

Mary Ripley

Interviewed by: John Milner
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MILNER: Mrs. Ripley has experienced some 50 years as a volunteer leader in local, national and international programs. In her long career she has been a major influence in the field of volunteerism. She has been a long time friend and supporter of the University of Southern California School of Social Work and has served on the boards of numerous Los Angeles social agencies.

MILNER: Mary, you were active in the attempt to establish mental health services for the Asian community here in Los Angeles. This project failed. Could you tell me about this? I know that you have said that we can learn from our failures as well as our successes and I am sure this was a learning situation.

RIPLEY: I was talking about the importance of developing community involvement in the Rest Haven hospital as it was expanding and I was talking in terms of the large numbers of Asians in the area where the hospital was serving. This was [as I said] sort of in the beginning part -- or not the beginning, actually, but in the civil rights movement has been going on. But it was the beginning of the Asians recognizing that they needed to sense their power and stretch their wings towards getting their demands. They were learning a lot from the black community and how the black community has used its influence and its sense of getting their

voices heard. We were very pleased about that so we developed this community council but it backfired because in order to have their demands met, they were not willing to do their part they wanted us to do our part and they were not willing to come half way. For me as chair of that community council, it was a tremendously learning experience. They marched on the hospital; they picketed us; they used all the techniques that had been developed during many years before. It was a very frustrating period of time because although the leading people in the Asian community -- Delores Wong and others -- were certainly positive and constructive, but they could not convince the people who were coming to the hospital demanding services, and we were limited in our ability to give services because of the restrictions by the government guidelines plus the limitations of the available professional services, and so on. It ended up as a very frustrating experience because in the end nobody won and the hospital was closed down and, as you know, Kaiser took over the building. So, the Asian community lost the opportunity to have a mental health services in their community and we lost a wonderful services as we on the hospital board and some of as volunteers lost a sense of how we could work with community people. We had to go back to the drawing board and try to figure what we didn't do that would open up their willingness to communicate with us and their willingness to work with us. It was a very frustrating and a very depressing time. It went on in other areas of concern and things that have happened since have, I think, have

been valuable for me to have had that experience because as a volunteer you have to learn not to always have your own agenda. Again it comes back to the whole quality of needing to have understanding, and understanding of different cultures. We didn't play our cards right in that situation. We tried to be open, and obviously we hadn't built the kind of bridges of understanding that I was talking about earlier and so everybody lost. There have been other situations when through people's demands and through situations that have been complicated because of the times that we are living in nowadays and because of the crisis that we are really in-- in having people know what services are available and how we can help them. I don't know if I can add any thing specific, I know that there is one point that I was going to talk about in one of these areas but in thinking back over that Rest Haven experience I found that was really awfully frustrating because as a volunteer I couldn't change it. I couldn't make a difference and that's one of the things that I think volunteers need: a sense that they can make a difference. I don't know what that opens up in your thinking.

MILNER: I think its very important. I think the Asians are not used to most of the Western ways of organizing and conducting things. Their sense of authority directs us somewhat different and probably the educational thing over a long period of time is to get them really involved. I think they make less use of social agencies but there has been

an increase, of course, in their use of agencies with the Vietnamese and some of some of the other Asian groups coming here.

RIPLEY: Yes, right. This whole experience in Rest Haven, as I said a moment ago, kind of prepared me for some of the things we are going through now. As you know, right now I am working in Planned Parenthood and we are constantly surrounded by new opposition, I have felt it was very valuable having had that experience when we just gone through this Operation Rescue where we had people who felt very strongly about their side and we felt very strongly about our side. Yet we have to live in peaceful co-existence in some way and the number of volunteers that have been involved and have been willing for instance to march on Washington -- that was an example of volunteers getting together as activists. And this is what I remember now I wanted to talk about, because more and more volunteers are finding that one of their important and exciting roles is being advocates and most non profit private agencies now have public affairs committies or government affairs committies -- whatever you want to call them -- and this is an opportunity to see how we as volunteers can be activist in changing legislation and changing public opinion. This is a whole new element in volunteerism, we didn't have this in the 50s we were service volunteers or board volunteers and one of the changes there that has been helpful -- in some ways also it's held us back -- is the federal government has passed legislation that limits the amount of lobbying per se that private agencies

under the tax exempt 5013C can do. However, we who feel strongly about issues that are changing and developing and becoming more focused. We know that in order to deal with those issues we are going to have to take a stand and so we are learning how to take those stands as volunteers, and we're learning how to speak with authority and with knowledge in Sacramento and in Washington.

