

Interview with John Milner #4

February 1988

Conducted by Elizabeth McBroom at his home

MCBROOM: What happened next?

MILNER: The Catholic sister said that she could not let me in, she had not had any orders from higher up to let me in. There I was, stranded out in the country with my taxi gone, so I had to hitchhike back into Phoenix. I spoke with Dr. Wayne McMillen about this, so he contacted the higher authorities of the Church and they arranged for me to go back the next day. When I returned I received a royal reception - I remember they fed me a chicken lunch. I sat at a large table with the nuns standing around me because they were not allowed to sit and eat with laymen. It was difficult to eat lunch alone while being watched and waited on every minute. I did the study of the agency, which was an interesting one to do because they wanted to impress me with how favorable their program was. When we went to the different dormitories, you would see the statues of Mother Mary and Jesus, many of which were knocked off the wall or broken. The nuns always explained that it was accidental. I had worked enough with delinquents to know however, that this was probably not true. On the whole it was not a bad program. We completed the study in about 5 – 6 days and it was later put into effect in Phoenix.

MCBROOM: Did it make a lot of difference in Phoenix?

MILNER: I never had a chance to do a follow-up to know. Although I returned to Phoenix to lecture several times and it appeared that some of their programs were quite good, I really did not have a chance to know how effective the study was. It was an important thing for Dr. McMillen, though, because he had decided to live in the west and so he left Chicago and came to Los Angeles to complete a mental health study. He later went to Oakland and did a study of services in the whole Bay area, making a major contribution to California. He became a very good friend of mine and other members of the faculty, including you.

MCBROOM: Yes, although it is too bad that we could not interview Wayne for the Archives.

MILNER: Yes, it would have been a marvelous interview.

MCBROOM: What about your study and evaluation for Family Service?

MILNER: I had done one or two of the outlying services in the Los Angeles community. There was not much to report on except for the evaluation of the casework they were doing.

MCBROOM: How did you find the quality of their work that was done in these districts?

MILNER: Quite good.

MCBROOM: Were some of our alumni out there working?

MILNER: Yes, some of our alumni were in the agencies. Mainly, my recommendations were that they expand their services.

MCBROOM: What do you think has happened to Family Service by this time?

MILNER: I am not close to what they are doing. From reports that I have heard, they are not as successful as they used to be – I do not know why. It is a loss to the community to lose Family Services – they have been a stable national agency. As to their local chapters over the years I would be sorry to see them disappear.

MCBROOM: Maybe they have gone mostly to fee-paying . . . and to hourly paid staff - that kind of thing.

MILNER: Yes. Since I have been supervising students, the Los Angeles chapter of Family Services has had money to give directly to clients. Later they have done away with providing any subsidies to clients – it seems to me that some of their resources have been diminished. Also, the interests of staff have been leaning more to psychotherapy, than to family-focused social work.

MCBROOM: John, you have done lots of work as a volunteer. I know that when you first came to Los Angeles you were a volunteer at the Veteran's Psychiatric Clinic.

MILNER: Yes, I did that for several years. The psychiatrist in charge was Dr. Roberta Crutcher, who was a very capable psychiatrist and one who had great respect for social work. The Veteran's Psychiatric Clinic was a training center for young psychiatrists – they, too, spent time volunteering at the agency. The cases we saw were largely cases that had problems in adjusting to civilian life after World War II. Some of the service there, I thought, was excellent. I thought the social workers were just as effective in treatment as the psychiatrists were. I learned that the quality of people coming into the psychiatric field was not any higher, in my estimation, than that of the students coming into the School of Social Work. It was a valuable experience to me and I gained a lot from the staff meetings. I felt that the experience enhanced my teaching.

MCBROOM: Can you tell a little bit about some case there that you still recall which will give me a flavor of the service you did there?

