



THE VFA PIONEER HISTORIES PROJECT

Margo Jeanchild

“I Am an Activist by Nature.”

National Organization for Women, Chicago Chapter. Country Director of the Peace Corps in the Eastern Caribbean to Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Women Made Gallery.

Interviewed by Mary-Ann Lupa, VFA Secretary, September 2022

MJ: My name is Marjorie Jeanchild and I go by Margo. I was born in Youngstown, Ohio, actually a small town called McDonald, of about 2400 people.

ML: What was life like there?

MJ: Very simple. I was born in the late 40's, so I felt safe in my community. I had a mom who was a nurse and a father who was a businessman. It was a comfortable place.

ML: You had what type of ethnic background?

MJ: We didn't really identify as anything but American. I thought I was Welsh and English and later found out I had a lot of German because my grandfather was adopted and had an English name, even though he was German. I didn't grow up with any real traditions that were ethnically oriented. We were just an American family doing our thing.

ML: You eventually went to college in Ohio?

MJ: Yes.

ML: When did you get married?

MJ: I got married in 1972, after college. I was a VISTA volunteer in Arkansas for one year. I was a speech therapist for a year. Then I went to VISTA, and then I went to New York City and married my boyfriend at the time, who turned into my husband. He was a veterinarian at Animal Medical Center and we lived in New York City.

ML: What did you train for in college?

MJ: I was a speech and hearing therapist. I was a resident advisor the last couple of years, so I lived in dorms. I was the only American, probably, who liked dorm life. But I did. I liked the community, and I liked having access to a lot of people. I'm an extrovert. I was a resident advisor and then graduated. Worked one year at a small town on Lake Erie as a speech therapist in a county that had a lot of money that year. It was 1972. They had a lot of money for special ed programs, so it was a really good first job.

Then I realized I didn't like the school system so much. I thought it was too regimented. I went to Arkansas and was a VISTA volunteer. There I worked with Head Start and got exposed to a really different way of living. It was a small town that I lived in, 500 people. I saw things like kids with unrepaired cleft palates, which I had never even thought there would be in the United States, and just a different cultural experience. Foothills of the Ozarks. I really enjoyed it. Different music, arts and crafts, that kind of thing.

ML: Were they confident of women therapists there?

MJ: They didn't have any therapists. The Head Start nurse, who was a real go-getter, a real fiery woman, she's the one who requested me, took me under her wing. I was 22 years old and my best friend was a 62-year-old woman who was the cook for the Head Start. I used to spend a lot of time with her and her 80-year-old husband. I was the only woman in my town as old as I was, 22, 23, who was not married. It was a very different cultural experience for me, but a rich one. I also learned there that you didn't have to have a college education to be smart. I met a lot of wise people and the women; it was mostly women who ran the Head Start were very caring. There was a social worker, a nurse, the administrator was a woman. Lots of good role models.

My friend Willeen was 15 years older than me and she took me under her wing and took me everywhere in Arkansas. Showed me the culture there. Kind of adopted me as her family. They were the only family that stayed up past eleven, so I would often go down to their house on a Saturday night and watch Charlie Chan and then wander home. It was really nice to have that safety net and also to be on an adventure that was outside my comfort zone.

After that, I moved to New York, got married and I was married for four years. And I wanted to get divorced. New York was one of the first states to have a no-fault divorce. So that is what my husband and I did. It required a one-year separation period. When I was in New York, I got denied a credit card unless my husband signed for it. I was told I couldn't apply for a job because I wasn't the breadwinner of the family. I learned that life was not fair for women. I didn't realize that before then. I wasn't really in the business world. It was a huge shock and I was angry a lot. I was angry at the unfairness of that and seeing how women were not given the same credit for their intellectual capacity and their ability in their jobs was mostly geared toward men. I had men in my office apply for jobs that I did not think they were qualified for and they just applied for them and didn't think anything of it, where women held back and we had to know that we were really good in something before we would try to get a new job or a promotion. I would say those were my angry years about the state of the world.

ML: You didn't get the job you applied for there?

MJ: I did not. I went ahead and applied anyway. My boss called me in afterwards and said, "What do you think you're doing, little girl? I told you, you couldn't apply". But I didn't get fired or anything. It was a government job, so it should have been wide open to anyone who wanted to apply. It was interesting because the person that did get the job was a woman. I was thrilled about that. I didn't get it, but another woman got it.

