BELIEF
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Name: Rita Warleigh

Date: 17 May 2011

Place: 499 Elizabeth St, Surry Hills NSW

Interviewer: Sue Andersen

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **SA:** **This is Sue Andersen interviewing Rita Warleigh on 17 May 2011 Rita's the coordinator of the International Volunteers for Peace and the project's for the City of Sydney Oral History Project, Belief.**

O.K, thanks, Rita - - -

RW: Pleasure.

SA: **- - - for doing the interview. Maybe you could say your full name and when and where you were born but also talk about the name that you actually go by.**

RW: O.K. My name's Rita Warleigh. When and where I was born?

SA: **Yes.**

RW: Sydney. When – you want to know how old I am?

SA: Just the year.

RW: '43, 1943, so I'm pretty ancient. My mother's English, my father's a couple of generations Australian. Recently I've been calling myself Rita Sophia. I was thinking of changing over to by deed poll but I haven't got around to doing that yet, so I'm sort of seeing how I feel about it.

SA: Was that because it had - - -

RW: Well just, you know, we inherit our father's name first of all and then we marry and take our husband's names and it's always sort of names that are handed on by men and I just wanted to choose my own, which I think a lot of women are doing these days. And it took me a long while to find one but I like the idea of Sophia meaning wisdom and of course, I suppose if there's one goal I have in life it'd be search for wisdom.

SA: Right, O.K. So you were born in Sydney?

RW: Yes.

SA: You went to school. Where was that?

RW: Gosh, you really do want ancient history. I went to school at Concord, yes, a little school there.

SA: And were you brought up in a particularly activist house or a household or a religious household at all?

2.06 RW: Oh no, definitely not religious but, yes, I guess my parents both volunteered at the PCYC or in those days it was the Police Citizens Boys Club. My mother did help with suppers for the Saturday night dances and, I don't know, my father did all kinds of things there. So I guess I certainly grew up with the idea of volunteering, not that it was ever really talked about, but I mean a lot of my early memories are of hanging around the Boys Club biz, you know, and going to all the Saturday night dances and so I suppose I had a view of volunteering as being a very positive thing, lots of fun and lots of people.

SA: So it was a usual community kind of event that your parents would go to?

RW: Yes. I suppose my brothers were all – I suppose that's how they got involved, I don't know really, because I was actually very little when they started there, but my brothers were both doing music and gymnastics and that sort of thing at the Boys Club, so yes.

SA: And you were saying very definitely that your parents weren't religious.

RW: Oh, my father was – well, should I say this on air – my father was a Communist, which actually now that I've met lots of other children of Communist parents I realise it was a great thing to have in your childhood because it really taught you to see the other side of things. But in those days of course it had to be hidden and so it was very secret and even though my father would discuss politics with me a little bit – or not really politics but maybe with the news, that he would always sort of give another side, so I knew that, you know, things weren't always as they seemed and you had to look a bit deeper.

4.15 But it was, you know, it was in the Menzies' era and it was sort of very scary. And I remember once telling him that I'd had a discussion with some friends at school and he said "Oh, you be very careful. Don't tell anyone you're a Communist", not that I was calling myself a Communist but I think I was having a conversation with some kids who were sort of very anti-communist and terrified about communists and so I said to my father "I think I'll tell them I'm a Communist" and "Oh", you know, "don't do that", he said. So that was how things were then but anyway my mother was not of that view at all and in fact hated him talking about politics because he'd get so angry and upset and so, yes, they were very different in that way.

SA: So, would he go out of the house to meetings or did you have meetings at home?

RW: Oh, no, we didn't have meetings at home, no, no way.

SA: Mum wouldn't allow that?

RW: No, Mum wouldn't allow that. I suppose he went to meetings – I don't know that, yes.

SA: So, did you have communist leanings when you were a teenager and starting to be able to vote?

RW: I've never been – no, no, not really, no. I mean, I suppose I certainly sympathised with communism and perhaps I thought it was a better way, you know, a better system but I always had a bit of a feeling of sort of spiritual existence and spiritual life, not that I'm deeply into that either, but I mean I think there's more to than this flesh and blood and so, you know, because communism was so against all that I couldn't really fully and wholeheartedly sort of say "I'm a Communist" at any point, no.

6.21 **SA: So where did you get that from, where did you get your spiritual kind of inquiry about?**

RW: I think I had it as a child, I think. I always loved nature and I always thought the world was quite a holistic place, I suppose, with just more than meets the eye and, you know, that there was another depth to things and sort of interconnections, I don't know where it came from.

SA: But it developed, yes?

RW: Yes.

SA: O.K. And growing up did you go to university and get into feminism and -?

RW: No. Well, my parents were poor, we were certainly not – not poverty stricken but we were not well off - there were five kids. I had a brother died when I was five – he was seven – that was a big impact on all our lives, well certainly on mine. So we were working class and expected to go to work after school, so no. I went to art school, actually, for three years but that was quite a sort of – I mean it was expected that once you left school you'd start paying board, so I did three years at art school but I had to work as well so that I could pay board and that was pretty stressful so I didn't complete that course and I didn't go to university until quite recently anyway.

8.24 **SA: Right. Well, that's amazing.**

RW: Yes, and in a way I was prompted to go to university because of, you know, running this organisation, International Volunteers for Peace, that I sort of thought I'd like a few more skills, yes.

SA: O.K, so you weren't necessarily into activism until much later in your life?

RW: No, and I wasn't into feminism either. I didn't realise you'd be asking such deep and meaningful questions but I can remember that – no, well, look, I had a sister eight years older than me. She got engaged at eighteen, married at twenty, started having kids. So, I mean, I thought that's what life was for for a girl, you know. My mother certainly was a very, shall I say, traditional – she didn't like girls wearing trousers, things like that. So, yes, my expectations were to get married, really, after I left school; I didn't really ever think about a career. I wanted to do art – well, I really wanted to do music; art was a second choice because it was kind of like "Well, how can you have a career in music?" I had no concept of that so art was a bit on the same sort of level but at least you could probably find some work as a commercial artist or something or sell some paintings. [break in recording]

10.12 **SA: Yes, so you were saying that – I think that was expected of women, just to get married and have kids.**

RW: Yes, that's right. So I actually married my sweetheart from high school and had my gorgeous son and a couple of years later a daughter.