MILNER: There were such a variety of cases that I remember. One of my patients upset the whole clinic because he would arrive early for his appointment. He was an ambulatory psychotic – he would always come with a raw beefsteak that had blood running off of it. He would chew on the beefsteak. He would first come to the window of the office that I was using and beat on the window to let me know that he was there while at the same time I was seeing another patient. I would acknowledge him and then point upstairs to the waiting room. He would walk into the waiting room and scare some of the people to death because he would look so wild, although he was as gentle as a

lamb. Often once he saw you, he would calm right down and participate in an interview – but before he left he needed to play his mouth harp for you. Dr. Crutcher would always wonder what was going on when she would hear the mouth harp playing in the office. He later had to be hospitalized, but I think the help we gave him sustained him for a while in the community. Once or twice he was arrested because the police were suspicious of his behavior in the street. I remember I had to go down to the police station to get him released once and explain his behavior. We had some weird case situations in that clinic.

MCBROOM: You also volunteered in Family Service in Pasadena?

MILNER: Yes, I thought it would be valuable to get some experience in a family service agency, so for two or three years I gave one or two evenings a week seeing cases there. Largely, they assigned me cases where children were involved – adolescent kids and pre-adolescent youngsters.

Too, there was another value. The director of the clinic at that time was Elise Delafontaine; she had been a social worker in New York. She had quite a national reputation for being a colorful woman who was quite knowledgeable about psychiatric social work. She had done some teaching at the New York School. The Board of the Pasadena Family Service brought her out to head the agency. I always got along very well with her and liked her eccentricities. She ran that agency for quite a while - until Carl Shafer eventually became Director.

MCBROOM: She was a good administrator?

MILNER: Yes, I thought in many ways she was. She always had difficulties with her office staff because she constantly drank coffee. She would leave the cups all over the office and expect the girls to collect them, wash them, and so forth. On the whole, I thought her judgments about what was good service were very, very good. At the time we were getting quite a number of cases from Cal Tech, where these super bright

students were experiencing personal problems – many of them were quite neurotic patients. We had at the time quite a few cases from the Altadena-area; later, I think, they had their own separate program. Some of the cases I heard from again a long time after I had seen them – reporting their improvement.

MCBROOM: Was there quite a difference in the clientele there from the Veteran's Clinic?

MILNER: At the Veteran's Clinic, I think we saw much more serious types of emotional disturbances than we did at Family Service, although some of their problems were similar. For example, I carried one case of a little boy whose father had been a prominent engineer in the Pasadena area. The father had experienced a psychotic break and had been hospitalized in a private psychiatric hospital. The mother had to go to work in order to support this boy, who was then ten years old, and his sister - she also had to hire a housekeeper. The boy I was seeing became very depressed and he failed in school - he had been a very bright student. He came regularly on his own, on his bicycle. He related to me right away. I spent some time with him away from the office. I would go to things his school held; he would ask that I come as his father to these events – the mother was most cooperative.

I remember one day he told me that he thought the housekeeper they had was mentally ill. I talked with the mother about this and we found that it was true; he had diagnosed quite well. So she had to replace the housekeeper and get her to some help. He was a wonderful little kid. His interest was in trains; his father had taken him regularly down to the train station. He knew what train ran on every line in the United States; he really was an authority on trains and had enjoyed this with his father. I knew little about them and so I went with him several times to watch the trains. He educated me on trains. We used art therapy with him a great deal. One of the things he did, was that every day he came, he would draw the car of a train on a sheet of paper and he would then post it on the wall. He said that when the cars went clear around the wall that our time would end because that would be the end of the train. His prediction came true because the

last time he came, he drew a caboose and in the caboose was a family – mother, father, and two children all waving happily out the window of the caboose. Simultaneously, the father had been released from the hospital. He was well recovered and he had accepted a position in Oakland, California. The family was to move there; this was the boy's way of saying good-bye. I received several cards from him afterwards, reporting that all was well. It was a satisfying case.

MCBROOM: That is a lovely story. You were really heavily into teaching practice at the same time. What do you think about the impact of this concurrent experience on your teaching?

MILNER: I felt that it helped me keep a current foot in reality of what was needed in practice, seeing theory in its application. In that way it was helpful to me. I personally have always believed in agency practice. I think that unless this School of Social Work decides that they just want to train individual, private practitioners, an emphasis on agency practice is extremely important; it is the only free service or service at minimal rates that is available to those who cannot afford to pay. As an example, I learned last night that the going rate for social workers practicing psychotherapy, runs about \$90 per hour.

