

KATHERYN NIELSEN, MSW
Interviewed in her Pasadena home by
Agnes Trincherro, DSW, LCSW
March 11 and April 20, 2000

Katheryn Nielsen, who received an MSW from the University of Minnesota, was employed as a social worker from 1942 to her retirement in 1977 from the Los Angeles Florence Crittenton Center. This interview focuses on her experiences in this agency, where she was the first trained social worker, and on her perceptions of the societal changes that influenced the course of the agency's work. The interview was conducted by Agnes Trincherro, whose own background was as executive director of the San Francisco Crittenton and then of Orange County Crittenton. Mrs. Nielsen for several years, with her husband, was on the Advisory Council to the Dean in the University of Southern California School of Social Work.

TRINCHERO: Katheryn, let's begin by your telling us about the Florence Crittenton agency.

NIELSEN: My first association with Florence Crittenton was as a social worker in 1955. In 1959, I was temporarily named Executive Director when the then director was incapacitated. My comments today resemble the presentation I made earlier to the Board of Directors who really wanted to know something about the history of Florence Crittenton, and particularly about the Los Angeles agency.

Florence Crittenton is the oldest private social service agency still in existence. Charles Crittenton, a wealthy drug manufacturer, founded the agency in 1883 in memory of his little daughter, Florence, who died at the age of 3. His vast fortune was dedicated to, in his words, "saving the sorrow of girlhood." At the time, the idea of unmarried pregnancy was considered a "sin." He was a devoutly religious man who established these rescue missions to save the girls from their life of sin and prostitution.

TRINCHERO: Katheryn, was Rescue Mission the name of the organization?

NIELSEN: Yes, Rescue Mission was the original name on Bleaker Street in New York. He bought a private railway car and attached it to railroads across the country. He named

the car “The Good News,” and preached his “gospel of redemption” in various cities, coming to Los Angeles in 1892. Among the audience was a Presbyterian minister, Reverend Stevens, who heard him preach and donated his home on Santee Street in Los Angeles for the first Florence Crittenton Mission and Rescue Home.

TRINCHERO: Is that the same area where the Agency is now located?

NIELSEN: No, it is not. The agency is now located at 234 East Avenue 33, Los Angeles. That building came into existence in 1913. The agency remained at the Santee Street address, until it moved to Avenue 33. Florence Crittenton Agency in Los Angeles had gone through some very difficult times. Finally, in 1913, there was a newspaper appeal for funds. The largest gift ever made to any Florence Crittenton Home was given to the Los Angeles agency by Mr. O.T. Johnson, a wealthy businessman in Los Angeles. He donated \$75,000 for a new building on a five-acre tract on the outskirts of the city. That tract is now Avenue 33.

TRINCHERO: That’s where the Agency is now?

NIELSEN: The Agency exists there yet. The building was occupied within eight months. At the beginning, there was fierce opposition to the home by the community, but by the time of its dedication on April 11, 1914, the bitterest opponent had furnished three of the bedrooms. This was the kind of appeal to the volunteer in the Los Angeles area at that time. The Agency was totally supported by private donations. There was no involvement of any government agency. A name to remember in the 1920s and ‘30s was that of Dora Shaw Hefner. She was a practicing attorney, a very interesting woman who also was the Director of the Los Angeles Community Welfare Federation, which included most social service agencies. She was a referee of the Juvenile Court in Los Angeles,

and, finally the chief of the state social services. Mrs. Hefner was President of the Los Angeles Crittenton Board of Directors for many, many years.

TRINCHERO: When did she become head of the state social services? That sounds like we're getting into the development of public social services.

NIELSEN: I don't have the date of that.

TRINCHERO: Was that the beginning of state support?

NIELSEN: Yes, that was the beginning. She was very active in civic affairs and in all the initiations regarding welfare planning councils in Los Angeles County.

TRINCHERO: We're looking now at an agency that had its own origins when?

NIELSEN: In 1883. In Los Angeles, in 1892.

TRINCHERO: In 1883, how did it ever get started in the first place, nationally?

NIELSEN: Nationally, Charles Crittenton organized these homes across the country, and even in Europe, Tokyo, Brussels, and even, I think, in Paris before World War I.