SA: Actually, you were talking about your art, doing art, that's right.

RW: Yes, yes. Yes, that's right, so I did three years of art and then I got married, had two children. And, yes, no, you asked me about feminism because just this little thing stuck in my head that I remember – well, gosh, anyway I remember a young man actually asking me was I a feminist and I sort of responded that, you know, I didn't have any – like, you know, I just had no interest in going that way, you know, that I was just being a very traditional – I probably was never traditional really – but, yes, that I was just a young mum with a couple of kids and feminism seemed very far away at that point for me. So I came to that a lot later, I suppose, yes.

SA: Right. So when did you start becoming involved in the peace movement then?

RW: Well, one thing that happened was that I got very involved in healing, natural healing, massage, Chinese medicine and I became a Shiatsu therapist, so Japanese massage, and that's what I started doing for a living and I was teaching Shiatsu as well and I also went to Japan and studied actually with my son – he was sixteen at the time.

12.24 We spent three months in a dojo in Japan, studying under a samurai, and that was a pretty intense time and that was a very, I suppose, formative time for both of us.

SA: So you would have been around about - - -

RW: I was about forty-something.

SA: Right.

RW: Yes, early forties. No, hang on. He was sixteen, so yes I was less than forty, late thirties. Anyway, the yoga that kind of went with a whole lot of philosophy about making the absolute most you can out of yourself, out of your life, out of not only body but your mind, your spirit and about passing that on, like once you've learnt something it's essential to pass it on and, yes, living your potential and using every moment of your life to be fully awake and fully active. Anyway, so I came back from Japan – we were there for six months, actually – came back, both of us like so fired up and full of energy and conquer the world and by this time I was living in the Blue Mountains and I then got – well, I said as a child I was always interested in nature – I got inspired by the Franklin [River, Tasmania] campaign and I went to the Franklin.

14.17 So, when was that? It's was early '80s anyway. You had to do a three day training before going, maybe two or three days – I think two days and then another day when you got there – on non-violence and I was so impressed with the training that I joined the trainers and I became a trainer for the Franklin campaign. But the group of trainers actually then became an independent group and we did training for all kinds of other organisations, teaching non-violence and communication and facilitation skills.

SA: So was this as a volunteer?

RW: Yes, as a volunteer, yes, and we called ourselves Chrysalis because we reckon we transformed people and groups from caterpillars into butterflies - well, I suppose we were trying to transform ourselves and we did training for ourselves as well, training for trainers, training each other and giving feedback. So it was a fantastic group, really, it was a fantastic time. And it was after – so those two sort of really meaningful experiences and then I discovered this organisation. I went to Europe for my first ever trip to Europe and I - - -

SA: So that was about the mid '80s?

RW: '87, yep. And I accidentally discovered this organisation. Somebody was going – I met someone and we were going to go cycling. I went to Europe; I took my bicycle with me. [Break in recording]

16.02 **SA: Yes, you were saying that you went to Europe.**

RW: That's right. I was going to go cycling through Europe with somebody and he said "Oh, I'm going on this project first of all, so why don't you enroll for this project too and then we'll go cycling from there on?" So as it turned out I got accepted into – so this organisation was called Service Civil International and I went on a project in Italy for two weeks in the central of Italy, central part of Italy, working in the environment.

SA: What were you doing?

RW: Well, we had a small international team, about twelve, fourteen people, and we were actually living – our accommodation was in a primary school or pre-school, a little school anyway, in this little village outside of L'Aquila. And we were cleaning up – it was with World Wildlife Fund, in cooperation with them, the Italian branch – we were cleaning up. There was this big area of sort of farmland that had a stream running through it with a lot of springs along the stream. The area was in the mountains and the rain didn't – it's this particular kind of landscape that the rain just goes straight into the ground so rivers form from runoff, the only rivers are from springs. This is really interesting, actually, and this creek, this stream, the water was allotted to the various farmers at different times of the day, so you

can only take water at a particular time and they actually had somebody in charge of sort of wandering up and down the stream, making sure that no one was taking the water when they shouldn't. So we were cleaning up the area. We picked up all the rubbish, put it in bags, got it taken away in a truck.

18.03 We built a little bridge over the creek and we made some signs for some of the native vegetation. And then there was particular day, holiday, in Italy where everybody goes out and has a picnic with their family in nature, so we had brochures in Italian on one side and English on the other, and we went around to all these little family groups to try to explain why the area should be made into a nature reserve, which is what World Wildlife Fund wanted, and why people should look after it and respect it and so forth. So that was our big project but it was great, it was a fantastic insight into Italian life and the little village. And as well there was this idea of, you know, all the international people working together and learning to understand each other and cooperate.

SA: So by that stage you were into environmental issues?

RW: Yes, I guess I was.

SA: But you've been fighting to save the Franklin. I guess it would be - - -

RW: Yes.

SA: - - - hard to say that you weren't.

RW: Yes. Well, I suppose it's just something that I think is essential to preserve. It's not like it was an issue, it was just like it's common sense that we need to look after our world, yes.

SA: O.K, so you travelled around, after you did your two weeks of volunteering initially you travelled around?

19.56 RW: I stayed in Italy for about five months actually and I found a – well, I said I'd studied in Japan. Well, there was a dojo in Italy as well, so I found that and I spent some time there and I also spent some time on a farm with a friend from Australia whose father was Italian, yes. So anyway at the end of this project with Service Civil International the leader, the group leader said to me "Why don't you do something in Australia?" and I sort of said "Oh, maybe". And anyway some six months or so later I got a letter, saying "Here are the names of six people who have ever said they might do something in Australia" so I said "Oh, all right", so I wrote to them all and I got replies from two and we met at Badde Manors [café] in Glebe and talked about, you know, what experience we had of Service Civil International and what

skills we thought we could bring to it and I said “Let’s do it”. So we started the organisation here with just three of us.

SA: In what year?

RW: ’88, I suppose, yes. And Chris and I were always very active and Vern much less so - Vern kind of was very good for giving advice and opinion. Chris and I sort of did all the work in the beginning, so we organised a project here as a start and sort of went from there.