MCBROOM: Well, that shuts out all but the favored few doesn't it?

MILNER: It means not serving the ones that. . .

MCBROOM: The Family Service agencies are not very available.

MILNER: No.

MCBROOM: What do you think of the young candidates for teaching that have come along who have had no practice experience? Aren't there some of those types of individuals these days?

MILNER: There are many. I think more and more teachers are being hired who have very limited practical experience. I would encourage them to do volunteer work in an agency; particularly in an agency the School is using. I think firsthand knowledge of our agencies and community is extremely important to communicate to students, so that they get an overall view of services in the community and not a narrow perspective.

MCBROOM: Do you think there ought to be some arrangements made so that students can watch their teachers practice or conduct interviews?

MILNER: Yes, although I have never really seen this done. But I think that it can be done in a classroom. I think the only experience I have ever had which was similar to this, was when the Navy invited me to lead some training sessions in San Diego. They wanted some of the counseling staff who were assigned to the stockades, to receive training in order to better deal with the problems of men who had committed certain offences in the Army. They had assigned a group of noncommissioned staff as the personnel to provide service to these men.

I worked out a plan where I had these young recruits sit directly next to me while I interviewed certain clients and, in turn, I would have them interview other patients while I sat beside them. I found it to be a very valuable experience. I also found that there was little or no interference in the quality of the interview with someone else being there as a nonparticipant, except as an observer. When the interview became focused, the patient or client seemed to almost disregard the other person entirely. We had established a type of relationship where the client could really concentrate on the interview. I thought this technique might be used in our teaching, but I think we never did.

MCBROOM: The same standard for professional practice applies when you ask a client for their permission to tape an interview for teaching purposes, doesn't it?

MILNER: That is right. In the Navy situation, someone granted the permission with a higher rank. But I think it would be important to follow ethical practices.

MCBROOM: We tend to forget that the interview is being taped and disregard the presence of the tape recorder after a time.

MILNER: That is right.

MCBROOM: You have done a lot of consultation in children's services – what were some of the experiences that we should hear about from that?

MILNER: There have been so many consultations that it is hard for me to focus on any one experience. Many times I have been called to agencies to talk about special problems that they were experiencing; sometimes they have included staff problems.

MCBROOM: Can you give an example of a staff problem?

MILNER: I remember once in the 1950s, one of the directors of a children's institution called me in to say that she thought she had a staff member whom she believed to be molesting the children. She wanted help in learning how to handle this situation with him, because she was unsure if the allegations were true or not.

MCBROOM: There had been some complaints?

MILNER: There had been some complaints and she had her own suspicions. She also wanted to know what her responsibilities to him might be. This was a consultation then about this set of issues. She eventually guided him to professional help and encouraged him not to work with children in the future.

There were such a wide variety of things that have come up in agencies. Sometimes it has included the recruitment of foster parents; discussing with agencies the strategies for recruitment, including advertising for potential foster parents.

MCBROOM: What are some of the most successful recruitment programs that you have seen or recall?

MILNER: The most successful strategy is word of mouth; that is, one foster parent telling another potential foster parent, encouraging them to take a child. The 'grapevine' system works the best. Speaking to selected groups that have greater potential such as PTA groups in the rural areas also has a value. Bringing in foster children to talk about their own experiences to an audience of this kind can augment this talk. For the most part, advertising in newspapers or on television is not too successful although some creative ways of advertising have worked awfully well.

MCBROOM: Can you give an example?

MILNER: I remember at Ryther Center that we had a kid who was quite a terror but he was not a bad kid, although he was always into mischief of some kind. As an example, we had a costume party and he wanted to be Superman, so we got him a costume with a large cape. At the party that evening, he went up to the second floor and jumped out of the window; fortunately he landed on a manure pile so that he was not hurt. He was a real little kid, only six or seven at the time. I think he became the real hero of the house as a result of this experience. When it came time for his placement in a foster home we put an ad in the paper saying in effect,

*"Challenging young kid wants to fly - potentially a paratrooper needs a home.
Age six."*

Interestingly, we got a response from any number of former paratroopers. These were fathers who were calling saying in effect that they would like to meet this kid. Although I

do not remember if he ended up in a home with a former paratrooper or not, we were able to ultimately find him a good home. It is that kind of appeal, which appeals more to fathers rather than the sentimental kind; they want a kid that is full of life.