ML: How did you get involved with the movement and did it help to deal with your anger?

MJ: The feminist movement in New York was really burgeoning then. They already had the march, which I was not there for. I think that was 1968. I started going to what were called consciousness raising groups. But New York was so big, and you would go to a meeting and never see the same people twice, different people coming in. I started getting involved there. I remember there was a feminist newspaper and it had an article about the new birth control called the umbrella, which was for men to insert into their penises. It's when IUDs were coming into view and women were suffering from perforated uterus. It was about that, and it was about when the man ejaculated the umbrella opened. I thought it was hysterical. My husband said, "That is just ridiculous". Things were starting to happen. It's the first time somebody told me not to call myself a girl, that I was a woman. All those things were percolating. When I got separated from my husband, and I applied to be a Peace Corps volunteer, which is where I was working. I was working for Peace Corps and VISTA in New York. And they let me go, which normally you'd have to have all the legal stuff done.

But because I worked in the office and they knew me, I got to go overseas when my divorce was still pending. So, I went to Kenya for two years. And that was a very interesting experience because, of course, women in Kenya did not have nearly the same rights that women in the United States did. It was kind of a shake up for my feminism. I didn't exactly know what to do with that. They had a debate on the floor of Parliament in Kenya about whether men should be

allowed to beat their wives. And the vote was yes, because how else do you teach them manners? I was dealing with that and trying to be also sensitive to the culture. It wasn't my job to change their culture, but it was an interesting two years. When I got home, I was a little bit afloat as to how my feminism sat with me.

Then I was in New York for nine more months, and then a job opened in Chicago, and I applied here. It was when the ERA, the Equal Rights Amendment, was in the midst of being passed. It had not passed in Illinois yet. I was here nine months, and our office moved across the street from the Monadnock Building, and that's where Chicago NOW was located. I said to myself, "Okay, Margo, time to get involved". And I did.

ML: What was your role when you first got involved?

MJ: I started out as a volunteer, and they had, at the time, Tuesday night sessions, which were work sessions, where maybe ten or twelve women would show up and we would do whatever the task was for that week. It might be making phone calls about something. Cagney & Lacey was taken off the air. We did a mail campaign about that. They got put back on, but I don't know if that was because of our efforts.

ML: What year was that?

MJ: That would have been 81, 82, 83. Sometimes they all blend together, but we would do different things on those nights. It was a time for women to talk about things. Nestle's was marketing formula overseas for women, and they had these tactics where they would give out free samples and the women would take it, and then their breast milk would dry up, and then they had to buy formula that they couldn't afford. They had dirty water that they used. We wrote letters and did a campaign against that. But it was a nice way to get to meet people and also to think that you were doing something that mattered. From there, I became the co-chair of that committee, actually deciding what we would work on every Tuesday night. Later, I moved into secretary, vice president, and president. I was involved probably for about ten years before I left for another assignment overseas. I was president for the ten-year anniversary of NOW. And we did fundraising. We had an auction every year, so I just learned a lot in that job.

We did a lot of street actions at those time, passing out leaflets in the morning and after work. It was just an exciting time. Lots of work on ERA. We got a lot of money as the Chicago chapter because we were a big chapter, and Illinois did not pass it yet, so we could do a lot. But sadly, Phyllis Schlafly came along, and we did not pass the ERA in Illinois. But it was a really interesting time.

One of the things we worked at that I was most proud of, is over the years, Illinois had passed a lot of bills about sexual assault, as the definition of that was changing, but they were all piecemeal things. We worked as an organization to work with legislators and get one piece of

legislation that was well written and covered the issue. Then we did a slideshow presentation that we took on the road to educate women and the basic community about their rights under the new law, and that just felt like something that was very important that we did, and it was tangible and you could have some results and you could see those. We would do presentations and I don't recall how we even advertised them.

ML: State legislation you had passed then.

MJ: Yes, so that was exciting.

ML: Did you have anything in particular that was of greatest concern to you with these issues?