A deciding new element was when we started doing something like this as a Child Welfare League in the 60s but now they have a Washington office, most of our non profits have a Washington office now. I will never ever forget going to this last affair in Washington with 600,000 people -- volunteers every one of them -- and they tried to say there were only 300,000 but there were 600,000. It the quality of concern that you are now seeing in China where the young people wanted to see something changed so the whole quality of participation or involvement has taken on a whole new tone. Here I am at seventy-four (74) when I probably ought to sit at home and knit or do something like that and here I am going to a march in Washington and my husband must have flipped off a cloud.

It's a whole new door that has opened and in some ways I learned it in those early days at Rest Haven. They came in and said "this is what we want and we want to be heard." Well, now we're learning that the issue in my view and particular cause is freedom of choice. The other thing that's fed into a lot of my thinking in my volunteer work has been the changing role of women. I think that's been a terribly exciting. It started

way back when I first got involved with the whole need for day care and I saw the most important thing that women needed now was to have somebody to take care of their children so that they could either have a job or do something else that was important. I could never have done all the volunteer work I've done in my life if it hadn't been that I had a very supportive husband and help at home; and on the other hand I continued to feel that your family and your children are the most important and they came first and what time was left over was for my own causes. But, women are finding, you know, the whole new questions about women working; we talked about that earlier. People are saying, "well you can't have very many volunteers now because all these women are working." Now the Junior League, for instance: 95% of their membership are employed so they obviously have night meetings. They adjusted to that. But the fascinating thing, John, is that we're finding that among a lot of these women who work from 9:00 to 5:00 or 8:00 to 4:00, or whatever it is, many of them doing highly skilled technical work with computers and highly skilled jobs in offices, taking lots of responsibility and look forward to having evening or weekends when they could do some people-oriented things. It's an interesting dichotomy: saying they want to do something that shows that they care. They want to go and paint the hospital or hospice or do things that really put them in touch with people. They want to tutor or teach helping literacy or teach English or a variety of kinds of jobs. Many of those women are also doing this kind of

activist work that I am talking about and they do it in conjunction with their job and they are able to express their opinions and show that they stand for a certain specific causes. We started a new group out in Palos Verdes which is traditionally an upper middle class bedroom community; now its becoming more and more a yuppie community, very rich middle class young people, and we started this organization out there about three weeks ago asking people to come and join to be concerned with family planning. We didn't think we'd get much of a reaction and in nothing flat we had a 100 members, each of them paying \$50.00 or more to join to be a part of a group that will simply be doing public relations and public information. This just shows that there is a lot of concern and a lot of desire to be a part of where the action is. And that is what volunteerism is all about.

MILNER: I think many people are never asked to serve and I think there needs to be some aggression on part of recruitment of volunteers.

RIPLEY: We have the national organization called Volunteer which is the network of volunteer centers all across the country. The independent sector has done this report of a whole study. The study is not just on volunteering; it's on giving and volunteering. They have a whole national program showing that people who give also want to volunteer and people who volunteer also want to give. Its follows that philanthropy is all a part of the volunteer movement. Unfortunately, fund raising is also a part of that. One of the things that happened to me that was also a part of my

volunteer experience that I think is probably typical. I was asked to take on Heart Sunday for the County of Los Angeles when they hadn't had a Heart Sunday. This was an interesting assignment and I was given a lot of staff help but I was suppose to recruit people from all over the County to go and cover it and ring doorbells on Heart Sunday. Well, because of the fact that it was certainly a very current concern, people were really concerned about heart disease and it was becoming more and more recognized as the national killer. We were very successful and so obviously they asked me to do it again and we moved on and that is when I worked with Chauncey Alexander. We had a wonderful experience, but what happened to me was they asked me to go out and raise all this money and then they never gave me a chance to have any participation in how the money was spent. So I raised the roof and said I didn't think that it was right to ask a volunteer to do all the work and not have some sense of helping to decide how the money was going to be spent. That moved them off the dime and I was put on the board and I was one of the first women on the board; that again shows the changing role of women in getting their voices heard and not just being pushed off to the side: you go and raise your money and we'll tell you how to spend it. So, the other thing, back on the changing role of women, and that is something that I am especially interested in, on the international level. You and I have talked about this before.

