Oral History Grant 2016
Project Description

From Private Matter to Public Health Crisis:
Nursing and the Intervention into Domestic Violence

In the late twentieth century, the medical system underwent a sea change in how it responded to survivors of domestic violence. This came largely as the result of nurses who worked tirelessly nationwide to reform and improve services to survivors. Beginning in the late 1970s, nurses recognized the inadequacies of the medical system when responding to women survivors of domestic violence. At that time, battered women were largely neglected as a population needing specialized medical attention. Interactions between battered women and their doctors revealed a widespread pattern of medical dismissal of patient complaints and the overall noninvolvement of doctors into the causes and remedies for battering. For the two to four million women who were beaten in their homes annually, this medical neglect had dire consequences.¹

Over the next twenty years, nurses were in the vanguard as they pushed the larger medical community to properly identify victims of battering, adequately respond to their needs, and prevent further harm to them. In so doing, these nurses were critical figures in reforming a once negligent medical system and, ultimately, improving the lives of thousands of women nationwide. With this grant, I propose to collect oral histories of those nurse-reformers who worked tirelessly to change medicine and the medical approach to domestic violence. This project will build on two years of research and writing that I

recently completed for the National Library of Medicine (NLM). As guest curator for the exhibit “Confronting Violence, Improving Women’s Lives,” I researched this little known history and created an exhibit in collaboration with staff in the NLM History of Medicine Division. The exhibit is currently on display at the National Library of Medicine, is available as a travelling banner exhibit, and online at:

https://www.nlm.nih.gov/confrontingviolence/

Surprisingly, there is very little work on this important chapter in the histories of medicine, public health, women, and violence. In conducting my research, I found only a few short articles or book chapters that reference or detail the exhaustive work of nurses and their allies.2 With the exception of one manuscript collection held at the National Library of Medicine3, there are no repositories that hold any substantial collections documenting this reform movement. Oral histories are also lacking in this area, as few researchers have collected or preserved the narratives and life stories of the nurses that were so integral to this history. In preparation for the exhibit, I conducted oral histories with two nurses and one physician, all of whom were at the forefront of this movement. These interviews are now at the National Library of Medicine. Yet there were dozens of other nurses across the country who were working on the difficult task of reforming the healthcare system at this time. Their stories and perspectives are critical to a full

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3 Sheridan, Dan, collector. History of Nursing and Domestic Violence Collection, 1975-2007. Located in: Archives and Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, MD; MS C 601. This manuscript collection was acquired in 2012 for the purpose of creating an exhibit, as well as for use by future researchers. It formed the basis of my research for the exhibit *Confronting Violence, Improving Women’s Lives.*
understanding of how change happened. As part of a history that has not been thoroughly
documented, these oral histories are a necessity for obtaining a full and nuanced picture of
this change. They will help preserve an important reform movement within medicine that
impacted thousands of women nationwide. This collection of oral histories will contribute
to the substantial records of nurses and nursing organizations already held at the
Schlesinger Library. This will be a unique collection—nothing like it exists anywhere else.

A Schlesinger Library oral history grant will allow me to conduct and transcribe oral
histories with those nurses who were at the forefront of reforming the medical system and
improving services to survivors of domestic violence in the late twentieth century. I have
already reached out to some of the pioneer nurses who did this work, including Barbara
Parker (Baltimore, MD), Annie Lewis-O’Conner (Boston, MA), and Diane Bohn
(Minneapolis, MN and Indian Country). They have all agreed to be interviewed. Through
my contacts, I have the names and emails of ten others who I will contact as well.

These oral histories sit at the intersections of the histories of medicine, nursing,
public health, and violence against women. Researchers across disciplines will benefit from
access to the histories of these nurse-reformers. Using these oral histories, I plan to write
an article for publication in a peer-reviewed journal; I have been in conversation with the
editors of *Nursing History Review*, who are very interested in this project. This research will
also be the basis of my next book project.