MJ: I always was concerned about women and children. My Peace Corps experience was as a health and nutrition educator working with women's groups. So really anything concerning women and of course, children, because they're what a lot of women are all about. That was my focus. I did care about employment, but Women Employed was doing that. I would say I worked more on the social issues that concerned women. I did do things with Women Employed, and NOW did a lot of things with Women Employed, but I felt like that was well taken care of in another organization.

ML: Did you feel that there was any particular major accomplishment that you were involved in?

MJ: The ten-year anniversary was interesting. Just a time to look back and see the journey that the women's movement had taken. Also, the Illinois legislation on sexual assault and the education campaign that we did. But meeting women from all walks of life, women who would come to NOW looking for something and to see where they wanted to fit in, that was all very exciting. It was a very busy time and a stimulating time, and one that I felt really good being involved. In Chicago, although it's a big city, it's also like a small midwestern town. You know people and you see people that you know, places, and so that was a much better fit for me than New York City, where there were just so many people and I couldn't make the same connection. I learned a lot. I learned about fundraising. I developed an ability to ask people for money. To this day, I'm willing to ask anybody for any amount of money for a cause and did not take it personally if I got rejected. Not everybody is going to give you money, but if you don't ask, a lot of people that would give you money, don't give you money. I learned that, which is a great skill to have. It was a really good training ground and also there were amazing women in Chicago who were around me, who I just learned a lot from.

ML: You said you had a trip to Springfield and lobbied.

MJ: Got on the bus and Anne Ladky, who was one of the founders of Women Employed, was on that bus working people like crazy, just going around, meeting every single person. She would go to every two seats, talk to people, talk about what our goal was, just enrolling and getting people excited. I still remember that trip for that. I just was like, wow, who is that? There were lots of

women like that. Mary Jean Collins was here then. It was an exciting time and I was so thrilled to be able to be involved in that way.

ML: You remained as an activist even after your term in NOW, right?

MJ: I did. I left NOW to go overseas for an assignment as a country director. It was 1989 and I left to go to Sri Lanka to be a country director for Peace Corps there. That was interesting because women there had a lot of legal rights that a lot of people in other developing countries did not have. It was an interesting place and there was an organization that talked about battered women and the interesting thing for me was they didn't have any action you could take. They had a film that was all about a woman in a village being beaten by her husband.

But at the end, like in America, we would have called this toll-free number, do this thing, contact your congressman. There was nothing like that. It just left people like, well, what do you do with this? So being in other cultures really gave me a lot of knowledge about how to go about things. Because I was in another culture, you can't force your culture on other people, so how to work within different systems. But my focus was always about women and my interest was always about women and women's rights and equality.

ML: When you came back, I understand you got involved in Women Made Gallery.

MJ: Yes, I called that my softer feminism because it was hard to be in the movement. There were a lot of angry women. I was angry and there was a lot of high emotion over what was happening. When I came home from Sri Lanka, there was an art gallery at the end of my street right by the "L" called Woman Made Gallery. It was a storefront and I just wandered in one day and it was an amazing place. Beate Minkovski is one of the co-founders and the shows that she had there were very focused on political women, underdog issues, and it was demonstrated through art. And one of the goals of Woman Made was to see a more equal placement of women's art in the art world, in museums and galleries. It met my criteria for helping women. But it's just a softer place for me to land after being overseas and it was wonderful.

ML: What role did you take?

MJ: I started as a volunteer, went in licking envelopes, and soon was asked to be on the board, because I had been on the board of NOW and they were really impressed with that experience. They said, "Wow, here's somebody who knows something about boards". Before I knew it, I was president and I served on that board for about ten years, I think, before I went overseas again. I always leave only to go overseas because I always love what I'm doing here. That was wonderful, meeting so many creative people, seeing themes expressed in so many different ways. We would have theme shows and people would do sculpture and writing and videos and paintings and drawings. It was just amazing what came out of an idea for someone. In my home now I have art of many women artists that I know, and I just feel surrounded by love from women. A lot of the

topics were very relevant to women's experience and it is still a wonderful place, but I moved from Chicago. I'm still active, I still give money, but certainly not in the same way.

ML: Did you have any exhibitions that people did not necessarily appreciate?