I recently have been to India and I went primarily to study the changing role of women. I specifically wanted to know how they were changing the roles of widows and divorcees and so on which, as you know is very very limiting in India: once they become a widow or divorcee, they're a no class citizen. Well there are women there now -- wonderful women -- who I met. I was just so impressed with them; they are changing the laws about the dowry and the whole problem of giving up everything if they become a widow or a divorcee, Those laws are being changed and its being done by women, obviously. So I see a tremendous opportunity through the volunteer movement and through social work and through a caring society of seeing the role of women changing.

MILNER: It's been dramatic the last ten years. Dramatic changes.

RIPLEY: For a while we were our own worst enemies because we would come charging in and disrupting meetings. I think now we've had to learn to get the trust of the male population of the world and to get their respect. I think there are people who have been tremendously influential in that kind of arena and volunteerism has always been a part of it. But we do have to be careful not to be our own worst enemies in that area and it means we have to learn discipline; we have to be on time; we have to be considerate of agendas and learn to handle meetings in a business like way. Meetings are good training for all of us.

MILNER: Yes, good for the men. They'd learn something about working rather than just working for them. It's made a great difference for the whole male behavior, I think.

RIPLEY: I would hope so. It would seem to me that women, because we are the child bearers and so on, we are perhaps the more caring of the two but that doesn't mean that the men aren't caring also and we simply have to change the male priorities.

You know there is another area that I found tremendously challenging and that is the whole area of the environment. I been watching these youth movements in China and Korea, and the students and the things that are happening, and even our dreadful gang activities here in this city and others. It seems to me that young people – well, we all we need a cause: we need something that pulls us together to work for a need, and we need a cause and the cause can be negative or it can be positive, and the gang causes are, of course, negative, I think of some of the students causes and but my feeling is that if we could make it terribly important to the young people to know and understand what's happening to the earth and the environment, that may become a cause they may put their shoulders behind and work for in the same way they work for a war or that they work for a march. Did you by any chance go to the program on Saturday downtown by the Physicians for Social Responsibility? That again is a volunteer group of Physicians group that have tried to awaken us to the problems of nuclear deliberation and so on. Now there are emphases on

the environment. I heard Paul Ehrlich from Stanford speak not so long ago and went to a session as a volunteer called Global Tomorrow and they're going to have a large conference in the Fall. I'm working on that as a volunteer and it seems to me that's one of the things that we can recruit people for now and get some of the steam worked off.

MILNER: No, I think there is an interest, certainly, in the educated young. I just don't know how extensive the knowledge is.

RIPLEY: It's hard for me or any of us to understand the effectiveness of the greening and the ozone layers and the things that Ehrlich was talking about. But, just the same, we know that there is a threat to something that really affects us: is the sunshine, the beach, the water we drink or the simple things. Well it's a very telling time for all of us and it certainly behooves all of us to hold hands with the rest of the world. Learn our responsibilities together. But you know Lindeman I think said some really good things in that little squib and he has a fantasy that he has outlined. What would happen if there were no volunteers? It's a fantasy that several people over the years have explored. I don't think its one thing to have a sense of concerns if there were no volunteers: there would be a lot of things that would grind to a stop, but what we really need to think about is how we can help caring people to help each other. And it isn't so important that we stress volunteering; it's important that we stress caring I think. That is the key to democracy and thats the kind of thing Lindeman was talking about.

He's very articulate; I remember he came to one of our conferences of the National Assembly. Well, John, one of the questions I would ask you is "What are the brains in the field of social work going to do to help us with the things we are talking about?" You say the Council on Social Work Education is one place.

MILNER: Yes, I think that is a focal point. I think there needs to be consultation with deans of various schools about getting more on volunteerism in the curriculum. Some of them, I think, would be very favorable about getting started in a few places. If there was a course offered on volunteerism I think it would be valuable. It 's not a easy job for a dean to get faculty to agree to that but certainly worth trying.

RIPLEY: I've been talking about it ever since I've been on the Board of Councilors, and evidently the keynote speaker at graduation at USC spoke on volunteerism, so I think there is some movement. You know, if I could do anything before I'm not able to do anything, it would by my hope if we didn't do anything but make a model in one school, SC is certainly a leader in curriculum changes and direction. For instance, I have spoken with Randy Anderson's classes down in Cal State Long Beach but she is teaching in the Department of Recreation and I don't think that is where it should be. I think it should be in the school of social work.