TRINCHERO: What established any kind of an organizational position for him? Was Congress involved?

NIELSEN: At the beginning, he worked with another minister's family, the Barrett family. Mrs. Barrett, (Kate Waller Barrett,) became his mentor. She went across the country, helping establish and organize the various Crittenton Agencies.

TRINCHERO: She had a nursing background.

NIELSEN: She had a nursing background, yes. Her family continued in the tradition. Her son and her daughter-in-law continued in the Crittenton tradition until very recently. I believe, the 1980s.

TRINCHERO: The organization itself, then, had the blessing of Congress in what way?

NIELSEN: In 1898, Congress passed a statute. Crittenton and the Boy Scouts are the original two whose charters were approved by an act of Congress.

TRINCHERO: It was a Charter?

NIELSEN: Yes, a Charter.

TRINCHERO: Interesting part of history. Then, reviewing for a moment, the Charter was issued in.....

NIELSEN: 1898, I believe.

TRINCHERO:.....and then Mr. Crittenton made a trip across the country

NIELSEN: Yes, across the country to impress the nation in his railroad car, as I mentioned earlier.

TRINCHERO: Was it financed by him privately?

NIELSEN: Privately financed by him, and wherever he went, he made a sizable donation to establish an agency in that area.

TRINCHERO: A home for girls who had no one else to help them?

NIELSEN: That's right.

TRINCHERO: And was it always focused on pregnant young women?

NIELSEN: Not always, but most of the time it was.

TRINCHERO: They were considered girls without a family?

NIELSEN: Yes, alone in the city. At that time, there was quite an influx of young girls into the urban communities from farm communities; they were "picked up" by various kinds of people who were exploiting them.

TRINCHERO: So this was "rescue." That's why he called it a rescue mission?

NIELSEN: Yes, that's right.

TRINCHERO: And it was in California that another minister approached him about a donation of a home, so that the same type of program could get started in Los Angeles.

And that was exactly when?

NIELSEN: 1893.

TRINCHERO: 1893? So that was one of the oldest Crittenton homes?

NIELSEN: It is the one of the oldest. I think it's the second oldest.

TRINCHERO: In the United States?

NIELSEN: Yes.

TRINCHERO: Remembering, of course, the era that we're talking about, the program was handled primarily on a medical basis, was it not?

NIELSEN: Yes. It was handled on a medical basis, and a very religious basis.

TRINCHERO: Religion and good medical care.

NIELSEN: Yes.

TRINCHERO: Were most of the employees nurses?

NIELSEN: Yes.

TRINCHERO: Also, did you not tell me once that the deliveries were done right in the Home?

NIELSEN: In the agency itself. The Los Angeles Florence Crittenton delivered babies in the agency until late in the 50s. Early in 1932, Dora Shaw Hefner was president of the Board. The agency was in very deep trouble; Florence Crittenton was about to be closed. The girls were considered mistreated, medical care was less than adequate, and closing was mandatory unless conditions changed dramatically. Mrs. Hefner immediately appointed a nurse, Ruth Swelstuen, who had been the Chief Obstetrical Nurse at the

California Lutheran Hospital. She held this position until 1959 when illness forced her into retirement, and I was asked to fill the position. From 1932 until September 17, 1959, when her illness occurred, there were changes in the world and certainly, in Los Angeles. World War II had changed the whole culture. Los Angeles was no longer a slow-paced Western town. We were in many ways the pacesetter for the country. The population exploded with the number of youngsters becoming pregnant. The need for an agency like Florence Crittenton was very, very great. Value systems changed and adoptions suddenly became the most approved method of care for babies of girls who were having children out of wedlock. However, at that time, families of the girls paid all the bills. There was no involvement from government or any other kind of social service agency.

TRINCHERO: If a girl didn't have the funds, then what?

NIELSEN: The agency carried her. She was never turned away. That was part of Mr. Crittenton's philosophy: no girl must ever be turned away. In Los Angeles, that was true.

TRINCHERO: So the collection was from private donors?

NIELSON: Yes. Referrals came from doctors, from ministers, from priests, from rabbis. It was totally private. There was no government involvement of any kind.

