

CITY OF SYDNEY

MEALS ON WHEELS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

TRANSCRIPT*

Name: Pauline O'Halloran

Date: 4 April 2007

Place: Edgecliff

Interviewer: Margo Beasley

Duplicates: Master CD held in CoS Archives
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SUMMARY

Pauline O'Halloran is the longest serving current volunteer with the City of Sydney's Meals on Wheels [MoW] program [she began in 1964]. Mrs O'Halloran feels she has had too much attention for that fact and says she volunteers as a driver with MoW less for altruistic reasons than because of the personal satisfaction the work gives her. She was invited to join MoW by two golfing friends, after her children had all started school. With the exception of five years in the mid seventies after the birth of her son, she has been volunteering with the service ever since. Mrs O'Halloran recalls there were many more clients on each run then than there are now; and that although runs today cover a greater area than they used to, they take less time. Her regular run every Tuesday now takes only about an hour. Although she finds that she rarely meets other MoW workers today (with the exception of the runners who accompany her) in the past there was more opportunity for congregating and camaraderie amongst the volunteers. After they had completed their daily runs the volunteers took turns making sandwiches for one another and would gather around a table to share lunch like a big happy family. She remembers that fresh meat for cats was also once part of the MoW service, in part because some clients would forgo their own meals to give it to a beloved pet. Mrs O'Halloran says that she and her family are all conscious of their good fortune and realise how lucky they are. A large proportion of her MoW clients live in public housing, her initial contact with which she recalls as an 'eye-opener'. She argues that some of her clients are effectively living in squalor and are in need of quite a bit more care than they actually get. In her opinion people in high rise buildings easily become reclusive and insular and that although this can happen in all kinds of dwellings it is more likely when people are living with personal and social problems, as many MoW clients are. She describes herself as a 'healthy eighty year old' and intends to keep delivering MoW for as long as she is able.

TRANSCRIPT

This is an interview with Mrs Pauline O'Halloran. It's a part of the City of Sydney's History Programme's Oral History Project on Meals on Wheels. It's taking place in her home in Edgecliff. Interviewer is Margo Beasley and the date is the 4th of April, 2007.

Now, Pauline, your claim to fame at the moment is that you are the longest serving current Meals on Wheels volunteer. So, can you tell me a bit about how you came to be a volunteer, how did that come about and what year did it happen?

Well, Margo, as far back as I can remember this is how it happened: I think at this stage of my life my children were sort of what I would say "off my hands". By that, I mean they were going to school and I had two friends who were doing this, the Meals on Wheels, once a fortnight and we were talking, playing golf one day and they said, "Would you be interested in joining us?" and I said, "Oh, yes, that – yes, I think I would". So, they said, "O.K, so on Wednesday you come in with us and we'll introduce you to the – Wilma Amorosi and we'll go from there". So, there were three of us in those days in the car. I didn't start off, I don't think, driving, and I just delivered and then it went on from there.

What golf club were you playing at?

I was playing at St – no, I was playing at the Australian Golf Club.

Where were you living at that stage?

I was living in Woollahra.

I think you'd come to Woollahra from Lane Cove, is that correct?

I had come, yes, I had come from Lane Cove – been living there for four years and then we moved over to Woollahra - and these girls just happened to be doing it for the South Sydney Council, so I just went along with them and decided to stay. I was quite happy there and it was a nice group of people and we all enjoyed doing it; it was something we all loved.

What can you tell me about those early days with Meals on Wheels, it must have been a bit different to now?

Oh yes. In those days there were many more people that you went to visit. I think there probably was about thirty two on my list or thirty four, even.

So, you'd do thirty four on a day?

Oh yes, but there were two, cum three of us. If the driver could help two went into one and one – three of you could deliver as long as you found an appropriate place to park – that wasn't always easy – but in those days I did it

mainly around the Surry Hills area, I didn't go very much further than that but of course these days it's a bit wider spread and less people but you cover more territory.

Why would you think there are fewer people now than then?

Well, I can only presume it's because they do deliver these cool chill meals which people that are able to handle a microwave and heat the meal they get those and they're delivered only twice a week. I deliver only the hot meal that has to be eaten at the time of delivery, so those are the reasons.

So, you're thinking it's not so much that there are fewer recipients of Meals on Wheels but rather the way that the meals are organised is different so that for people like you who are driving around there are fewer people who need hot meals – is that what you mean?

