

Margaret Mudgett  
Interviewed by Edna Gerstel  
In the Home of Miss Mudgett  
November 3, 1988

GERSTEL: Why don't you start by giving us a brief biography of yourself.

MUDGETT: Well, some people want to know how I ever got started in social work.

Although I graduated with just a general background A.B. from Stanford, I ultimately got a master's in history and took a general secondary teaching credential. But, again, nobody wanted a teacher. So I became a volunteer.

An older woman friend of mine got me involved with the Community Chest campaign, the forerunner of the present United Way. Inasmuch as I was young, inexperienced, and had loads of friends who were in the same position as I was, I was quite a godsend to that campaign because it was very easy for me to organize door-to-door volunteers for it.

So, after two or three years of volunteering in the Community Chest campaign, one of the women asked me if I would be interested in working for the Girl Scouts. I indicated that I didn't know anything about the Girl Scouts, but I'd be interested in finding out.

I went to the local Girl Scout office and heard some good things about the organization. One of the best was that they were having a training course at Asilomar the next month. It would be given by Edith Colnut who was a sister of the then-president of Harvard University. She was on the national staff of the Girl Scouts.

The course was on the organization and administration of the local council. It was perhaps the clearest and best-given course that I've ever had. I lucked into that. I was quite

impressed.

The other thing that was told to me was that if I did go into the Girl Scouts, to remember that it was just very poorly paid. You couldn't even buy a pen with my first six months' pay because I had to work free for six months--they didn't have any money.

Anyway, that was the start of eight years of working with the Girl Scouts in Los Angeles and in Burbank, and then coming back to Los Angeles as training director. And again, I lucked in.

Margaret Murray Brownlee--another national staff member of the Girl Scouts--was giving a course in training methods. I took it, and I certainly thought it excelled any of the courses I'd had in my education in college. [Laughter] So, those were two real good things.

During the war, though, there were new things, new problems, new dimensions coming up. One of them was the start of the Los Angeles Youth Project in response to the Zoot-Suit Riots. [3-13 June, 1943] Remember those?

GERSTEL: Yes.

MUDGETT: We thought it was a tremendous thing. The United Way, or, rather, Community Chest, allocated a quarter of a million dollars to ten agencies to start a project. [Laughter] But it certainly made us all much more conscious of the needs of many of our younger citizens. It made me feel, certainly, that I'd probably work with the Girl Scouts as long as I needed to and that I wanted to find something else.

In 1945, when the war was over, I resigned from the Girl Scouts, and I did leg work on the Sorenson Recreation and Youth Services Survey in Los Angeles--it was going on then--which was an excellent addition for me because I got acquainted with many different parts of Los

Angeles, the underserved, and where the greatest needs were, and so forth. I also applied for a job on the Youth Project staff as an area coordinator, which eventually materialized. That, again, was a very interesting experience with a good deal of emphasis on community work innovation.

One of the things that I recall very well, one of the places I visited while working on that survey, was the old Neighborhood Settlement Association down on Wilson Street in East Los Angeles just before they gave it up. Well, it was out of operation for a year. It was sponsored by the Episcopal diocese and apparently someone from the diocese asked the Youth Project for suggestions for a new executive director for Neighborhood Youth Association, NYA, and as I was Episcopalian, I was suggested. [Laughter] And that started a long, 25-year association with the agency.

Among the areas that were underserved were West Los Angeles, (the Sawtelle area), specifically, which has changed a lot since then.

GERSTEL: Yes, it has. An affluent area. [Laughter]

MUDGETT: But it was pretty needy in those days, and Venice, also. Incidentally, the Agency had virtually no money, and they thought a decentralized program sounded fine because it didn't mean a big capital investment for buildings. That makes sense, to use some community buildings and community facilities. The total budget for the Agency the first year I was there, was \$20,000. As you can see, it had to go quite a way.

I inveigled one of the young men who was working for the Youth Project (on their special services unit) to come to NYA as a group worker at that time--and also Marguerite Vanderworker, who came to us from the YWCA and USO. Those were our two original group workers. Emma Garcia, who was an older teenager in Venice, who Marguerite had gotten

acquainted with through one of her groups, became our first secretary. So there we were.

Well, we didn't have an office. We'd have staff meetings in the car. We'd go around and look for office space. We had part of a photography shop offered to us, but that wouldn't have had much privacy, somehow. We finally ended up with part of the ground floor of an old hotel whose picture you have. By the time we got there, there was no logo in front of it, but a traffic circle. Across the street was the post office. So, we were in business.

We began going around to schools, juvenile officers, BPSS, anybody, everybody who could give us any clues to where we might find our clients. I remember when Marguerite went to talk to the principal at Venice High. She called a couple of girls in and one of the girls said, "You mean we can have our own club? We could elect our own officers?" Marguerite said, "Yes."

Well, as it turned out, I don't think they ever elected officers because they didn't really want to. But it was nice to be able to. [Laughter]

GERSTEL: Yes. Of course.

MUDGETT: We developed a few boys' groups and a few girls', and we got started. The next thing was the acquisition of the station wagon. Truly, many of these youngsters had never been out of Venice or out of West L.A.

GERSTEL: I can believe that.

MUDGETT: As we developed different programs, we tried to get them out and give them some new experiences. They didn't feel very good about themselves. I can remember one girl saying, "We're no good. We were born no good."

Another time, another gal was in trouble at the high school because she didn't attend

school. She wouldn't say why she was out. We found out that she was out because her mother was drunk and she, the girl, was taking care of her younger sister. You know all these stories.

GERSTEL: yes.

MUDGETT: Well, anyway. That's background of NYA.