The scenario in 1955 at Florence Crittenton ran something like this: the population was 32 pregnant teenagers, all of them white, all of them middle class. Not one girl was placed by a social services agency or a probation department. Two thirds were referred by obstetricians and ministers. All but one girl placed her baby for adoption. The total budget for that fiscal year was just under \$45,000. The staff numbered eight. Four lived in the agency itself, working 24 hours on and 24 hours off, 7 days a week. All babies were delivered on the premises. When a caesarian section was

indicated, Hollywood Presbyterian Hospital was our affiliation. We were a member of the Western Hospital Association of America. A great name associated with Los Angeles Florence Crittenton is William Benbov Thompson, Chief of Obstetrics of Hollywood Presbyterian Hospital. He was probably the most famous obstetrician in the west. He was a Chief of Staff at Florence Crittenton for over 20 years.

The medical residents at Hollywood Presbyterian Hospital became our chief delivering doctors, and many of them became board members of Florence Crittenton when they finished their professional training. Ruth Swelstuen directed this large group of young men as well as the staff on grounds.

TRINCHERO: Are we still talking entirely on the medical group or were there social workers involved?

NIELSEN: Oh, at this time, there were no social workers. I was the first social worker ever hired by Florence Crittenton in Los Angeles.

TRINCHERO: What did you do as a social worker at that point? Did you have particular duties that were different than the nursing duties and the medical duties?

NIELSEN: Yes. I worked with the families. I also worked with the young man involved with the girl, and relationships became very, very close and very warm between the families and the agency. Many of the girls were placed by very wealthy families, and I think the continuing relationships with Crittenton resulted in their becoming board members and leaders in the community.

TRINCHERO: And donors.

NIELSEN: And donors to the agency.

TRINCHERO: It sounds as though the agency directed its attention mainly to middle-class and other people who were able to afford the cost.

NIELSEN: Yes, that's very true. Now, in 1959, when I became Director, we moved into a different world. At that time, at least from 1956 until 1968, our Board President was Charles Fleischman, a leader in the community, who was a brilliant Recanteur, he was a dedicated businessman, and a great benefactor to Florence Crittenton in Los Angeles. During the years of growth and movement from a medical facility into a more professional social service agency, he was at the helm of Florence Crittenton.

The morning of after Miss Swelstuen's illness, the staff was totally in a state of chaos. She had not shared, ever, where any of the supplies were. No one had a key for anything. It was a time of total chaos. However, the Board of Directors were pulled together and came over to the agency in about an hour, and everyone was re-assured, and I was temporarily named as Director.

TRINCHERO: Now prior to that, you were the social worker, and you were assisting the Director?

NIELSEN: Yes, I was assisting the Director. We were beginning to have groups of with parents and the young people; sometimes the young men, the fathers of the babies, would join the groups. This was a totally different kind of service, a branching out. It was less medical, more into social services.

TRINCHERO: Was that accepted by the Board: the leadership and the Director?

NIELSEN: Yes. The Board was very enthusiastic about this. Comprehensive changes occurred, of course, in the late 1960s. With the changes in our culture, the community changed in every way, and we began to see a different kind of girl coming in.

TRINCHERO: Would you say, also, attitudes about sexuality were changing?

NIELSEN: Yes, yes, we'll get into that. But the staff of 8 grew to 30 plus, and the population in 1968 totaled 57 in residence.

TRINCHERO: As compared with?

NIELSEN: As compared to 32, which years ago, was the usual number. During this time, a great surge in volunteer support occurred. There were, at one time, 17 auxiliaries or circles devoted to supporting the agency; again, just volunteers, with no government money supporting them. However, during this time, a slow influx of girls placed by the Department of Social Services and Probation began to occur. We began to see a different kind of child coming to Florence Crittenton.

TRINCHERO: That implies that there was an ongoing organization in the public sector that then led to the possibility of referrals to the private sector. You mentioned that there were referrals from public welfare at that time. It would be important to track when those organizations were actually organized and were available, so that this private agency could have a relationship with them.

NIELSEN: Are you speaking of the public agencies?

TRINCHERO: Yes. You mentioned the public agencies. Were there certain departments that referred?

NIELSEN: The Los Angeles County Department of Social Services, Child Welfare Division; and the Los Angeles County Probation Department.

TRINCHERO: This implies that during this early period, there already was public interest centered on some children who were not covered by private funds.