21.56 And we had an office that was a cardboard box that I carried around with me and, I don't know, after three or four years Chris dropped out. He was sort of doing the final stages of uni and masters degree and it was all getting too difficult for him to continue but by that time we’d managed to recruit a few other people anyway. Yes, so we started off with, you know, no funding, no idea how to run an organisation, just lots of inspiration and energy and it’s grown very slowly because we’ve never really had anyone in the organisation who’s sort of got business skills or funding skills or anything other than enthusiasm for the idea of, yes, I guess the peace. I mean, you asked me that question before, when did I start. I mean, I guess doing the non-violence training was probably my first understanding of, you know, peace, what peace can really mean, when people really talk together and work together and work through problems and learn how to cooperate; I like that idea of peace, you know. I mean, peace is a big word and there are many ways of describing it or people have different ideas of what peace is but I guess for me that’s the sort of peace that I like. And I guess, interestingly enough, the teacher in Japan, this samurai, Aki Sensai, he was also a peace activist. I mean, he believed in getting to peace through coming to peace with your body first and then, you know, from there being able to come to peace with your community and your family and the world. So, yes.

24.05 **SA: So, did you take on the, I guess, beliefs of the international parent organisation or when the three of you got together did you got together did you talk about sort of developing other - - - [break in recording] Yes, I was asking you about when you came together as the group of three - - -**

RW: Oh, right.

SA: - - - did you kind of establish, what it was that you wanted the organisation to be run by or the principles or did you kind of take on the international parent body?

RW: Probably a bit of both. I mean, we always saw ourselves as independent and that we – I mean, I guess the thing about Service Civil International is that it is independent, every country; it’s very grassroots in that way, that every country – it’s not like there’s a – what do you call it? – a coordinating branch or a coordinating office or

anything; it's a network of independent organisations that all subscribe to this sort of basic philosophy, and we always saw that we had the independence to be as much part of that as we wanted but if it didn't suit us that we could act independently or differently. But, yes, the principles and the philosophy are not hard to accept; we found that we agreed with their principles, yes.

SA: Well, can you tell me what they are?

RW: O.K, so it was set up, it started in 1920 - Pierre Ceresole was a peace activist. I mean there were a lot of peace activists in those days after WWI, apparently, a lot of people, you know, very, very actively trying to find ways to create peace in the world.

26.11 He and various friends went to various meetings to set up various groups and one of them was IFOR, International Fellowship of Reconciliation - which is quite big in Europe, it's not so well known out here – and he helped form that group but apparently he sort of stood up at the end of the meeting and said "I want action. I don't want sitting around, talking, it's got to be action". And so he and his friends then started this project. He actually negotiated with the mayor of Verdun in France, a village near the German border that had been completely flattened, there wasn't one house left, and he got a team, his international team of friends and recruited some more volunteers and they got permission from the mayor and they went there and set up camp and started building houses so that the villagers could return. And it's quite an interesting story, actually, because the villagers were at first absolutely delighted. Then they discovered there were Germans in the group and they said "The project's got to stop. We're not having Germans in our village". And so the volunteers, you know, had a discussion together and they said "Well, what we're here for is reconciliation and learning to understand each other and work together, so if the Germans have to go we all go". And so they stopped the project and they started negotiating again and, yes, so that's kind of basically what it's about. And so they ended up being there quite long term and built houses. But then after that they also did projects where they did rehabilitation after natural disasters but always with this idea of having an international team so that, yes, you just learn to understand other cultures.

28.18 **SA: So that was part of it, was it, actually working with other cultures?**

RW: That's the essence of it, yes, that's exactly what it's about, that's the peace aspect of it so that, you know, once you've got to work side by side with somebody of a totally – you know, a Muslim or a Jew or a German or, I don't know, Aboriginal person or whatever, you know, you learn to appreciate them as people and realise, you know, similarities we have but also how different cultures can affect how we think or different religions, etcetera, so yes.

SA: So the organisation just got bigger and bigger from there and then - - -

RW: In Australia?

SA: Well, in Europe.

RW: In Europe, yes, yes. Yes, it spread throughout Europe fairly quickly and then, I don't know, eventually they sort of went to India and started some projects there - I think in the '60s they started things in Africa. It's quite big in India and Sri Lanka, not so big in Bangladesh and then more recently there's been a big push into Eastern Europe, yes. And there's one in the States but they're a very small one just like us; they've been going about the same length of time as us.

SA: It's interesting that there was not an organisation that started earlier than – did you say - - -

RW: '88.

SA: '88?

RW: Yes.

SA: Yes.

30.01 RW: Well, it was also very difficult when we first started the organisation because no one had heard of the concept. I mean, because it came from the 1920s there's a lot of terminology also that comes from there, like "work camp". In fact, so the idea was, yes, having this international team and developing peace through understanding but also they lobbied the government to set up an alternative to military service. So, look, the name Service Civil International means the opposite of national military service. So they wanted a civilian service where people could serve and help the community, doing things that were good for everyone, not just training up to kill someone because they came from the other side of the fence. So they lobbied governments to have that accepted as a sort of alternative and so it's because of Service Civil International that we have conscientious objection as a legal alternative, so yes.

SA: Right.

RW: Yes. [Break in recording]

SA: So prior to that that concept of - - -

RW: No, that's right, it didn't exist.

SA: It didn't exist?

RW: No, that's right, and it still doesn't exist in some countries but it's, you know, pretty general throughout the world, yes. So that's right, so he lobbied, you know, or they lobbied for that and a lot of countries where there is conscientious objection it's often still sort of a bit of a punishment that you have to do longer and you get paid less, so yes, so it doesn't become an attractive alternative, I suppose, just to test your resolve that you really have to build - - -

32.06 **SA: So they were a lobby group as well as a working group?**

RW: They were, in that sense they were, yes, yes, just anti-war really, I suppose, yes. I mean, they say that they're not a lobby group; they say they're just – it's action but, yes, they have lobbied.

SA: Now, so the beliefs that you took on, I mean, obviously it was the idea of peace but I'm just wondering whether you could cast your eye over this - this is on your website actually.

RW: Yes.

SA: So when you got together, the three of you, sitting down, talking about, well, what was this organisation going to look like in Australia - - -

RW: Yes.

SA: - - - what things were you considering? Did you think about like that you were actually working in an Australian context and what that might mean here in Australia?