No, I don't actually mean that. I mean that they, to save - perhaps if they can't get enough people which is obvious because they're doing this big promotion now that we really need more people who are willing to drive, mainly, but also to deliver the meal, I think that because of this and they have employed now the council workers who can deliver these meals and so it saves the likes of me having to have one every day and I think it's purely and simply the fact that they've got to sort of - if they can't find the health visit they've got to do something else and for those that can heat their meal it's quite - they just get it delivered twice a week, probably, and put it in their freezer or fridge and then they can reheat it when they like.

What can you remember about your clients around Surry Hills when you first started delivering?

Well, they were concentrated mainly – there was a few of the just the singular kind of dwellings but mostly they were in the big units like Northcott and The Pottery and then the scattered odd one here and there around Surry Hills.

So, you mean that they were mainly public housing tenants?

Mainly, mainly public housing, yes.

But that's not - being in some way socially disadvantaged is not a prerequisite for receiving the Meals on Wheels, is it? I mean, people who are quite well off might still receive it because they need to?

I'm not sure what the guidelines are. I know that they have to have a doctor's certificate, so I don't know that it is, it's not - mostly or basically just not being well enough, I suppose that, I don't know the monetary part of it. I don't

What I'm trying to say is it's not means tested, it's really about your physical requirements and if you're isolated and so on.

I think it's more – I think it is more so that. Surely it has to be that, I'd say, yeah.

Some people talk about Meals on Wheels being a bit of an eye opener, that when they first started doing it they hadn't realised the kinds of conditions that some people live in and so on. Was it like that for you?

Oh yes, yes. I found that mostly the women were the ones who kept their places very neat, clean and tidy. The men seemed to be a little bit – are the ones who that doesn't come into their thinking very much and also there are people, really, who need more care than they're getting in looking after themselves because some of them can't live after themselves and do live in one would almost say squalor, you know, and I know that over a period of time I have gone back and told – back at headquarters that - you know, so and so is looking very poorly and the place is filthy and should they do something about it and I don't know what happens after that. That's all you can do, really, because that's not my, that's not my part of the deal for me, at least - - -

But it is one of the functions of the Meals on Wheels delivery is that people do get checked on regularly.

Yes. Well, when you say "checked on", that isn't my role but if I see something that I feel should be reported I do.

Yes, I mean incidentally that that's what happens.

Incidentally, yes, yes – but it is an eye opener, I must say.

Can you elaborate on that a bit more, about conditions and people's circumstances and so on?

Well, of course they're improving the accommodation now, I think, for these people because Northcott was, I think, experimental – that went up in the 1960's, I think, must have been the early '60s - and it wasn't a great success, I don't think, this high rise, and the one that is opposite The Pottery is a far better construction.

That's lower rise, is it?

Much lower rise, yes. It's not as big either – but it was very difficult, I suppose, to house all these people. We just don't have – we could do with a lot more public housing, that's for sure and I don't know what happens to people now that need it, I don't know how long they have to wait or even like that - but yes, I don't think Northcott was the best environment.

What are you talking about there? Are you saying that the way the building was structured was actually an issue for living conditions, that that actually impacted on people's quality of life?

Yes, I feel when you put a lot of people together, a stack of people, one on top of the other - I don't think, number one, you were meant to live like that but if you stack them one on top of the other people then become reclusive almost. They feel there's so many people around and certainly if you had any choice you wouldn't choose, perhaps, to live next door to them - keep to themselves and I think that makes them a little more insular and you don't go out and talk to people in the hall or even like that, you just keep to yourself. And I could feel that, I could tell that by talking to them. You know, if you'd say "Oh, so and so on floor", "Oh, no, I don't know anybody up there". I guess it happens in all sorts of unit living, I think people do, are inclined to keep to themselves more, so when you get people living with people with problems it's more exaggerated and, you know, they keep to themselves more.

Sometimes you take food not just for the human beings, I think?

(laughs)

What was the story there?

Well, it didn't happen a lot but if somebody did have a cat - it wasn't dogs in those days, they were cats - they'd ask could they give them something for the pet and so I have been known to take little parcels of meat to feed a cat.

Was that on your own volition or was that part of the Meals on Wheels service?

No, I didn't, I wasn't, I didn't personally do it, no, no. The Meals on Wheels did it but it's so long ago I think nobody will remember that.

No, but it's a nice story isn't it to know that?

Yes, it is, it is lovely. Yes. No, no, I did have a runner recently, he went into this unit where this fellow has a cat and he was taking up a little packet of dried food to him and then there was somebody said they were giving their meal to the cat. You see, they're the sort of things you've got to watch because people get very fond of their pets and it would get ugly.