NIELSEN: By this time, the Florence Crittenton had organized the nationally. There was a beginning of a conscious need to expand social services. Social workers were beginning to be hired throughout the country in all the Florence Crittenton agencies. There was a need to link up with the public agencies, because the need was growing greater and greater. But in Los Angeles, during this period, our volunteer supporters promoted phenomenal benefits. We had antique car shows, a country fair at the Bothwell Ranch, (Ann Bothwell, who was then president of the board), a Diamond Jubilee at the Coconut Grove Hotel, premiers of "Camelot," "Mary, Queen of Scots," plus many, many other individual benefits. A great deal of money was raised privately again. So, at Florence Crittenton, there was this dual and mutual support by public and private agencies. This was also the beginning of the "thrift shop," which was started by one of the volunteers here. It was a continual source of support for us.

TRINCHERO: What happened to the original impact of religious thinking and training, the earlier motivation, from Charles Crittenton in working with the girls? What happened to that aspect?

NIELSEN: I think as the culture changed, and as Florence Crittenton became more involved with other agencies, less and less emphasis was placed on the religious aspect.

TRINCHERO: And it was always a non-sectarian agency?

NIELSEN: It was always a non-sectarian agency. Into the 60s, there was less and less religious overlay with the agencies, as was proper, working with the public agencies as we did. Gradually, as the culture changed, and the kind of girls we were caring for changed, we had to move to this kind of agency.

TRINCHERO: What would you say were the characteristics that were most impressive when you mention the changes in the type of girl? What were the differences?

NIELSEN: At the time, in the late 60s and early 70s, the tremendous changes in society affected the kind of girl that we had. Traditional values were overthrown, the abortion law was passed, communes were flourishing. There was an entirely different kind of sexual liberation. Instead of perceiving a pregnancy as a disgrace and a time to be hiding from society, many of the girls flaunted their pregnancies as a kind of badge of honor. There was a great change of attitude among young people. There was a more permissive attitude on the part of the family, and the family was no longer the “bellweather” of society. These children were really rebelling against society. This tremendous change affected the agency. From a population of 50-some girls, we dropped immediately down to about 25. This was in the early 70s. From 90 percent placement in adoptions, now 98 percent were keeping their children. Florence Crittenton began to wonder where our role was in this big picture. The degree of disturbance among the girls was very high. They were no longer children from an intact family. Many of them were children who were abandoned and who had been sexually abused themselves, and they were angry. The Florence Crittenton Board and I faced this dramatically changed population and wondered how we could best fit into this new world.

It’s difficult to explain how much the Board of Directors gave to me during this time. We were floundering, trying to find a way to keep the agency serving the community in the best way possible. After much soul searching, we decided that the service should begin to include mothers and babies living together on the premises. Under Mrs. Lindley Bothwell’s leadership – Ann Bothwell – we did make the change.

We were the first agency in America to include mothers and babies, as well as non-pregnant girls, in a diversified service that was that under one roof. Many agencies in Los Angeles questioned this, but there was great support from the Children's Residential Center Association, an association of non-profit children's agencies that Florence Crittenton had joined some years before.

TRINCHERO: That was statewide?

NIELSEN: It was statewide, yes, and represented many agencies serving children in many different ways. At this time, there was national interest, because many Florence Crittenton agencies were closing because of the varied kinds of conditions as described in Los Angeles.

TRINCHERO: Nationally, Crittenton agencies were closing their restricted program?

NIELSEN: Yes, their restricted program. National interest in the changes apparently became so great, that Florence Crittenton in Los Angeles was interviewed on 60 Minutes, a national television program.

TRINCHERO: When was that?

NIELSEN: That was in 1970.

TRINCHERO: Crittenton was seen as avante garde because it had taken on residential care for mothers and babies.

NIELSEN: Yes. This was a bold step for the Los Angeles area to take, and it was with some trepidation and sense of risk that we did it. But apparently, it was really needed as reflected by a rapidly growing child population in care. An addition to the building was dedicated on "National Florence Crittenton Day" in April of 1970. There was a period following the dedication of the new building when services to the new population were

rocky. There were many times when we were finding our way. But we were still leading the nation in terms of this diversification of services, and those Florence Crittenton agencies still in existence, all diversified their services. Several of them, however, have closed.

