

Dorothy McGowan

February 8, 2017

[This was an informal conversation on February 8, 2017 between Hank Grasso, Exhibits Designer, Office of NIH History and Stetten Museum, and Ms. Dorothy McGowan. She came to work at the National Cancer Institute as a secretary in 1971 and suggested that procurement language become gender neutral, for instance, using “Dear Vendor” instead of “Dear Gentleman.”]

Dorothy McGowan: There was a criticism of the Self Help for Equal Rights (SHER) group that they tried to push people into taking grievances or complaints to court. I did not find that to be true. There was certainly support for these people but I found their work also focused on raising awareness of women’s issues for employees and management. For example, one of their projects addressed the attempt to downgrade secretaries. They also sponsored having a core group of representatives who could accompany women who brought their complaints to management and act as advocates. SHER focused on ending discrimination and I think the main emphasis was for women scientists.

I think SHER was important for that time period. I did not know members of the group outside of the meetings. However, some of the members had been active in civil rights marches and had been advocating for civil rights for others for years. I remember Rosemary and Fran Harding. I was a very junior person at the time. You can see by the pictures I gave you of Rosemary that she had a certain presence.

I'll give you the article. It is talking about the reality 20 years later. That shouldn't surprise me because I remember talking to a young woman even in the late 70s who said she did not sense any sex discrimination. Everyone has their own reality and perspective. I don't know if you want these, but page 165 refers to self-help for equal rights.

Hank Grasso: That would be a godsend. Can you describe briefly how you found your way to NIH?

McGowan: How I found my way to NIH? I came to NIH as a secretary. I worked as a temporary for Auerbach Associates. Auerbach had a logistics and consulting contract with the National Cancer Institute (NCI) as part of the Nixon 1971 “war on cancer”. Joseph Califano Jr. was Secretary of Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (DHEW) at the time. Mary Lasker was a force that led to the legislation. The NCI contract brought scientists from all over the world to Airlie House in Virginia to discuss and coordinate cancer research efforts. I eventually went to work for the policy and planning office of NCI after the Auerbach contract closed.

Grasso: Did you feel immediately that you were a part of a larger community when you joined NIH?

McGowan: Yes. The people I met at NIH and the opportunities NIH gave me had a huge impact on my life. I saw more women in professional positions than in places I had previously worked. Once I had my college degree, I wanted to explore so left NIH and worked for the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA); Environmental Protection Agency

(EPA); and Voice of America (VOA). In my pre-NIH years, I worked at the Pentagon for the Air Force and Navy and the Marine Corps at Camp LeJeune. When I was at Voice of America, I knew I wanted to come home to NIH. I actually took a downgrade to come back to NIH because I figured I would be able to regain my grade at some point. NIH is where I wanted to be, because this is a community and a mission I loved. Besides the mission, women had much more voice and position than in other agencies at the time. When I first left NIH, I looked around and said where is EEO? Women's representation?

NIH is just a special place so I felt like I was a part of a community. I felt that today driving through the campus and seeing so many new buildings and a thriving campus. There was a lot more green space when I first worked here in the 1970s.

That was the other thing, I got an offer to work with the Central Intelligence Agency at some point after I had my daughter. I could have regained my grade right away. At the time the news was filled with stories about waterboarding and dark operations so even though I believed the CIA mission was essential it was very difficult to go there after years of working at NIH and believing in its mission.

Grasso: How did you happen into the, I guess I was thinking that the one group, you really described two different, I'm looking for the acronym of the self-help group.

McGowan: Self Help for Equal Rights (SHER).

Grasso: Okay. How did you happen into this group, or did you encounter one person that you talked to?

McGowan: I found SHER because it advertised with flyers on bulletin boards and I was curious. I was a delegate on the Women's Advisory Committee. I participated in some of their activities but later when I started applying for jobs removed any mention of participation in these groups because unfortunately these activities labeled me.

Sometimes SHER identified things that portrayed women in a negative way. For example, there was a lab safety exhibit in building 31. There were mannequins in white coats, men looking very serious and businesslike – one had a pose with chin cupped in his hand looking thoughtful but with disgust on his face as he looked over his shoulder at a woman who had tripped. The fellows were grouped together clearly engaged in serious and “important” conversation except for the looks of distain and disgust at the unfortunate woman who was posed mid-trip, look of horror on her face, and a beaker that spilled an ominous liquid all over the place.

