to register the problem and began to help and more flexibility came in. But the impact of that separation of work experience made such a difference and as I said, the horrifying thing was the Development Corporation didn't even notice. Until we did our research they didn't ask a gender question on the questionnaires that they used to do every year. So they'd never picked up that there was a difference. They'd picked up they were getting some different answers but they didn't know what the common factor was. Once they asked the gender question it...they had two completely different pictures.

(3rd interviewer) What was your job?

I was a Project Planner initially and then Systems Analyst with Marconi Avionics which is defence industry. It was on Linford Wood when it first came up, yeah.

(1st interviewer) Thank you very much. That's really fascinating stuff you've given us there.

Right. Ok.

Thank you.

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(tape ends)