TRINCHERO: This is throughout the United States?

NIELSEN: Yes.

TRINCHERO: In California, there are two other Crittenton agencies?

NIELSEN: Yes. I believe San Francisco was established a few years before Los Angeles. I think that was one of the very early ones. In 1968, one opened in Orange County. They are still in existence, and giving diversified services. Many of them now handle foster families as part of their services, and Los Angeles, at the present time, handles foster families as well as an after-care service.

TRINCHERO: Do all of them agree that we're dealing with teenage-girl problems, at times?

NIELSEN: It's more than just a pregnant girl problem, and that's a very good description -- teenage-girl problems. Many of the agencies are trying to work with the alleged father if the girl is pregnant. But for the most part, the counseling in the Florence Crittenton agencies is directed to severely dysfunctional families.

TRINCHERO: Do I understand, too, that some of the girls often display mental health problems?

NIELSEN: Yes.

TRINCHERO: And that they are often very seriously disturbed girls?

NIELSEN: Yes.

TRINCHERO: So how did that affect the staffing patterns? Who were the people that you found necessary to include on the interdisciplinary team?

NIELSEN: There usually is a psychiatrist as a consultant, and sometimes a psychologist for testing. A team of social workers, hopefully MSWs or licensed social workers, a team of child-care workers and the necessary medical support workers, fewer than when the agency began. Delivery of infants is always at a hospital. Florence Crittenton, Los Angeles, is now delivering at Cedars of Lebanon Hospital. There is a totally different approach to serving these children, today; many are as young as 12 or 13 years old. Very often, there is no family to contact or to give support, so that you're dealing only with an isolated child who is in very deep trouble.

TRINCHERO: Do I understand, also, that there has been an expansion of training programs for these girls, and that school programs are also very important?

NIELSEN: In almost every Florence Crittenton agency across the country there is an auxiliary school program, which is an integral part of the service. Many of the girls have had failures in school all their lives. This sometimes is the first time they have any sense of accomplishment and achievement. The school is a very important, integral part of the service.

TRINCHERO: And are these schools contracted with the ongoing public schools?

NIELSEN: Most of them are. There are various ways of doing it. Los Angeles now has a dual type of contract: they have their own school, plus contracting with the Los Angeles School District. So there is a continual flow of contracts back and forth between the public and private sectors.

TRINCHERO: Do you have anything more you want to add as to what you see is still needed in terms of services for this population?

NIELSEN: We find society constantly changing. The structure of the family is totally different today than it was in 1950. I think the need for trained social workers to do this job is absolutely the most important service that they can give.

TRINCHERO: I have heard in talking with you, as well as with other people currently working with this population, that there is still a missing piece, and that is, that the age of 18 should not remain a cutoff date for services.

NIELSEN: Yes. When a girl attains legal age, she is often totally unequipped for going out on her own to make her own way. So, many of the Florence Crittenton Agencies are continuing an after-care service, to help them learn how to shop, learn how to run a house, learn how to take care of their child, and how to become self sufficient as a person.

TRINCHERO: Have any of the agencies worked with the young men or boys that are connected with the family groups who have contacted you? How does that work out, if at all?

NIELSEN: It could work out, but it's very hard to find the fathers of these babies. They do not come in very often. In the 50s and 60s, we worked very closely not only with the young man, but his family. There was a concern for the girl and a concern for the baby, with both families related to these young people. This does not occur today. It is very hard to find the father of the baby, and very hard to find young men interested in assuming responsibility of the child.

TRINCHERO: It leads one to wonder if some of the laws we have passed to rectify one ill, may have created others. The law that the absent father must be pursued to secure financial support for the child has alienated some of these contacts. At the same time, there is the need to make sure that the resistant father assumes his legal responsibility to help support his child. There is no work really being done to help young men with parenting issues.

NIELSEN: Some schools are doing this. There is, hopefully, an outreach to the young man. They are in many ways as needful as the girls.

TRINCHERO: Is there be anything else you want to say about how to set up a community-based program so that all the resources can be used together in making a disciplined contribution to helping children? It appears to me that we do symptom treatment, and that we have a hard time getting a global view of how to put together a community environment helpful to children from birth. Before we get involved, we seem to wait for behavior breakdown that is outside the family's capability, or where some legislative law has been broken. Do you see much hope for a community-spirited approach to dealing with children?