MCBROOM: A kid that looks to the future?

MILNER: Yes

MCBROOM: That sounds like it was a very successful appeal. Maybe some of the other homes worked out for other kids?

MILNER: Yes, we used some of the other homes.

MCBROOM: Tell me about some of the state and national meetings that you have been to for volunteers.

MILNER: I have been to an awful lot of volunteer meetings over the past 50 years. I have been to the national meeting of foster parents as a speaker in Canada and in several American cities including Hawaii. I have been asked to present two or three papers at these national conferences at various times, giving me the chance to talk with foster parents who come from a wide area.

In this state we have had an awful lot of meetings of foster parents in various neighborhoods of Los Angeles and various counties throughout the state. I always felt that I came out of those meetings learning more than I gave. Foster parents, if they are allowed the opportunity to talk openly about what they do, have come up with such creative ideas on how to handle children's problems.

MCBROOM: Can you remember an example of one idea that really impressed you a lot as being creative?

MILNER: I remember one foster mother in Watts; she was quite a large black lady, who was quite an imposing person. She had sat through some discussion about how to handle negativism in children. Finally, her patience gave out and she got up and delivered her speech, “ When kids are arguing outside my kitchen, and do not obey me, I just go over to my oven and get out a big chocolate cake. Then I hold it out the window and say, them who quit arguing and obey is going to have a piece of this. Them that do not, cannot eat” Then I slam the window. She said the arguing all comes to a stop and the kids just come in and behave. I thought this was a good example of using operant conditioning.

MCBROOM: Positive reinforcement.

MILNER: This speech, of course, broke up the meeting. There were a number of practical, little suggestions from mothers who had previously raised several children of their own and therefore were experienced. I think that often we professionals go in to a situation with no practical experience that can be helpful, instead we talk about things theoretically.

MCBROOM: At these meetings was it your experience that the foster parents helped each other a great deal?

MILNER: A great deal. There is great value in coming together because it is like a club or an association that develops where they are doing something in common. There are so many wonderful foster parents – I think they are probably the least appreciated group of people that I know of.

MCBROOM: Is there any way to change that?

MILNER: I think many agencies need to give much more recognition to foster parents. I also think that there is a real responsibility to pay the foster parents more than they are currently receiving. The parents are so underpaid, particularly if you consider that it is a

24 hour a day job to take care of a child. They make little to nothing for doing this; in effect they are doing it out of the goodness of their hearts - many do not even break. I have visited some foster families that really became professional foster caretakers, which I always thought should be a much wider program. These foster parents then are paid at the same rate as you would have paid for institutional care of these special children.

MCBROOM: Do you think this practice is increasing?

MILNER: I do not think so.

MCBROOM: You do not see an increase in the number of group homes?

MILNER: Yes, I think there are more group homes, but I was thinking of just regular families.

MCBROOM: Do you mean a family with only one or two foster children?

MILNER: Yes, that is right. We had an early experience at Ryther Center, when we placed the teenage daughter of a wealthy doctor in a foster home. At that time, although I do not remember the exact amount, it was thought to be a considerable sum of money: approximately \$600 a month that today would likely be equivalent to \$1,500 a month. We placed her with a family that was equal in social status to her own parents; it was another doctor's family. They would not accept her without adequate pay because they noted that her biological father could afford it.

MCBROOM: They would need that much money to keep her in the lifestyle that she had grown accustomed to.

MILNER: That is right. The last I saw of her was through an announcement in the society pages of the New York Times that noted she was engaged to marry a prominent New Yorker.

MCBROOM: So that was another case with a happy ending. You have done quite a lot of training with the Junior League; what about those experiences?