RW: No, and I don't know that I entirely understand your question anyway but, I mean, we started off with a project. I guess we thought about what sort of areas we might want to work in and one was environment, another one was with Aboriginal people, another one was maybe with women's organisations, refugees. So we thought about the sort of areas that we wanted to have projects in, the sort of organisations we wanted to work with, yes.

34.01 **SA: And were there changes that you had to make to the principles of the organisation being based here in Australia or it was about peace and that's universal?**

RW: Yes. I don't think we've had to make changes. I mean, I didn't know a lot about the parent organisation when we started here; I'd been to this one project in Italy. I really liked the concept and I liked how it related to other parts of my life that were important. Chris had done a couple of work camps. I think he did one in Russia and one in Finland and I'm not sure where else and Vern had done quite a few

work camps, including being a long term volunteer in Bangladesh. So we all liked the principle and, you know, we started with a project and then a year later we did another project.

SA: What was the first project that you did?

RW: It was bush regeneration in the Blue Mountains just because, you know, I had contacts there and we could organise it easily because the whole concept was not really known in Australia. That's where I came to sort of talking about the old terminology: so they're called work camps because of this whole idea of them being not military camps but work camps. We've now just sort of dropped using that word and we started using the word "projects" but the word "work camps" still sort of comes back into the terminology. And "peace" too, maybe that's a sort of concept that people find a bit hard to get their head around as well.

36.02 And maybe they're things that hold us back and stop us from, you know, becoming a bigger, more successful organisation but once you've been on a work camp you like the idea, you know, and you like the word, so it's hard to change those sort of things.

SA: So in that first project where did you get your volunteers from?

RW: Well, the way we got the volunteers is the same as the way we do now: we advertise the project with the international network; we let them know we've got this project and people apply through the organisations around the world, so the same as we've got information about all the projects they've organised. So each country organises the projects in their own country so you have close links with the host. I mean, we don't organise them – well, I suppose that first one was maybe different but generally we're cooperating with another existing organisation, helping them to do some work that they would have trouble otherwise completing. It's got to be a non-profit organisation, it's got to be not replacing paid labour, it's got to be something that we think, you know, that is good for the community and also where the volunteers are going to get some learned skills or learn about an issue – it's got to be a two-way street. So what was the question? You've forgotten too.

SA: I've forgotten as well. No, I was asking you where did you get your volunteers from but that's quite clear.

RW: Right, yes, yes, yes. And we had an Australian girl – I don't know how we got her actually but, yes, it's a bit hard to remember exactly, yes.

SA: So still by this stage you were still working out of a box?

37.58 RW: Yep, that's right. And I was going to say that, yes, so the first thing we did have a project and a year later another project but in the meantime we had to sort of start looking at – well, we decided we'd have a membership so then there's the administration of that, you know, and then there's, you know, correspondence and meetings and then we had to open a bank account so we had to, you know, elect members and become a non-profit organisation and then we had to have a constitution. So all that side of it's been secondary but it's had to happen along the way. So none of us had any experience in that so it wasn't like we sort of came in – I mean, I envy people who go "Right, I'm going to set up an organisation to do such and such" and they get it all structured and they get the funding coming in and then they start doing the work. Well we just, you know, did it the other way around. And so in a way we didn't really know a lot about the parent organisation either. I mean that's got ninety years of – well, it was seventy years then but now it's ninety years of history so that's a lot of development, a lot of change and because it's so big and strong in Europe people, you know, they know the history. It had also become a very big, cumbersome – it had a cumbersome sort of structure that was difficult to make decisions and that sort of thing. So about ten years ago they did a complete restructure and simplified how the organisation works. But it's also really taken me a very long time to really learn about the history, about how they communicate, about the structure, who's who, keep up with – you know, and we used to get the minutes of international meetings but it was just impossible to understand: there's all that history, all that structure, all those names. So really it's taken me a long time to understand that organisation as a whole and it's only now that we're really able to say "We think this needs looking at".

40.04 You know, so we're finally able to have a bit of an influence in the international meetings and say – you know, like for instance you've just pointed out that on our website it says what we believe "International Solidarity" – well, I think we've just changed that because solidarity is one of the topics that they organise work camps under. Well, what exactly does that mean? You know, we're not really sure. So we're kind of suggesting now that they should look at this wording, be a bit clearer about what it means and maybe consider using something else. And, you know, it's come from I don't know where, the sort of east/west divide in Europe or something like that. So another word that is strongly used is like "north/south" as in north being, you know, the more developed countries, south being less developed world. That's a bit difficult for us to accept as well because here we are in the south. So, things like that we're starting to – yes, so we've had to, you know, learn a lot about administration, about organisations, about international communication. I mean, it's been a huge learning curve for me.

SA: It sounds like it's a full time job.

RW: Oh, it has been a full time job and completely as a volunteer. And I'm over it, I want to leave, I want other people to take it over; it's time for me to go.

SA: So have you got anyone waiting in the wings?

RW: No, not really. I'm trying to build up a committee at the moment who's sort of strong enough to take over. But, yes, I mean I've done it for twenty two years. But, look, it's been the most fulfilling job anyone could possibly have; it's been fantastic, you know.

42.04 And volunteers who go on projects and then come back and, you know, they've been moved, their lives have changed, you know, they've been inspired to turn around and go in a different direction or they've opened up their heart to something that they, you know, had no concept about - it's fantastic, better than money, you know.

SA: So you would have had to have kept fairly abreast of what was going on sort of internationally as well, I would imagine, like politically and socially.

RW: To a certain extent. I mean, one of the things I love about Service Civil International is that there are – well, of course, when we started it was all paperwork, you know, applications were sent by mail and then fax came in and then, you know, finally we had to make the big step to internet and email. So now we've got several sort of email networks where people can discuss issues so there's always - you know, when any international event happens there's really interesting discussion that goes on. So, I mean that's one of the great things about it: there's very lively discussion and people can be very frank.

SA: And what about kind of campaigns and issues closer, like at home? Because I guess there's a lot to be done here as well. So what other projects have you done here?

RW: Well, I mean we decided to take on working with Aboriginal groups as a priority because we think racism in Australia – I mean we're against war but we're against racism or we're against – I don't know what word to say but we'd like to see war becoming illegal and not something – like slavery, you know. Everybody thinks that's been abolished and yet it was a huge thing in the world once upon a time and accepted and it would be great if war could be abolished, you know, and racism too.