NIELSEN: That would be utopia if it could be achieved. If the private and the public sectors could sit down together -- the referring agency in many cases a government agency, and the service agency -- would there be an effective mutual support plan worked out for these families? Much needs to be done to dissolve territorial barriers that limit collaboration.

TRINCHERO: Well, thank you, Kathryn for your helpful contribution and the generous gift of your time.

Second Interview
April 20, 2000

TRINCHERO: Have you been the subject of other interviews related to your professional experience?

NIELSEN: Yes, there have been several reported in the Los Angeles times, several other interviews with CBS radio, and the last on CBS 60 Minutes in 1970

TRINCHERO: Do you have copies of any of the interviews or of the recordings?

NIELSEN: No, I've never had copies of them.

TRINCHERO: As far as you know, can copies be obtained?

NIELSEN: I would think the stations would have copies.

TRINCHERO: What about the newspaper?

NIELSEN: The Los Angeles Times should have copies of those articles in their library.

TRINCHERO: What would you give as the encompassing dates within which the newspaper articles appeared?

NIELSEN: Might be from about 1959 through the 1970s.

TRINCHERO: When you held these interviews, what was their focus?

NIELSEN: In the early 50s and 60s, they concentrated on the unmarried mother and her child, and the rapid increase in the practice of adoption. Florence Crittenton had always offered services in caring for pregnant teenage girl. Now we were faced with different problems.

TRINCHERO: What is "different"?

NIELSEN: Originally, most of the girls came from private families who were placing a child in an agency like Florence Crittenton because of shame and concern regarding her pregnancy. They called pregnancy "out of wedlock." In the late 1960s, the girls were no

longer from intact families. Many were children placed by Probation Departments, who had broken the law, or who were abused or abandoned. It was a totally different kind of population, not paid for by a private family. Fees were now paid by the government.

TRINCHERO: In your experience, when did you note this change?

NIELSEN: I think the first rumblings of change were heard from the campus of the University of California, Berkeley. There were gradually changing post-war attitudes toward the family. Many children were not growing up in a so-called nuclear family, with a mother and father together in the family.

TRINCHERO: What about other changes such as attitudes towards sex?

NIELSEN: I think at that time, there was a complete change in attitude towards sexual experiences. Up to that time, when a girl became pregnant, the family felt a certain amount of responsibility as well as shame. The changing attitude towards premarital sex, sex and divorce, couple separations during the war, fluctuating work force involvements – moving from agrarian to urban living: many forces produced a completely different attitude regarding family life and child rearing.

TRINCHERO: What circumstances led you into social work as a profession in the first place?

NIELSEN: I can recall, with a smile, how that happened. I was a Masters of Fine Arts graduate from Oberlin College in Ohio when my husband was called into the service. I was offered a job in Minneapolis, our home, as a curator at the Minneapolis Art Institute for \$125 a month. A good friend, who was a politician, indicated there was a desperate need for workers in the county welfare department, paying \$325 a month. At this time, the money really appealed to me, and I began a job in the Division of Old Age Assistance

what then was known as the categorical aids. As I began to work there, I found I was finding it exciting and stimulating, and I began to grow a real interest in social welfare. I began to take classes at the University of Minnesota in social work and graduated in 1942. Malcolm Stinson was the dean at the time and later came to USC as dean. That was the beginning of my association with social work.

TRINCHERO: When did you come to California?

NIELSEN: We came to California at the end of the Korean War. We liked California and made our home here.

TRINCHERO: What was your first job when you arrived in California?

NIELSEN: My first job here was with Florence Crittenton. It was the only job I held here. My twin children were born in 1948, and I had a five-year hiatus.

TRINCHERO: What was your earlier history or work in social agencies?

NIELSEN: In Minneapolis, I worked in the County Welfare Department, during and immediately after World War II. My last employment was in the unmarried mothers division of the public agency in Minneapolis in 1948.

TRINCHERO: Then you continued to carry out that interest when you got to California?

NIELSEN: That's right.

TRINCHERO: What kinds of social work positions did you hold during your years as a social worker?