The SHER group raised a fuss over the exhibit. They said the exhibit was depicting women in this very negative way. They were right. Again, things changed. I don't know if you had that same exhibit today anybody would notice but SHER certainly noticed. You notice when things just aren't right. Even as I reread my suggestion, I saw that in 1979, two years after the suggestion, something was distributed about gender neutral language in documents.

Sometimes a person thinks that something would be very easy to change because it just makes sense, so obvious but then you find the change isn't so easy. What was so difficult

about making a salutation gender neutral when the policy or correspondence obviously applied to men and women. Diana nailed it in her supportive but comical memo “I don’t think the men in this organization expect to see me in the ‘men’s’ washroom. If I’m not included under the masculine noun in that instance, why should I be included under the masculine nouns “Gentlemen” and “Dear Sir?” There's some truth to this, right? It's so obvious, so easy and would hurt no one.

Grasso: When you, I guess I would say I would ask is how did you find your voice? Going on record to make a suggestion is a significant move. In some circles sometimes that puts you in a troublemaker's corner.

McGowan: I was considered a troublemaker by some people or perhaps “confrontational” or “argumentative” even though I don’t think of myself in these terms. I just didn’t want to call myself or other women “men”. I had spent most of my life at the bottom of the economic food chain observing people who were powerful. I never viewed these people as “fragile” but clearly they were. It is also clear that many in management agreed with my suggestion. I do not have the history but clearly some people in management supported the suggestion. I am an introvert who worked hard. I didn’t think I was the one making trouble.

Grasso: Talk more about that. What was your experience? When you decided to make that, can you maybe give the overview of you're working, you're having to type over and over again. What was the moment when the light went on and you said, "I got to say something."

McGowan: It wasn't just the typing gentlemen over and over. It was a culmination of experiences. For example, when I was a secretary at NCI I talked to a young man who was my age, graduated the same year from high school, he was a GS13 contract specialist. In the 1970s, if you were a GS13 you could buy a house, support a family, and so on. I was a GS6 and struggled. I had an apartment, but oh, heaven forbid I had car trouble. That was a problem. I lived simply.

When we were talking, I found that we had both started working for the Department of the Navy when we graduated from high school. We had both entered the Department of Navy at the same time. The lights went on when I was talking to him that women were immediately put in the typing pool. The young men who didn't have college degrees were placed in training positions for computers, contracts, wherever they needed labor. At that time, it wasn't like it is today where people have to have multiple or advanced degrees to get hired. People were often trained in a position and the degree was obtained later if at all. There was a screening process that uneducated young men would have professions and uneducated young women became typists. I think one of the reasons was probably that men would need to support a family and women were supposed to marry well, be supported, and assume the status of their husbands. Economic independence for women wasn't really a thing at the time.

I think the suggestion came from something that was simmering for years as well as seeing so many amazing women at NIH in so many diverse professions. I remember working for the Air Force. I was in a typing pool and we had these big typewriter carriages and you're typing and you're throwing those big carriages. The colonel's office

was way up the hall. He would buzz you if he wanted something and I would go running down to the colonel's office and sometimes when I walked into his office the room was full of pilots, male pilots from California. He said, "And this is what I use to get my poor old heart started in the mornings." Everybody laughed. I didn't laugh. I was embarrassed. Then, he dismissed me and said I could go back to the typing pool.

Grasso: He thought that was complimentary.

McGowan: Not for me. No, I don't think ...

Grasso: He just didn't think.

McGowan: I don't know that I was a human being to him. I don't know what I was. I don't know. It was things like that. It was just a series maybe of events or things that I had observed. The Madmen TV series was very real. If you are a female, men felt like it was okay to make passes and to do things like that. You do simmer at some point. When I came to NIH, I eventually applied for the STRIDE program, got into a training position, and obtained a college degree.

When I made the salutation suggestion, I wasn't trying to start a fire. I tried to change the salutation and was told it wasn't a part of the format and when I put it in the suggestion box I was told that it would have to be changed at the DHEW Departmental level and possibly beyond. I did not confront or push. There was another option – the NIH suggestion box that got it out of my organization. I then submitted the suggestion to the NIH suggestion box and got it out of my organization.