44.25 But we think racism in Australia is an important issue, so we were working with a lot of Aboriginal groups - we haven't done any of that work in a couple of years now. Well, I suppose since we started the organisation's grown very slowly, partly because of our inexperience, partly because the whole concept is a new one in Australia. We had no money for publicity or marketing or anything like that so it's grown

by word of mouth. It's changed – I mean, I think you said that one of the questions; you were going to ask me about changes. Well, it's changed dramatically in the last, I don't know, maybe five years. Well, for a start there was, you know, a lot more international terrorism so people are a bit more cautious about where they go. We've got huge competition now with adventure tourism and of course they've got a lot of money to advertise, etcetera, and now the new thing is the gap year, so that's a huge thing too. Now, those people – like to go on an overseas project with us it costs you, you pay your own fare, etcetera, but your actual fees are three hundred and fifty dollars.

46.01 For just about any other organisation it's in the thousands. So why aren't they coming to us? They don't know about us but we don't have money to market the organisation but especially like young kids who've just left school, we're the perfect organisation really for them to volunteer through. So that's one thing. Another thing is that, you know, it's I guess business: all kinds of business these days really need to be very up to date with internet and, you know, the latest technologies and we're a bit behind with all that.

SA: But you have introduced that?

RW: We've got a lovely website and we do, yes, everything by internet but, we're not out there really. I mean, we've got a Facebook but we don't really know how to use it to advantage and that sort of thing and I'm not really interested in learning that stuff, which is another reason why it really needs to be a new generation taking over the organisation now.

SA: So any other changes that you've seen over the years since the organisation started?

RW: No, I don't know. I mean, I think that there's also – I don't really want to get political because we're a non-political organisation but during the Howard years there was a lot of pressure on people to work more, more productivity, you know, and so I think people are working harder now and perhaps playing harder as well. I think there's actually less interest in volunteering now and sort of in a way volunteering's been corporatised. You know, there's been study done into how many hours people volunteer or all the kinds of volunteering, why people volunteer and, you know, volunteering, I don't know that it should be sort of so closely defined.

48.24 I think when we're nice to each other it's kind of volunteering too, you know. And I think – I don't know – another theory of why it's declining is that people these days are sort of more happy to just sort of give some money and it's an immediate feel-good rather than put hours of their time when they could be doing something else.

SA: So you're not getting as many people these days?

RW: No, no. It's getting harder and harder to get people both for our projects in Australia and for volunteering overseas.

SA: It actually really surprises me. It really surprises me because I just thought there were many, many more – that whole concept of actually going and doing aid work it's really taken off but what you're saying is it's taken off by those adventure tourism people.

RW: Exactly, yes, yes, yes.

SA: Wow. Yes, that's really interesting; it's not what I thought at all.

RW: Yes. So that's why we're, you know, really happy about this interview because we really don't know if we're going to survive, you know, this year or the next few years, so yes.

SA: So you've got projects that you'd like to work on but just you're not able to attract - - -

49.54 RW: We've got a project starting tomorrow. We've only got two projects this year; one starts tomorrow. It's a fabulous project, we think, but we've only got half the volunteers we'd like to have. So we've got – well, we had seven but unfortunately the young man from Jordan's been refused a visa – so we've got six. We would have liked to have ten or twelve but - - -

SA: What's the project?

RW: The project is with a group called 'Breakaway'. They're on the Central Coast and they provide respite – well, it's not respite care, it's a holiday camp for people with disabilities and their carers. So the carers go along and have a holiday too and they organise – you know, they have extra volunteers come in so that each person with a disability has maybe a couple of volunteers as well as their carer so that the carer can just enjoy the camp. And they have special activities set up so the clients are there for a week and they have fantastic activities for them. They've got a marvellous property, it's just set up – you know, this accommodation that's designed for intensive – well, there are all levels of care; some of them need less care and some of them are intensive. And they have, you know, the local motorbike club comes in and takes them on bike rides and they've got a swing set that you can take a wheelchair into. So all those things you don't think about that, you know, people with disabilities don't get to go on swings, you know. They've got a sensory walk now that, you know, it's got smells and things to touch but it's also got some – you know how if you walk down along the beach there are things where you do your pushups and your legups, all that athletic stuff, well it's got some of that as well in the sensory walk but designed for people with disabilities, so.

52.00 And when I visited the project they had a couple of people had come in to do an Olympic Games day and they had all these competitions but, you know, some of them were blowing balls along a board with numbers on it, all kinds of activities like that where they were competing – lots of fun, lots of fun. And - that's right - they were having a cocktail night. Well, they weren't having alcohol but they had all these fabulous drinks mixed up and they had converted the dining room into a Turkish bazaar and they'd just done so much work on it and they had incredible décor and the food was all appropriate for the occasion. So, yes, it's a really great camp. So our volunteers are just going to be, yes, helping with that.

SA: So you'll hook up with other organisations to kind of provide volunteers for people? So you're making connections, that's the role of the organisation, to make connections?

RW: Well, we work with another organisation, so their organisation's called Breakaway and they've been running these camps for a number of years. They had trouble getting enough volunteers, so one of our members actually who's done quite a few work camps, she happened to, you know, meet someone from this organisation and heard that they were needing volunteers and said "Oh, well, you know, why don't you talk to IVP". So another thing I didn't say, that when we first started here in Australia we called ourselves Service Civil International.

SA: Service -?

RW: Service Civil International, which is the parent body but after some years we thought it was negative rather than positive, so we changed our name, took quite a while to come to a new name. I would have like the word "Greenpeace" but it was already taken so we're International Volunteers for Peace.

54.06 Anyway, so we started negotiating with Breakaway and they liked the idea of having international volunteers because that adds a different flavour as well to their camps and it also helps them, yes. So we've got six and they're meeting here tomorrow morning, so we're looking forward to meeting up with them. And the other project we've got, we've been working with a woman in Queensland who looks after injured wildlife, so we've been recruiting just one volunteer at a time. So she's had people from Slovenia, Taiwan, Poland, Sri Lanka turn up at her house and stay with her for a month and help her with looking after the wildlife at the same time as getting to, you know, meet a kangaroo, all that sort of thing for the volunteers, yes.

SA: Gosh, that's incredible. So that's just an ongoing project?