NIELSEN: In Minneapolis, I was a caseworker, and I think, I was the first social ever hired at Florence Crittenton. At that time, 1955, Crittenton was mandated by the state to hire a social worker.

TRINCHERO: The year was?

NIELSEN: In 1955. The next year, the Director became ill, and I thought I was going to be temporarily assigned as Executive Director. I remained until 1977.

TRINCHERO: A long temporary period.

NIELSEN: It was.

TRINCHERO: Give me some idea of the kinds of experiences you found most gratifying, personally or professionally, in the work that you were doing, and quote whatever kinds of experiences that you'd like.

NIELSEN: Well I think that the when I was working with girls who were from two-parent homes. I worked with the boy's family and with the "unmarried fathers." As time went on and the change in the kind of client we saw occurred, the challenge grew.

Society really didn't know how to handle that the changes. The most gratifying aspect of the job was working with the Board of Directors, who moved along in wanting to help this new kind of girl. The Board was always behind what we were doing, and at the time we made the big changes, the financial support was very difficult to obtain.

TRINCHERO: These were the changes when you found you were getting referrals with different types of needs?

NIELSEN: Yes, girls who had broken the law, who had come from the Probation Department, girls who were runaways, some who had been abused; but not all were pregnant.

TRINCHERO: You mentioned the sense of success in working with boys and their families as well as the mixture in the groups. But what about non-successes? Did you have any problems in reaching some of these children? Or was what you found difficult or disappointing?

NIELSEN: Yes, there were times when we could not reach these children. There was no place for these children to go.

TRINCHERO: What did you do about that? Did the agency attempt to provide ongoing care?

NIELSEN: Only as a follow up, because we had only one referral source, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the state-aided county organization.

TRINCHERO: That was really a partially finished situation.

NIELSEN: Right.

TRINCHERO: You mentioned something earlier about a girl's sense of completion. I was struck by that thought that somehow she was fitting the mores of the society, and felt she had "done the right thing," when she gave up a baby. Whereas, in the second part of your experience, there weren't "right ways" to settle things, were there?

NIELSEN: No. For many of these children, there was no way.

TRINCHERO: And the society was in flux.

NIELSEN: And the society was in flux. No one really knew where there was solid ground. And we had children having children.

TRINCHERO: What strategies did you use or were involved with to accomplish some of these goals that you had for these girls? This new population – well, earlier population as well as the new one. What were the strategies used for fundraising, for getting community interest in their situation? What did you do?

NIELSEN: Among the strongest supports were the "circles" volunteer women. At one time we had 17. The Board of Directors had an annual fundraiser so that the money was

primarily from these private sources. After the 1960s and 70s, the support was primarily government.

TRINCHERO: What happened in terms of the volunteer groups that were so active in the beginning? Did that continue?

NIELSEN: It continued well into the 60s and early 70s. By that time, some of the women were going into the work force. There was not the same sense of personal dedication. It became very, very difficult for us to carry the financial burden. The Board searched to find donations on an annual basis.

TRINCHERO: What would you say of the social movements that were going on in the state, and locally? What were some of the activities in which you participated that seemed to you important, but they didn't always reach the same goals you had in mind? What were the kinds of ways you handled the agency's position in the community?

NIELSEN: We were members of the Children's Residential Centers.

TRINCHERO: Statewide?

NIELSEN: Statewide, yes. We also belonged to the National Child Welfare League and the National Florence Crittenton Association.

TRINCHERO: What were their activities that you thought did benefit the agency?

NIELSEN: The Child Welfare League and Florence Crittenton Association of America were on. They used their legislative clout. They also would occasionally, personally, go to Sacramento to lobby the politicians.

TRINCHERO: Were there particular politicians that you recall as helpful; a governor, or someone else?

NIELSEN: Usually someone of our own board, also Willie Brown, now Mayor of San Francisco.

TRINCHERO: Legislator Will Helm?

NIELSEN: Legislators, yes.

TRINCHERO: What governor did you deal with?

NIELSEN: Governor Reagan at the time.

TRINCHERO: Which state administrations did you find helpful?

NIELSEN: Governor Reagan and, before him, Governor Pat Brown.

TRINCHERO: So, the groups of agencies had representatives that were talking with agencies in administration?