Because the board was enthusiastic about the move to the new locality, the new focus, and the small staff was excited about the whole concept, we had the beginning of what continued for many years to be a nearly ideal board-and-staff relationship, with respect and understanding for the role of each. Contacts were frequent between board and staff members, with staff presentations the usual part of board meetings. Problems as well as successes were shared. Board members understood why intensive work with groups, their individual members, their parents, and community agencies related to them, were essential, and required time which precludes large numbers of clients per worker.

Staff, too, were given the opportunity to see the difficulties of the board in securing the funds that all recognized as being needed.

In the beginning, funds were really scarce, as I said, \$20,000 per whole year. We had no office, no supplies, just three of us on the staff. But we could begin and make these community contacts I told you about that led to the formation of the early groups.

None of us in the beginning had MSWs, but we began to feel the need of more knowledge, more disciplined type of knowledge, and by 1951, all of us had decided to go to graduate school for our MSWs. By that time we had added two MSWs to our staff.

Betty Schwartz, for the next 16 years, provided exceptional leadership and guidance to many teenage girls in the Venice and West L.A. area, and supervision to a number of field work

students from USC's School of Social Work.

The second one, Sarah Maloney Porter, was acting executive when I attended USC. Later she received her doctorate at Western Reserve and went on to teach social work at USC.

That brings you up to date with many of the things that went on, Neighborhood Youth--except that we began to grow, and we expanded our work to Wilmington. We took caseworkers on our staff to work with the families, thinking that youngsters would move faster if the families were helped at the same time. As a matter of fact, this follow-up study that you have, will show that was not the case. I think it was explained: we were working with adolescents who had moved away from the family, and the family had never paid too much attention to them in many cases, anyway. There were a few cases where the families really got involved in the casework--and we did find more movement there. But on the whole, working within the group and individually, was just about as helpful if they couldn't get more back up help at home.

One of the things that we discovered was that in violation of a principle, we had heard about group work, that you couldn't really single out an individual to work with in the group because the others would resent it.

Quite the contrary, if it was based on a need of the individual. Group members say to us, "You go see him. He needs you. You oughta let him talk to you."

GERSTEL: That's interesting and refreshing.

MUDGETT: So, it depends on why you're seeing the individual.

That's pretty much the story of NYA. Oh, it isn't, either. In the later 1950s, we hired a trained group worker to work with Community Activity Aid, the CAA programs.

GERSTEL: That's important.

MUDGETT: That's very important. It had its pitfalls and its good features.

GERSTEL: What were the pitfalls?

MUDGETT: Pitfalls, in both the cases--the group we have in Wilmington and the CAAs here--were, I think, partly in the fact that this relationship I hoped had been established, always split board and staff members did not take place so well with the new staff. That was part of it.

If you remember, this was an outgrowth in a way of the War on Poverty and all kinds of things in there. I think both of the young men we hired--the one I thought was much more qualified than the other--were so excited about having a program that they felt was their own, that they never could tie it to the Agency. Now, in fact, the Wilmington group ultimately went off, had a program for young children all its own, and continued to get funding from one of the outfits in the state.

The CAAs did a lot of very good things, too. One of the things that I remember very well about them was that--Vermont McKinney, who directed that program--they got strong contacts going with the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Department. The CAAs would get young men and women who were addicted to drugs. By that time we had hired a little bungalow court. There was a room in there. We would take these people there to get them ready to go to UCLA to be detoxed. It was pretty hard to see some of these young ones come in, some of them young mothers, some of them expectant mothers. I thought the CAAs did an excellent job in getting them to the point of readiness to accept this kind of treatment. That was an exciting thing.

It did not mean that our troubles with the police were over because the CAAs often would defy the police and the police would defy the CAAs. You know what that's like.

There was one person on the police staff that came into Venice when things were awfully tough down there once, Jesse Brewer, who seemed to have a very keen understanding of the whole community picture. He put two and two together and saved the day for them.

GERSTEL: That's helpful.

MUDGETT: Then we had the project with the YWCA, in which we tried to help another agency to take on this kind of work with youngsters who don't necessarily gravitate toward the YWCA. We have reports on most of those projects in there. That pretty much concludes my story of NYA.

After I left there--because I thought it was time for a change, both for the agency and for me--I coordinated a single-parent project for the United Way, which was quite interesting. We got a great many of our referrals from the Big Sister League, who'd been working some with them. Our objective here was to get community agencies putting on some special efforts on behalf of these single parents. They were single parents who were frequently pretty lost.

I spoke to a group once, at some meeting in Los Angeles. There were a lot of single parents there, but they weren't our kids. They were the ones who were delighted to be single parents and getting along just fine. With ours, we used small groups there; the mothers and the babies came to the groups together. We tried to help the mothers to connect with needed services because they really didn't know too much about it. Sometimes, it meant taking them to the services and also helping them to be better mothers.

One of the most interesting things I saw in it was that the babies--who had been pretty much isolated in a one-room apartment with their mother and seemed fearful of other children or of adults--began to gradually move out to other little kids in there and to the adults without fear,

much more comfortably. We involved the Big Sister League, we involved children's Home society, NYA for a short while (I think it was the Pomona YWCA), and the maternity homes in developing similar groups.

One of the weaknesses, I think, in all of our programs, is that we don't have enough follow-up on them to know what happens later. I do know that Children's Home Society maintained groups for several years after I was out of the project. I'm afraid we're all too mobile. People who can get the most in follow-up are no longer around in the agency.

Anything else you think of there?

GERSTEL: Maybe....

Editorial Note: The above was a full side (45 minutes) of the tape. The second side was blank, even though the interview comes to an abrupt close.