MJ: Lots of them. The one that sticks in my mind was one just when I came back. Maybe that's what got my attention. It was called "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary". It was about the Virgin Mary. There were all kinds of artists' representations and the gallery got hate mail and death threats because people felt they were depicting Mary in a disrespectful way, when in fact it was a lot about how women are expected to be. They always say they want women to be a whore in the bedroom and a princess in public or whatever. I mean, there was all of that when we were growing up. It was a discussion about Mary and how Mary herself was a representation of all those things and how those roles were placed on women.

ML: In the art that was presented in that exhibition?

MJ: Yes, one really powerful piece was a statue of the Madonna that is in many people's yards here in Chicago, and it was a decoupage with articles about women who had been killed by their husbands or lovers. That's just a striking, startling piece. Very powerful. Didn't say anything else, but those articles were there. Yes, that was a very controversial piece, but I think Woman Made always got, just like now, hate from people who don't like women. My own brother was like, why should there be just a Woman Made? Why do you have to have a gallery about women? I'm like, "Well, Jim, take a look. If you look in museums, what's the percentage of women? 5%?" People don't notice those things. We're so used to being oriented to a male world. That was a very rich experience and I just am so happy for both the NOW experience and Woman Made. They both have enriched my life in so many ways.

ML: How long were you on the board?

MJ: I think about ten years. Time, as you get older, kind of all blends together. But the reason I left again was because I was going overseas to be a country director in 2010. I was out of the city, my mom was ill, she had Alzheimer's, and I moved back to my small town in Ohio to live with my sister and my mom and help her with my mom. I was gone, but I was still very involved, providing support and talking to the directors there and things like that and connected to the artists. I had already been away and then I came back for a year and then I went overseas with a new job.

ML: Did you have any other activist experiences after Woman Made?

MJ: I feel like I'm an activist by nature because I like to see something done if there's an issue that I can work on. I've always been in organizations and supported organizations that change things, that are about change. I moved from Chicago in 2015 permanently, moved back to Ohio to a really small town, 1200 people up on Lake Erie where I spent summers. My mother retired, so the last 20 years of her life were spent up there. It's a little town that was started in 1867 and

it's a throwback to the 60's. I tried when I got there, I mean, moving from Chicago where politics are so right, right around you all the time. I looked for the Democrats and I could not find very many of them.

I've just recently started getting more active and there's a woman who's now in charge and she's working to activate the party. I've been doing some fundraisers and I've had meet and greets at my house for different candidates. I write letters, I call my congressman. I'm very politically astute. I pay attention to what's going on. The overturn of Roe v. Wade was devastating. I cried when Trump got elected. I want people in office who really have all of our best interests at heart and realize that women do not need to be protected. Women need to be able to make their own decisions. I'm very outspoken about that. I had a great experience. I was in South Carolina and I had a Planned Parenthood sticker on the back of my car. I pulled up to a hotel and there was a young guy helping with luggage and he said, "Wow, you don't see too many of those stickers around here". And he said, "That's where I go for my health care, but I don't tell anybody". And I said, "Well, you need to start telling people, so that they know that Planned Parenthood does a lot more than abortion care". So just interesting things that happen in your life.

ML: You're carrying over the experiences that you had from the movement to every day.

MJ: Yes. I'm a feminist through and through. Never had trouble with the word feminist. I see how hard women's jobs are. When I traveled overseas, a lot of times there would be a woman whose husband was in the military, moving her entire family without her husband, with her three kids, a baby, luggage. I used to think, and we are called the weaker sex. How did that even happen? Because women carry the burden everywhere.

In Kenya, women fetch the water, they haul the firewood, they take care of the children, they do the cooking. And men, they were the hunters, and now they're not hunting, so they would just be around. Loret Ruppe, who was the head of Peace Corps for a long time, used to say, if you educate a man, you educate a person. If you educate a woman, you educate the family. And that's really true. Women are those people who look at community. That's what I like about women. It's more egalitarian. It's more community oriented. Not that there aren't men like that. There are. But I would say in percentages, women are used to taking care of people, and we care about what other people think. I've always had really good experiences working with women. I've never had the bitchy director who is trying to push everybody out of the way. I've always been around women who are just enrolling and encouraging and mentoring.

ML: Thanks very much for sharing that, Margo.