So, they might feed that cat and be suffering from malnutrition themselves?

Yes, probably, would be part of it or something like that, yes.

I think you also had a break in your Meals on Wheels service, didn't you?

Yes, I had a break in my Meals on Wheels which I was just - I had to do it because I had a baby at forty five and so - and my husband died when he was two and a half, so it meant I had to be there for him and I waited for him to go to school and I must have rejoined again when he was five and he went to school

Since that time, about what year would that have been?

That was in 1975.

And since that time your service has been continuous?

Yes. Yes, he was born in '72, my husband died in '75, so he was three then, two and a half, three, and then I waited another couple of years and then I went back to South Sydney. I didn't go to Woollahra even then, I went back to South Sydney.

Did you like the South Sydney area? Was that why you did it, even though you lived in Woollahra?

No, I just got used to the people there; they were just such a lovely little bunch. I mean, there was, that whole – in Phelps Street, that whole room was crowded with people.

What are you talking about when you say "Phelps Street"? For the benefit of people who - - -

Phelps is where the centre used to be off South Dowling Street.

The Activity Centre?

And they had the Activity Centre and they had their own kitchen.

And the meals were generated there?

Absolutely, yes.

And they service the area, the South Sydney area?

Yes, yes. And we used to have our meetings – we had a few meetings at the Town Hall and then they transferred all that to Erskineville and - but now we don't have Annual General Meetings; I haven't been to one for years.

So, there were a lot more meetings back then, were there?

We had one every year

An AGM. And also were there regular meetings where - - -

Oh, no, no, no, I wouldn't say so. No, there just seemed to be the one meeting there and it was well attended. People were very interested and the people who were doing it were very dedicated, you know - I thought they were terrific and nice people.

Were you also ever involved in actually serving meals to people in the Activity Centre as opposed to delivering into people's homes?

No, we never delivered – we never served meals in the Centre.

In some of the centres that did happen?

Yeah.

Sometimes the women would actually serve out meals to people who came in to dine.

Well, we didn't – well, the time would have been overlapping.

Yes, I think they probably divided them up.

I mean, meals went out about eleven, half past ten or eleven and then by that time, by the time you got back in those days we were looking probably looking one o'clock. By that time I think people would have been dining, sitting down and having their meal in the Centre. No, I've never delivered, never served meals at table.

That would have been another centre.

Could be.

And I think also sometimes the women were involved in making sandwiches, were they, for some of the men who were drivers?

Well, we - when we were in Phelps Street we took it in turns to do sandwiches and we had a table set up and as they walked in they would give their order, the taxi drivers included, and often they would have their sandwich then because they'd been working a long shift or something like that. We had a couple of taxi drivers but mostly all volunteers and so when they came back we all sat around and had lunch and one big, happy family. (laughs)

It's nice, though, isn't it?

It was nice.

It must have encouraged relationships between all the people.

It did, it did. Oh yes, it was great camaraderie about it – I liked it, I enjoyed it but now it's a matter of come in, get the list, put them in the car, go and do the job and that's it, you come back.

So, you don't get the opportunity to meet other runners and drivers very much, just the people who are on - - -

No, we don't know any of them, no. I do talk to the people in the Centre, though. I enjoy that, I go in and I talk to whoever's in there.

You mean the staff, Council staff?

No, no, no, no, the people who come in for a meal and that and a couple of well known people in there that are always good for a joke and a laugh.

And when you talk about taxi drivers, I think you're talking about the times when they haven't had enough cars or enough drivers - - -

Yes, oh, yes.

- - - and so the Council would actually employ taxi drivers to do the run?

Yes, oh, yeah. I think they still do if somebody can't do it. Like, if I go away I think they need - they get a taxi driver.

If you're not around?

Yeah, I mean it's - I don't know if they have anybody else to do it if I'm not there for my run unless they get one of the other drivers and I don't think I met them. I may meet them in May if I go to - when we go to the Town Hall, they'll probably trickle there.

For the social occasion?

Yeah. I think I have met one of them but we don't - we're different days so, you know, you just don't collide with one another.

Can you remember any particular clients that you're especially fond of in the early days or subsequently? You must have had a few favourites amongst them.