NIELSEN: The groups of agencies had representatives and individual agencies had representatives going up to see the politicians.

TRINCHERO: Did you see any policies change as a result of these contacts? Did you have any concrete evidence that this made a difference?

NIELSEN: Yes, I think it made a difference. First of all, it made them aware of the problems, and secondly, the funding did increase. There was an honest look at the kind of changes we affected in the girls we were now treating. The bureaucracy was willing to accept this and pay for it. It is very costly to care for the kind of child we see today.

TRINCHERO: You mentioned that when the Crittenton program began, the volunteers saw themselves as dealing with children who were like their own. What happened to these volunteers, as they viewed this other group of children and the multi-problems they presented?

NIELSEN: The mix in ethnicity, race, and backgrounds meant that the volunteers that we had become so comfortable with over the years, were no longer willing to associate personally with the girls. We became aware that we could still use the volunteers in a very important way in educating the community to the needs of this child, even though she was different from the “girl next door” as we used to know her.

TRINCHERO: Did you go outside the group you knew in looking for volunteers, or did they remain pretty much the same group, middle class, who had means, and who could use personal influence to help?

NIELSEN: Through some of the original volunteers, we did get groups of volunteers who were of different nationalities, social and ethnic backgrounds, who did go into the community to explain the desperate needs for treatment for these troubled girls.

TRINCHERO: Did you find yourself working with different departments than you had before in terms of the public agencies who made the referrals?

NIELSEN: Yes, there was a change almost completely from the Los Angeles County Department of Social Services to the Probation Department and to focus on the legal aspects. Many of the girls had been incarcerated for periods of time. Also, it became necessary for an agency like Florence Crittenton to separate itself from the Board of Education in Los Angeles and establish its own, accredited school to meet the special needs of these girls.

TRINCHERO: Was there any other reason why they were not entered in the regular school?

NIELSEN: Many of them could not adjust in the regular school or had been expelled. Their grade level was so far behind where other children would be. They needed special attention with special teachers in special schools.

TRINCHERO: So it became a total environment?

NIELSEN: It became a total environment, yes.

TRINCHERO: After leaving Crittenton in 1977, you remained interested in watching what was happening to the program and, since then, have you not been both an interested observer and a volunteer? What significant changes have you observed in social work practice from when you entered the profession and today?

NIELSEN: I think the greatest change is that social work today has turned to a more pragmatic approach in helping people resolve their problems. Help to the kind of girl who is in an agency like Florence Crittenton, has become focused on educating and enabling her to take care of herself; a real survivor, instead of focusing mainly on protection. Social work moved from dedication to the psychiatric aspects of a child's behavior to the more practical, pragmatic aspect of what her needs are, and how can we help her to live and be a productive adult in her environment -- it is a different environment from the one we knew 30 years ago.

TRINCHERO: Yet some of the children's problems have resulted from either drug use or alcohol use with the resultant mental illnesses that we see. What social work services do you think ought to be given to a disturbed girl?

NIELSEN: I hope that there will be a much closer working together between the Department of Mental Health and some of the medical services and psychiatric centers, with the agency that is caring for the mentally ill girl.

TRINCHERO: What would you say to incorporating some of the services relating to drug abuse problems and alcohol use problems, as part of the care-taking environment.

NIELSEN: In an agency like Florence Crittenton?

TRINCHERO: Yes.

NIELSEN: I think it's very important that we join hands with professionals who are knowledgeable in that aspect of the service.

TRINCHERO: That sounds like you are talking about community relationships, including neighborhood and regional relationships important to how a child grows and develops.

NIELSEN: I think that is the hope for the future; it is the greatest hope.

TRINCHERO: Do you have any personal papers, pamphlets or items that you think you might contribute related to this interview?

NIELSEN: Yes, many of them are at Florence Crittenton and will come into the archive at the USC School of Social Work.

TRINCHERO: Are there any final comments you wish to make about this experience or other recommendations you care to make?

NIELSEN: Social work is a most rewarding profession. I don't think I need to tell anyone who has ever been close to the profession, how rewarding it is.

TRINCHERO: So you would do it again?

NIELSEN: Yes, I would do it again.

TRINCHERO: Thank you very much, Mrs. Nielsen.