MILNER: I have always had a lot of respect for the Junior League volunteers. They are very serious about the training programs, which they have set up for themselves to complete. I think, however, that they could be used in a wider variety of ways than they generally are. For example, I know that at the Ryther Center, we trained some of the volunteers to function as the initial finders of foster homes and to be responsible for completing the initial interviews with potential foster parents. The volunteers were as competent as anyone I know; they generally are very bright and very sincere in their interests. It is part of their organization's mission to take on some responsibility for meeting the social needs of the community. They also prepare themselves to take on the role of Board members; some of our best Board members came from the Junior League.

MCBROOM: Have you seen creative programs for Junior League volunteers locally?

MILNER: I have not had a lot of experience with what the Junior League does locally. I do not believe that I can provide an example of what they do here.

MCBROOM: I know that they are represented at the Roundtable [for Children]. I think you were one of the early members of the Roundtable. Can you say something about your experience with the Roundtable?

MILNER: The Roundtable is a project of the University of Southern California's School of Social Work, in which representatives of programs dealing with children come together to discuss research and practices associated with providing social services to

this community. Their goal is to partly promote legislation that will result in improved conditions or alternatively brings pressure to bear upon politicians to provide better services to the community. It is a very educational program for those who attend. I think it has led to a much better understanding of what overall community problems there are. There has been very little work in Los Angeles that has attempted to do this on such a scale. I think UCLA has some program that performs a similar function, but perhaps not in the same way. Since the Welfare Council was abandoned in Los Angeles, there has been no opportunity for agency personnel to come together and plan things for the community and to share their experiences. I have always felt that this has been a loss for our city.

MCBROOM: Why do you think the Welfare Council was abandoned?

MILNER: I really do not know the reasons, although I suspect it was due to politics over at the Community Chest or whatever it is now called. I think that they did not like the pressure that was coming from the Welfare Council agitating for changes in programs and services. I do not really know.

MCBROOM: But you see it as a backward step for the community as a whole?

MILNER: Yes, I felt that loss of vision, but I have not been close enough in recent years to know for certain.

MCBROOM: You have been quite active in the Volunteer Bureau?

MILNER: Yes.

MCBROOM: Tell me about what they do.

Milner: I was on the Board of the Los Angeles Volunteer Center for three or four years. They run a wide variety of volunteer services in communities, in almost every type of

agency, even including the employment services for people who have retired, but want to continue with some type of work in their older years. They have done a lot to gain material things for agencies: office equipment and machines and so forth, by collecting from factories and offices. This equipment is given to them and then is distributed to agencies. Also, they have usually had very good Christmas programs, where they have arranged to have toys, clothes and food donated for poverty-stricken families. They have done a variety of things; it has been a very important service. Again though, it has been under-financed compared to some of the other services. They have had a good staff over the years.

There are also good volunteer programs that private agencies themselves operate throughout Los Angeles. I have great respect for what volunteers have done in our city. I often have been concerned with the fact that professional staff has not often appreciated volunteers enough.

McBroom: The foster parents and the volunteers are like, the “Forgotten People.”

Milner: That is right. I think that often professionally trained social workers and even those who are not professionally trained, feel a threat from volunteers, that the volunteers are taking over their jobs or that professionals need to limit the number of jobs and services available from volunteers

MCBROOM: Has some of your teaching dealt with the subject of volunteers and how to maximize their potential?

MILNER: Yes, in my practice classes I have always had some discussion of this topic. Additionally, I have always encouraged my students to volunteer themselves; some have. I believe that there needs to be a greater emphasis placed on the discussion regarding volunteers.

MCBROOM: I believe that right now you are involved in evaluating the volunteer service at MacLaren Hall. Could you say something about that?

MILNER: I am volunteering my own time to participate in a study of the agency's operation. Presumably there will be a reorganization based on the studies that we are conducting at MacLaren. MacLaren Hall is the largest county-run children's agency for abused and neglected youngsters who cannot live at home. It is so large and overwhelming that it is difficult to have quality services there.

MCBROOM: What kinds of services do the volunteers do there?