RW: It is. It's actually coming to an end and we've just started working with an organisation called 'BlazeAid' which I've only just found out about but they work in Australian rural areas, helping after cyclones and floods, etcetera, and we're very excited to have this new relationship with them because in a way that's where Service Civil International started, you know, helping after natural disasters. So we've got our first volunteer up in Tully in Queensland. She's Russian, she's sixty two and she's out there, helping with clearing fences.

SA: Because I was going to ask you, actually, like what are these - - -

RW: Profile?

SA: Yes, what's the profile of someone who comes here to volunteer?

55.54 RW: Well, look, in Europe it's very easy to go, you know, from France to Holland or, you know, hop over a border in your university holidays, etcetera, to volunteer for a few weeks so the profile there is really eighteen to twenty three and mostly female. We're very pleased that our profile is a lot wider. A lot of the volunteers we send are older. I mean, probably we haven't sent anyone over the age of seventy. I mean, we had a woman turn sixty in the middle of a work camp in Bangladesh and she just had the most wonderful birthday. You know, they took her out to a movie but she had to be accompanied by – because it's not O.K. for a woman to go, especially a western woman, go out on her own. So they took her out to a movie in a little group and they cooked her a cake and, yes, she had a wonderful time. And, yes, and we've just got this woman from Russia here at the moment, she's sixty two. She's done about four or five work camps around the world, different places, yes. But we have a lot maybe, you know, thirties, forties, yes, and in fact not so many in the eighteen to twenty three range.

SA: So they would be more likely to go to the adventure?

RW: Probably, yes, yes, yes.

SA: Now, you were talking before about changing your name - - -

RW: Yes.

SA: - - - to International Volunteering for Peace. So it's much more than peace, though, isn't it? Because I'm just looking at the website, info on the website. So can you just tell me what your organisation believes in, like what's the belief of International Volunteers for Peace?

58.00 RW: Well, I think it's just the principle of - taking action, I suppose is definitely a part of it. Yes, but the idea of overcoming prejudice

through getting to know other cultures, other ways of thinking. Yes, I mean that's really the principle of it and creating paths to peace by creating a scenario where that can happen, where those sort of international friendships can grow, yes.

SA: So it's kind of peace in a really broad sense of the word, isn't it?

RW: It's seeds of peace. I don't know that it's broad. It's kind of – I guess the eventual aim is broad but I think it's actually, yes, like sowing seeds that are going to grow into, you know, a forest.

SA: And it's not direct action?

RW: No, no. It's direct action but it's not like - - -

SA: Not in its traditional meaning.

RW: Yes, no, yes. I mean, it's direct action in that it's working directly with peace, throwing people in together. The thing is it's like you create a temporary community on a work camp or a project. You see, a work camp is more than a project, isn't it, anyway? The people are living together so they're not just going somewhere to volunteer; they're living together in a group. They stay in that same group for two weeks. They sort of do an orientation, there's that whole thing of group building, they have a group leader who ideally is kind of looking after making sure everybody's included and organising discussions, organising some sort of evaluation and feedback so that everybody's got a chance to say how things are going, if they think there should be any changes or what difficulties they're having, they have rosters and they cook food.

60.21 So the last project I was on, I was cooking with – I think she was Italian - the only language we had in common was French. I've got school French; her French was a tiny bit better than mine but not much. So here we are, trying to talk in broken French to organise a menu and work out how to cook a meal. And everybody's expected to take part in everything, so whether it's cleaning or, you know, all the various rosters so there's an equality and everybody's on a learning curve, everybody's got a level of discomfort and difficulty and challenge and what happens between people is amazing. You know, some of those friendships last a lifetime; mostly, you know, that's what happens. I remember talking to a woman who – well, she was actually on a project where someone died; it was a drowning accident.

SA: One of the participants, like one of the volunteers?

RW: One of the volunteers, yes. And she said she was telling someone about this, you know, how she was affected by this and the person she was talking to said "How long did you know this person?" and she said "Oh, about ten days" and they sort of said "How could you be

that affected by somebody you'd only known ten days?" you know, and she said "Like it's just amazing how deeply you connect with people on a project like this where you're, you know, living together and challenging each other as well as volunteering and doing something that's, you know, good for the community or the environment or whatever".

62.16 So, yes, it's amazing, it's hard to really describe the profoundness of what we do.

SA: So, do you find that a lot of the people that come here want to go internationally rather than working in Australia – Australians wanting to volunteer?

RW: Yes. We used to have a really strong push for trying to get Australians on Australian projects and especially when we had worked with Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal schools and that sort of thing we had no difficulty getting people but in general, especially now, it's actually very difficult to get Australians on our projects, yes.

SA: So why is it that you don't do so much work in Aboriginal communities?

RW: Oh, it's not really that. We're just actually not doing very many projects now. I mean, once upon a time we'd be doing five or seven projects a year; we've just got two this year. So, yes, it's just the energy's run down a bit; everything's a bit sort of on the decline, the number of projects, the number of volunteers. I mean, I used to run a leader training every year, using all the stuff I've learnt as a non-violence trainer and they were great but these days I can't get enough participants to make it worthwhile to run so we don't do that either. So, yes, it's just on a bit of a decline. Hopefully there'll be some new blood and some new inspired young people will join up and take it to great heights again.

64.11 **SA: It sounds like there's a market if the adventure tourism can be charging so much money for their tours.**

RW: Yes. Look, I think it's possible but, you know, it's just – we're doing a whole lot of analysis at the moment, looking at internal and internal constraints, you know, to sort of try and evaluate whether it's worth trying to continue, really, or, yes, whether it should just go back into a cardboard box and have a rest or go to sleep. And, look, you know, because it's my baby, I mean there've been a few occasions before where I've been sort of just feeling the lack of other people to support the work and help with the work, help with the workload where I've suggested we close down. But, you know, it's been very difficult for me, it's been a real challenge to sort of work out how I can leave and watch it, you know, fall apart or whatever, not that that necessarily is

going to happen but it's been looking that way. I'm now feeling O.K. about that; I now feel like "What a fantastic thing to have done and, you know, maybe it's had its day and, you know, maybe someone will come along and start it all up again". So it's O.K, I feel O.K. now about if it closes.