MILNER: Because, Recreation is awfully specialized about the type of volunteering.

RIPLEY: Exactly. You have to have certain skills and, after all, if social work is the caring profession and volunteerism is based on caring and if we want to complement each other in our fields of endeavor, we need to learn from each other.

MILNER: In my own experience so many social agencies are completely unimaginative about how to use volunteers and I think social workers should be trained to use some imagination. An awful lot of volunteers offer to start and are disillusioned with what they are given to do and they just leave because they are not satisfied; their needs to be giving something grows out of experience of doing something as relevant.

RIPLEY: Exactly, and nowadays the volunteers that you are getting are highly skilled people and they are not willing to just do "work." As I said earlier, they need to feel that what they are doing has a purpose in the overall structure of the agency. Well, we have been doing a lot of work in helping in that area. From the National Center, for instance, one of the programs we've had is using handicapped people as volunteers; again that is developing a new resource, but it meant that we had to get the agencies that would be imaginative on how they would use a handicapped person as a volunteer. As you know, we've got to help agencies to come up with those kinds of creative jobs.

MILNER: I think a lot of agencies just generalize that much but I think some agencies now recognize they should use volunteers but they don't

really know how and don't make an effort to make good use of them; but they are supposed to have them, so they have volunteer programs.

RIPLEY: Well, in my lifetime we have moved from where the hospitals were at the beginning of volunteerism and the first that had directors as volunteers too. Now where most agencies have directors/volunteers, that may not be a full time job but it is a person who has that as a specific assignment. In my view, that is a terribly exciting change and development because one of the things I had to convince Chauncey about when we were working on developing the volunteers in other than fund raising was that he had to be committed to it. The executives has got to be committed to that concept so that he or she will give some structure and some emphasis and priority to staffing that kind of an office. Then you can't just plunk volunteers down in X room and expect them to perform; they have got to have supervision and you know getting a volunteer program started doesn't save the agency money. That's a false concept.

MILNER: I think that's nationally pretty much said. I think Reagan always said we can save money by this kind of volunteerism. It's a terrible mistake.

RIPLEY: It's absolutely ludicrous because you just don't save money. It's taken us in the volunteer movement a long time to convince professionals that volunteers have to have a supervision and the supervisors have to take time and they have to do training; they have to

do orientations but they've got to recognize that the volunteers brings something special. That's the extra special quality to a program and in order to really understand that, we, the volunteers have got to help -- whether it's in the schools of social work or through United Way giving funding for hiring supervision in whatever area; but there has to be a continuing source of information in that area.

Well, I think we are on the right track and I think that there are all kinds of tremendously exciting things happening and as far as I am concerned, volunteers are here to stay.

MILNER: And, you have had a long career and you've really seen the development.

RIPLEY: It's has been an exciting 50 years.

MILNER: Absolutely, just unbelievable.

RIPLEY: But, I've been very blessed and I've been very blessed with the opportunities that have been given me and as I said to have a husband who supported me -- which is terribly important as well as someone with my children when they were little. And I've been fortunate to have the training of the Junior League and fortunate to have the exposure to national organizations and international organizations and to travel. All of those things come together to make a very rich life, very exciting.

MILNER: We've very fortunate to have you.

RIPLEY: I'm lucky to live in the community and have buddies like you

MILNER: Is there anything you would like to add?

RIPLEY: I don't think so. I think I've said more than I probably should say. As I said in the beginning, I wouldn't want this to be just a statement of Mary Ripley's life. It's really the kinds of things that I've been exposed to.

MILNER: You have a statement of your life right here.

Mary: That's certainly that part of it. You know, someone quoted this wonderful statement of Confucius "that man wrapped up in self make a small package."

MILNER: I've never heard that one before.

RIPLEY: That's good. And another one that I think Lindeman said or someone has also said that "what I am is god's gift to me and what I become is my gift to god," and that's what I've always believe.

MILNER: Beautiful quotes.

RIPLEY: I think so. You have to know that the future of the world lies in the hands of my grandson and on my grandchild's shoulder. Those are the ones that are going to make the difference. We'll work together.
Right.