MILNER: The volunteers do a wide variety of things. There are a large number of volunteers, for example, who come in to assist on the wards or in the cottages. As regards the care of infant children, there are a large number of infants who are brought there because their mothers have been drug addicts and this has affected the child. The behavior of these children is difficult to manage. It really is a basic mothering job for those women who volunteer to come and hold these children and comfort them.

MCBROOM: Does this volunteer position seem to attract the right type of people who are competent enough to do this?

MILNER: Yes, it has been the most popular program – it is sort of a grandmother program in a way.

MCBROOM: They bathe and diaper these infants and so forth?

MILNER: Yes, they interact with the children like a mother would. For older children, some volunteers come in who are interested in more recreational services. They have hobbies and these volunteers try to fan the interest of the kids in their respective hobbies. There is also a large group of religious volunteers who come in on Sundays; they encourage the children to engage in religious worship. This particular program is

not clear to me yet; we are in the phase of the study where we are attempting to discern exactly what it is that they actually do. These volunteers are well meaning and often participate in other volunteer programs as well at Maclaren. The most difficult area, however, has been the older adolescent kids. They have not received much help from volunteers in this area except in sports or some other recreational thing. We are, however, encouraging more professional volunteers to come in and assist in this area.

MCBROOM: Is that program for teenagers taking off?

MILNER: It is too early to tell.

MCBROOM: It is too early to tell?

MILNER: Yes.

MCBROOM: But it is a program that is in process at present?

MILNER: Yes.

MCBROOM: I think you have suggested a formal recognition program for the volunteers as part of the school's activities?

MILNER: Yes, we also have this one group of volunteers who are largely the wives of people in the movie industry. These are people who generally have high incomes and are generally well known around the country. They have their own volunteer organization; they generally give parties for the kids at MacLaren.

This set of volunteers has also done a great deal to redecorate a very drab institution that was built initially for unmarried mothers through the provision of furniture and play equipment. They generally tend to do very good things for the kids at MacLaren, although they have little to do with the other volunteers. There really are two separate

volunteer organizations at MacLaren Hall. The celebrity group likes to run their own show. As a result, my study does not have much to do with them ; although I feel that they also need recognition for what they are doing. I also hope that it will foster their interest in our School. Let's hope that it does.

MCBROOM: What happens?

MILNER: What happens when?

MCBROOM: How are they recognized?

MILNER: We brought them to brunch and presented them with certificates as a reward for their good work. We had a good response, although they are a difficult group to reach because they do not tend to give out their home addresses. People who are celebrities need the protection of what anonymity they can get; that is: they need to not have anyone know where they live.

There is also recognition provided to the other volunteers by the agency itself at big evening event held once a year. This year I went to the event, which is held at Christmastime. It was a very nice recognition program with good food to eat and gift certificates as rewards.

MCBROOM: Does MacLaren have as many volunteers as they need?

MILNER: No, there is a special committee working on recruitment of a greater variety of volunteers than they currently have.

MCBROOM: Well, I can see that from infant care to sports coaches there would be room for lots of different types of people.

MILNER: Right.

MCBROOM: A while back you were asked by one of the administrators and professors on campus to predict the future of the profession. I think you were asked in the 1970s, to predict what would happen by the 1980s. Are willing to predict the future again, now that it is 1988?

MILNER: Well, that is a difficult thing to do with the way that the world is today. In the first place, I am amazed at the number of people who still come in to the field of social work.

MCBROOM: Why are you amazed?

MILNER: The cost of going to school today would seem to me to be prohibitive for anyone who would be paid as little as social workers are in general. Yet our schools all seem to be full while becoming more costly each year. I think we still get a good quality of students coming in to school who are interested in the profession. The focus of interest of students seems to be more in psychiatric social work, than in any other field of practice. The number of people who have an interest in child welfare seems to have diminished somewhat.

MCBROOM: Well, I remember that there was a gathering for the child welfare people who had graduated about a year or so ago, and they seemed to be very enthusiastic about the number of current students.

MILNER: Yes, I think the ones who choose the specialization, really care about the specialization and generally like their work and feel that they benefit from their involvement with it. However, there is such an increasing interest in private practice . . .

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