SA: So in terms of campaigns that you've been involved with in the past - - -

66.03 RW: Well, you asked a question about whether we do direct action. The only political campaign, the only political project or work camp we've ever done was at Jabiluka. We went up and helped the Mirrar people in their campaign to preserve some of their land from a planned uranium mine. So, yes, we joined, we sent a little international group up to join that camp.

SA: Tell me about that.

RW: Well, I don't know. You know, it was a bit of sort of - because we say we're not political, so it was a bit of a sort of challenge to even present that to the committee and get that accepted as an agreement to do that. I don't know. I went. It was fabulous; I mean it was fabulous experience.

SA: So what did you do?

RW: We just joined with everybody else, really. So we did, you know, cooking and learning; a lot of it was just leaning about the issues. A woman from the Mirrar people came and, you know, talked to us, so getting to know about them. We did some theatrical stuff; we got involved in an early morning theatre piece at the mine. Well, it was where the gate to the new mine site was and we got, you know, I don't know how many people, a hundred people, down there at dawn which meant we had to get up at four and we all got dressed up. But, you know, all the planning for what the theatre – it was a dye-in so, you know, there were people all painted green, sort of dying from uranium poisoning and all that sort of stuff. Yes, it was very funny, actually.

68.05 Yes, so we did that sort of thing. We helped with some of the logistics, driving the bus, just the same sort of thing that most of the people at the camp were doing, yes.

SA: So you took some volunteers from overseas on that campaign?

RW: Yes, yes. There were a few Australians but mostly from overseas, yes. And so we had a little tent site so we stayed together and so we were sort of just a group within the big group, really, yes.

SA: So it sounds like you actually get involved in a lot of the actual campaigns as well as - - -

RW: Well, I did actually get arrested at that camp but that was it.

SA: O.K. Come on, tell us about that too.

RW: O.K, and I got arrested at the Franklin as well, so I've been arrested three times, I've been in gaol three times. And, of course, it was a choice on all three occasions, a choice to sort of be – I mean, that's what I like about – I guess with the whole Franklin was that the idea of the training was that people were very clear about what they were getting themselves into, so there weren't people making rash decisions and rushing out and doing things. So if you were going to get into a situation where you could get arrested you knew that and you knew the consequences. Yes, so the one at Jabiluka, yes, at this business, this huge theatrical event that we staged, I mean we told the police we were going to be there and we told the media and so they were all there as well and then some of us sort of, you know, got over the fence or through the fence and sort of didn't get very far before we got arrested and so thrown in the paddy wagon and transported to Darwin, to the lock-up in Darwin, spent the night there.

70.12 That was a very interesting experience, that's a whole other story. But anyway spent the night there and then appeared in court in the morning for a – I've forgotten all the – it's a bit the same as what happened in Tasmania, really. In Tasmania there was a whole busload of us arrested and we happened to be with David Bellamy [UK environmentalist] – he was in that action that day – so he was in the bus, travelling with us. We travelled through the night; it was an action very early in the morning - in fact, I was on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. So we all went by various canoes and vessels across the Franklin River down, we went down and then across to where the mine site where they'd landed a huge bulldozer the day before and some of us, you know, got off on the land; so we were safe on the water but once you went on the land you were trespassing. So we trespassed and we went up and we climbed all over the bulldozer and, well, we had photos of ourselves on the bulldozer on the front page of the *Herald*. So a whole busload of us got – well, it took all day for them to process us, take all the photos, you know, get all the details – then they had to transport us up the river and then they kept us there until they got the bus that came over from the east coast and picked us up, so it was early hours of the morning by the time we actually got to the gaol. And we were in Risdon; the women were in Risdon, the women's prison. But anyway David Bellamy, it happened to be his birthday so we were singing songs all the way in the bus; he was teaching us all these risqué songs; it was very funny, a very funny bus trip.

71.59 And then in the gaol we decided, us group of women who were there – I think there were about six or ten, ten women. The gaol - it's only a really small gaol – they didn't have enough room for us so that was funny and we decided we'd fast while we were there. It was a Friday, we got arrested on a Friday so we couldn't appear in court until the Monday, so we were there for sort of three or four days and we decided to fast so that was – yes, but there were only about like six prisoners. I think there still are. That was really interesting getting to know them too.

SA: Would that be, I mean in terms of just say the Jabiluka campaign - - -

RW: Yes.

SA: - - - and when you were arrested, you were with international volunteers and some Australian volunteers?

RW: Yes.

SA: They were working within the organisation?

RW: Well, it wasn't the whole group that got arrested.

SA: Right.

RW: It was actually two of us from within the group and that was all discussed and decided beforehand. So we said we would like to be part of the group who went forward and, you know, went through the fence and made ourselves available for arrest. So the rest of the group were O.K. about that.

SA: So would you actually allow some of your international – like is that something that you'd have to be – I mean it's a hell of a risk, isn't it, really?

RW: Yes. I think I wouldn't advise international volunteers to take that action, no, because you don't know what the consequences could be for them in their own country, yes. I mean, there are consequences here. I mean, for instance, you know, if you're in certain professions it's not a good thing to have on your record, you know, have a criminal record. In fact, the case was dropped because we had to go back for a court case sort of six months later and I raised funds via asking people for donations to help get up there for my court case and it's really good that I went.

74.11 So there were a group of four of us for our particular case and when they produced a map in the court and said, "You know, can you ask the mining company to tell us where this arrest took place?" they had no idea, they didn't know where the road was, they really couldn't

read the map. And so it got thrown out of court because they couldn't really produce evidence to say where the arrest had been because the road they reckoned that we'd been arrested on didn't exist on the map and they didn't know where it was and it was crazy.

SA: Quite an adventurer, really, aren't you, Rita?

RW: I suppose so. And the case in Tasmania was thrown out of court too, yes.

SA: So International Day of Peace in September, do you celebrate that?

RW: Oh, we did last year – I mean, sorry, in 2009 I think we did. Look, we'd love to celebrate all kinds of things like – yes, International Day of Peace is an important one, I think. What we did that year was – see, in this building there are four peace groups all with a different focus but we don't do a lot of stuff together. I mean, the Anti-Bases, they're mainly a lobby group; PND were very active twenty years ago, now they're not very active at all.

SA: What's PND?