I don't think the controversy over whether to use neutral gender language was ever about just a change in salutation. When I was typing Dear Sir or Gentlemen over and over, I think I envisioned a woman project manager, business owner, scientist, or other professional responding to the government's request for proposal and what message that was sending to her. These were not just titles to me. I met these people so a woman project manager actually had a face. On the other hand, the people who fought this change must have at some level sensed that gender-neutral language meant that a woman could actually be in a management position or in a position of authority or decision-making. Maybe it was less about gender neutral language but what gender neutral language meant – it meant inclusion.

Grasso: I wondered how many of your supervisors were women. When you mentioned that some of your immediate supervisors mentioned that the Bible was on their side, could you repeat that?

McGowan: No. It wasn't so much that. I didn't have women supervisors at the time. They were men. It was many years later that I worked for women. I do not know what the Biblical reference was all about. There were men who supported the idea and men who just wouldn't. NIH gave the suggestion to the Research Contracts Division and Mr. Fretts, the Director, decided to circulate the suggestion for input. Initially, he gave the suggestion to his main policy person who did not support the suggestion. Fortunately, Mr. Nat Lindsey told Mr. Fretts that there were other perspectives and opinions and Mr. Fretts wanted to hear these perspectives.

Not all the women supported the idea. Some of them said it was time-consuming. Some of them said, "Of all the things to fight about, why this one?" They were right. There was never an argument that it was anything but trivial. It wasn't important like childcare or equality or equal pay. Again, to Mr. Fretts' credit, I know that he got some pushback. I know that he got pushed back about style manuals.

Whatever it was in him, he decided to go with the people who supported the logic of my suggestion, the logic of Diana, of Beverly and I'm sure Nat probably weighed in on this. It's about maybe what's in someone, in people that makes some people just dismiss, ignore, be indifferent. Others go, "Oh, I never really thought about that" and evolve.

Grasso: No, no. I just was surprised when I saw that little footnote about ...

McGowan: Oh, the Bible?

Grasso: ... the style manual and the Bible are on our side arguing against change that women's role in the world, universe forever and ever. That was curious to me. A lot of this too. There are things that you recall that are documented in the moment that bring you back to a place and a time more accurately than you recall. When you mentioned that men holding a door for you in the moment, you thought, thank you very much, you chauvinist. I can open my door. I had forgotten about that moment where there was real anxiety about, you know.

McGowan: There was. I have to talk about the troublemaker at some point because actually I became, I realized it was important for me to advance. I removed the woman's advisory committee from my resume and things that I had been proud of because I didn't need for somebody to go, "Oh, no. We don't want this in here. We don't want this." As you get power, I think you have to be able to somehow or another climb, and then maybe you get a better voice. I wanted promotions and position because I would have the power to change things including my own life. People hear you when you have power and position.

Yeah, the door thing is a perfect example. It's almost comical when I look back. Why was that an issue? It was an issue because even cussing, I was not raised to cuss. I didn't want to be nice girl anymore. I didn't want to be sweet. I didn't want to be a little lady because gee, that's like saying I'm a doormat. I am so inept, I'm so helpless, I'm such a damsel that I need all the help I can get including this big old heavy door. While working at the Health Care Financing Administration, I cleared out one of their snack stands one time because it was bring your child to work day and standing in line was a woman with her little girl. The man behind her said, "Well, we're hiring secretaries awfully young these days." I turned and asked him, "Why doesn't it occur to you that she may be the next director of the Health Care Financing Administration? Why are you saying that she's a secretary?" I said, "Nothing's wrong with being a secretary, but in your mind, you can't see her being anything else?" Everybody got really uncomfortable. I guess I didn't. I got to the point where I didn't care if somebody was uncomfortable. I'm not even sure the other women in line understood. These movements, many women are opposed to change as you still see today.

Grasso: That little girl certainly would remember that moment.

McGowan: I don't know, I'm hoping it didn't hurt her. I don't know what her mother said. Her mother may have said that woman is crazy. There are little things like door opening that you forget. Now, if somebody opens the door for me, I smile and say thank you because I know that that man or young man or boy is not opening the door for me because he thinks I'm feeble or inferior and he is not trying to assert dominance.

Grasso: Less than.

McGowan: Or less than, yeah. I certainly have no problems opening doors for guys if they have groceries or if they have small children or need help. I certainly don't mind opening a door. A lot of things you get testy about at one point but when things change, you can change. On the other hand, if everyone is comfortable then there is no change. There is no motivation and no new awareness.

Grasso: Overall, your impression, you mentioned at NIH at that time, there was an awful lot of stereotyping and prescribed gender roles and structure. Of your peers and folks that you found including these groups, how did you settle in? What were the things that made this a more comfortable place to be?

McGowan: How did it make a more comfortable place to be?

Grasso: I guess it was your strategy.

McGowan: I guess it was validating, the things that I had perceived the things that had hurt me. You know, how many times as a secretary had some guy come in and said, "You don't act like a pretty girl." I have heard that unfortunately more than once in my career. I'm thinking "What is wrong with this guy?" I came from a farm community. There was a lot of emphasis on being useful, not a pretty girl.

Grasso: Decorative.

McGowan: Yeah. You have to be useful. You know, you had to do all kinds of things. I wasn't sure what a pretty girl is supposed to act like. Then later on I read that smiling can be a submissive gesture. I also remember a time when I was working for NCI as a secretary and the coffee expectation. It wasn't just that I made coffee for the office. My boss had a lot of visitors. He didn't want to use paper cups, so we used china or glass cups.

Sometimes there were 16 of these things. I'd go in every morning and wash them. Sometimes people ate soup out of them. I had to clean these things, and I don't think they had kitchens then on the floor, so I had to take them into the bathroom. I'm washing these cups and then putting them back. I decided that I wasn't going to do that anymore. I got some paper cups, but I was told that that was not friendly. I started washing cups again. Then contractors would come in and my boss would come out and say, "Would you get Mr. E some coffee?" The coffee was right in front of me, right there -- the whole business. Everything they wanted was right there.

I remember one time Mr. E asked me for a cup of coffee. I said, "Help yourself." The next thing I knew, my boss was looking at me in an angry way and said, "Dorothy McGowan, would you bring Mr. E some coffee?" Then he says, "We're going to be over

here in the conference room." There was a conference going on, a big meeting. I took salt and creamer and sugar and whatever else was handy that wasn't toxic. I put it in the cup and I went in and I put it in front of Mr. E and lingered for him to take his first sip because I wouldn't miss that for the world.

He looked at me and I looked at him and he never asked me to get him coffee again. I left the conference room, stuck all the coffee cups in the freight elevator and pushed the basement level. I don't know what happened to those cups, but there were paper cups for everybody when they came back. That was it. There was no more discussion for me. Nobody asked me to bring them coffee. I would have done it for my boss probably. I guess I was a troublemaker. I didn't mean to be.

Grasso: I only use that phrase because when you stir the pot, everyone who does set things in motion is considered an agitator or a change maker or a change agent. I wasn't sure if you had experience, any blowback from having made your, put your suggestion. That's a suggestion.

McGowan: I think my directness and willingness to confront made people wary. However, when I went to work my emphasis was the job not a cause. I got my promotions when I got into a professional series because I was good at whatever I was doing. Contracts offices are always busy and sometimes overworked. I can remember being in the procurement branch, there was an assignment log. I knew when somebody came into the office with a new requirement. I already knew that people were overworked. I was single. I didn't have children. I would go in, just go to the boss's office right about that time.

Many times he would shake his head and say, "Everybody's so swamped. I don't know who to assign this to." I said, "I'll take it." I worked into the evenings. I'm imagining I must have been difficult for my bosses, because what do you do? I got along with my program officers. I worked very hard. I did really good work. Then there was that other side of me I guess.

Grasso: What a pleasant surprise to come back to NIH and have a check waiting for you and to be exonerated [McGowan eventually received a suggestion award check]. That's kind of interesting.

McGowan: It was so strange. It was 1981. I had forgotten about it. Things had changed.

I never really thought about it again. The suggestion disappeared. I have copies of some of the responses, these were no doubt bootleg copies sent to me. People were showing me in secret. Nobody called me. You see where even after the EEO people had said, "Yeah, this is something to act on." The PHS coordinator said no. Don't think I didn't know what a pat on the head looked like. The coordinator said to "compliment" me. Right – just what I needed – a compliment. How about forgetting the compliment and just stop calling women "sir". How about a polite acknowledgement that women might be in a position of authority and women aren't men and use gender neutral language.

Grasso: I love this story. Because it is of a moment. The fact that you held on to these speaks to the importance of that moment. This was a transition moment. A lot of things were changing but some weren't. Some were changing for some women and not others. I

wondered about the nexus of minority roles here on campus and roles of women. Did you think that at any time the two initiatives come together for you?