RW: People for Nuclear Disarmament. And upstairs we've got WILPF, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Well, that's also one of the oldest peace organisations in the world; they started in 1919, ours started in 1920.

76.04 But they've got a very small group in Sydney. They're very active in other cities, particularly Adelaide, I think. So I organise something to bring the four groups here together because I think that's, you know, important to start at home. So we just had a day of events and the four groups came together at Humanist House and we had films and we had a talk and we invited someone along who sang songs of peace - and a lot of the songs she particularly collected were ones we could all join in once we, you know - and then we had a discussion about what peace means to us, to each of us and also we had a sharing about what each group's doing. So, yes, it was a great day.

SA: And have they been big in the past?

RW: The International Day of Peace, it's not been going very long.

SA: No?

RW: No.

SA: Since '81.

RW: Is it? O.K. I don't know, I don't know a lot about it. I'm sort of – I think even if it started back then it hasn't been very big, no; I think it's been something that's grown slowly.

SA: Yes. So any other significant campaigns in the past that you can recall? I mean, you've talked about quite a few of them.

RW: Well, no. I mean, as far as the organisation goes, no. I think that, you know, we did some good work, working with Aboriginal groups.

78.01 I mean, like I say, individual volunteers – well, for instance I mentioned changes it makes in people's personal lives. We had a volunteer who went to a project in Germany first. She applied from here and went for a two week project in Germany and from there she applied to go to Ireland to take part in a training for sort of reconciliation between Irish and Catholic parts of society there. So she used us and this project in Germany as a sort of reference to get into the training and she did the training and then she applied to be a long term volunteer there, to join this sort of trainers group; so they bring in school children and they do a whole lot of training with them. So that was for four months and so, you know, we helped her again with a reference for that. She was a teacher here so, you know, she had that sort of background as well and from there she went on and applied for a job with the Council of Europe and so she's had a fantastic, well-paid job for the last seven years with the Council of Europe, doing sort of anti-racism training with youth through Europe and she sort of organises, runs the programmes. So, yes, and that project's come to an end now so she's looking for something else in that sort of – in Europe, hopefully with the European Union, so yes.

SA: So it opens a lot of doors?

RW: It does, it can, yes. We had another volunteer, she came to a project in Australia and then she joined our organisation. She did the leader training with us and then she became, you know, one of the trainers and she became the coordinator here for a couple of years.

80.03 And then she went off to Nepal and she started a women's organisation in Nepal, so she runs an NGO in Nepal now for women – married a Nepali – and, so, yes, there've been people whose lives have changed because of the doing our projects. But as far as campaigns, no. We'd keep saying we'd like to work with refugees but we haven't found a way that we can have – I mean work camps are difficult because it's not just a team of volunteers going and helping with something. You've got to find accommodation for them where they can all live together and there's a whole lot of considerations around that, not just anywhere, even though the first one I went to was – like I said, we were staying in a primary school in Italy and we just lived in the classrooms on mattresses on the floor; the toilets were converted with a sort of shower over the top. So often the

accommodation can be simple but you've got to have, you know, male and females separate. Well, you don't have to but for some volunteers it doesn't matter, for some it does. But anyway the accommodation side of things makes it a whole new ballgame; it's quite difficult.

SA: So you've got some work ahead of you then, trying to, or possibly trying to get a new coordinator to take over from your - - -

RW: Yes. If you've got anybody who might be interested, please put them in touch.

SA: So what now for you then? Well, obviously for the moment you're here but what are your - - -

RW: Well, I'd really like to go and do some volunteering, doing other things, you know, and now that I've heard about this BlazeAid, this organisation that goes out and helps on Australian farms, I mean that'd be a fantastic experience. I've also met a woman who – because I've moved to the countryside, I live outside of Goulburn now, and there's a woman in Goulburn running projects, just doing projects in Goulburn to help make Goulburn a better place, mainly, you know, for tourism. You know, they're doing gardens and public gardens – I don't know what else they're doing – painting, they're looking after public property and, you know, I'd like to volunteer locally but also, you know, I'd like to get back to my music and art and my other things that have kind have had to slowly, slowly slip by the wayside.

82.36 **SA: You've been too busy here.**

RW: Yes.

SA: Now, just before we finish, now we're in Elizabeth Street - - -

RW: Yes.

SA: - - - at what number?

RW: 499.

SA: 499.

RW: Yes.

SA: So you were saying that early on that you were - - -

RW: Cardboard box.

SA: Cardboard box. When did you move into this building?

RW: Right. We moved out of the cardboard box into a building in – I've forgotten the name of the street but it's further up. It's a little sort of street that runs off Elizabeth Street and it was on the fourth floor of an old block of buildings there in a rather disused area of the city. Surry Hills was a bit sort of downgraded some years ago and there were ten activist groups in that building on the same floor and it was called 'Common Cause'. So we had the experience of having an office there and that was great. We had a fold-out office - because you paid your rent by amount of floor space you used - so we had our office that folded away, so we didn't have much permanent floor space. Anyway, they had to move eventually and so then it moved – by that time I was living in Katoomba and so – or maybe all the time I was living in Katoomba – I think I was – so the office actually moved up to my house; it was on my front verandah for a while and in fact that's where our constitution was written.

84.11 And then eventually we sort of realised that really if we wanted to grow we needed to be in the city; it was going to be much easier for everyone else. And PND, People for Nuclear Disarmament had just acquired this building; they got it through a donation, they were given a big donation and they bought the building and they were looking for tenants so, yes, we moved in. I don't know when that was but it was, you know, probably close to ten years ago, so, yes, we've been here.

SA: So it's been important to actually be based in the - - -

RW: It's a great location being, you know, this close to the centre of Sydney, especially, you know, when you've got international volunteers coming and it's just a walk from Central Station; you know, it's fantastic and people can drop in, yes.

SA: So that's been an important part of the organisation?

RW: Very important, very important, yes, yep. And, you know, because the building's owned by another NGO the rent is very affordable for us because otherwise we couldn't possibly have, you know, premises in the city, yes.

SA: So before we finish off the interview is there anything else that you'd like to say on tape and finish off with? I mean, don't feel as though you have to, please.

RW: Peace, brother, sister. No, I can't think of anything. I think we covered a lot of ground in sort of some depth, yes. So, thank you for your interviewing skills.

SA: Thank you. No, no, thank you very much.

Interview ends