McGowan:

I didn't know the history. I'm not sure but I think Secretary Richardson started the STRIDE program. Apparently, there were some activist Blacks on campus or in DGW who basically took over his office and said, "We want some sort of upward ability." They created something called the STRIDE program. At the time you would get a college degree. You would also work 20 hours a week. You were put in a position so that at the end of that training, you were now a contracts person or a budget person or in the life sciences. I didn't know any better. I didn't know that this was meant to be for minorities. I applied, as did Beverly Fischetti, who is white, whose memo is there. Nat Lindsay is a black man and Diana is a white female. We all applied.

There were certainly black people, Eleanor Norment was a close friend of mine. She was an older black woman who was in the STRIDE program. In fact, we got our degrees, our contracts training, and met again when we both started working at EPA. One of the things that bothers me now, which is why I said in my transmittal letter that when you're marching, please don't look to the left or the right and say, "They're a little bit different than I am so I want to exclude them." There were some women who expressed anger that they had marched for civil rights to help change things and now wondering where are the black men to help the women's cause?

That was something I have to admit, I heard. There was a certain amount of anger about this. For me, I guess I let it all just pass. I'm always looking for the bottom line. Are we moving forward? Did these things converge? Yes. Nat Lindsay was a contract specialist. I wish he were alive. He died a year after he retired. I think he was 56 years old. He had started as a glass washer here at NIH. He remembers when he was not allowed to enter the front doors of building 31.

Nat Lindsay said to me once: "Dorothy McGowan, it's a protracted struggle." I didn't know what he meant at the time. I have to admit that I do now.

Reliving this time has caused a little bit of psychological discomfort. I was relieved when it was over. I'm going back to the '70s, it's jogging new memories. People don't always support each other even though we're for the same cause. I have to admit, there was somebody in the SHER group who said there were bigger things -- salary and scientists who needed promotion. They thought it was a waste of time. That it was trivial.....and I can only agree. So, I came back full circle to completely agreeing that the suggestion was trivial which is why it could be done immediately. Naïve.

Grasso:

It's a substantive change. That's a huge thing.

McGowan:

What are we doing, all of them were doing magnificent things. Women today are doing magnificent things. This is not meant to be magnificent. This was just, a little bit like Diana said. This is a small thing. Their constant denial of it and foolishness about their arguments, why it couldn't change, it became a big thing. I don't know what happened in all those years. I noticed that there were other things that came out. There was something in 1979. I don't think I gave you the entire document, but you can have it. I'm looking at

it and I went, oh my goodness. It was more than just salutations. I'll give you that for your own, and it's really, really hard to read. I can't remember if I gave it to you. Maybe I did give it to you.

Grasso: That gender-neutral language document is pretty interesting.

McGowan: Yeah, yeah. Did I give you all of it or did I just give you three pages? I had not scanned before. That was kind of new for me. I'm not sure, oh, here it is. Maybe it's here. These are all the originals if you would like to have them. It went much further than salutations. I had no idea if the suggestion helped put this in motion. don't know. I don't want to take credit for doing something that just didn't happen.

There's actually more copies here. I was surprised how the gender neutral language document even talks about language other than salutations. It talks about artwork. Sometimes men are quiet, passive, and sensitive, sometimes women are insensitive, aggressive, and authoritative. It was talking about sex roles stereotyping.

Grasso: The cover and the inside, just the ...

McGowan: I don't think I gave them yet. You can have this if you want.

Grasso: Oh, that would be great.

McGowan: This is kind of funny. I looked at it and I went, oh my goodness. I'm guilty of some of this today. Now, I don't call a policewoman a policeman. I do call her a police officer. You see all of this creeping back. You see people using "chairman" instead of "chairperson".

Grasso: Oh, thank you.

McGowan: I better do this too. Do you want the originals of these things?

Grasso: It would be wonderful.

McGowan: Because I can give you the, here's the original.

Grasso: What we would do is probably speak to the National Library of Medicine (NLM) to be our archival repository. They would hold the papers so that they're easily found, more easily found.

McGowan: Okay. Those are the originals. They're pretty old. You see that they're yellow. They were written with a typewriter. We didn't have computers then.

Grasso: We'll be sending a deed of gift, the NLM folks would send you a deed of gift for those documents. I just want to be able to scan them to the best quality.

McGowan: They might not want them.

Grasso: I think it's interesting. Did you attend the march ...

End of NIH Oral History Interview conducted by Hank Grasso with Ms. Dorothy McGowan.