Well, I did but I can't remember - Mrs ... was one of them; she was in Northcott and the other day I went and I thought, I wonder if Mrs ... 's still here - but I knew it was the second floor, I couldn't quite remember. Probably if I walked along I would notice it but you don't knock on doors these days. I mean, they wouldn't know who I was; I could be anybody - so once again people are very aware of these sort of things, you know. We had an incident where - it wasn't on one of my days, it must have been a day they collect the money which I think is a Monday - and a fellow held them up with a hypodermic needle and took the money. They didn't have much but he wasn't to know that and - yes, yeah, I've been around when there's been a few (laughs) police. There was police there yesterday - there always seems to be a paddy wagon around that Northcott unit, there's something going on and you hear people shouting at one another. It must be - it'd be drugs, it'd be drugs.

What was it you liked about Mrs ... ? Why did you mention her when I asked about your favourites?

I think she was very outgoing and always liked a conversation. Some don't, some people don't like that, you know, they keep to themselves too much – and there was a few in there that – women particularly - that I got to know and then suddenly they disappear off the list. You never know why unless you ask and some move on to perhaps, you know, hostels or they die, you know.

And I think quite a lot probably go to nursing homes as well.

Exactly, yes, exactly.

So, nowadays you're a driver. Is that one day a week?

One day a week, yes.

It's quite a big commitment, isn't it?

Well, yes, it has got (laughs) – it is a very bit commitment because I said the other day, you know, "If for any reason I feel I have to quit I'm going to feel terribly guilty, (laughs) I've been doing it for so long". That is not at the back of my mind at the moment. I'm healthy, thank God and still able to drive.

Well you are, if you don't mind me mentioning this - - -

Yes.

- - - you have, I think, recently celebrated your 80th birthday, is that correct?

Yes, yes, yes.

But you're a very fit 80 year old.

Yes, yes, I am, thank God.

And I know that you are very much valued by the service because, I think, reliability is very important.

Yeah, thank you, I am reliable, yeah.

Can you give me a bit of an idea of the run that you do now? You don't necessarily have to tell me people's names or perhaps just their first names.

Yes.

But when you go in on a Friday, is it Friday you do?

I do Tuesday.

Beg your pardon, Tuesday.

That's all right.

So, when you go in on a Tuesday, how does the day go?

Yes. Well, I start off and we head for Mrs ... that's in Surry Hills. Then we go over, straight through then to The Pottery and Northcott and we'd only have two in each of those buildings. Then we go down Clisdell Street and there's one there, then I head over to Moore Park Road and we do one Mr – there, then I come back down through Oxford Street, Mrs - what's it? – Mary. Ely, she loves Ely and he's always there a fair while because she likes to chat to him. That's in - - -

He's one of your runners?

Yes, he's my Chinese runner and he's just lovely and he's always got a smile on his face - and she's in Liverpool Street, then I go down to Poplar Street, down near where the big police academy is, then I go down to Castlereagh Street and then I come back to Riley Street and home.

How long does that whole run take?

It only takes about an hour.

So, it's a lot less demanding than it used to be?

Oh, yes, oh much, yes – and I'm very lucky because I can usually park. People who do other – a lot of areas like Kings Cross and they always have trouble with parking. I'm not too sure now how many rounds there are; I think there's only the one round. I don't know who does – I used to do Kings Cross once but they've all disappeared. I used to do quite a few in Kings Cross.

They're done out of Millers Point now, Kings Cross.

Oh, well that's - - - I see, yes. Well, there were quite a few in Kings Cross and so they've gone for me.

Do you do any other kinds of volunteer work or is Meals on Wheels your main thing?

No, it's my main one. I do do some, a couple of things for the church, yes.

Such as?

Well, I do the flowers and I do the counting.

The counting?

Counting the money that's on the plate.

From the plate. That's a very important job.

..... yes. I said to the priest jokingly one day, "I think I want a bullet proof vest". (laughs)

Because the plate was so heavy with donations?

Well, it's money and (laughs) you're never too sure what people might do to get some money. So – and they don't take a lot of my time. It's just a matter of every bit helps, I suppose because they're – everybody's looking for help these days.

Yes, that's true. Do you think it's different from the way it used to be, that kind of thing, the need for money to generate money for organisations?

Oh, I certainly do, yes.

What do you do with the rest of your time? You're very active, I know.

Yes, yes. I fill in my time reasonably well. I play golf twice a week, I play bridge, I do shopping.

You entertain?

Yes, I entertain a little, yes, yes.

Your table's beautifully set today for an Easter dinner.

Yes, yes. I enjoy that – I quite like doing that, I'm used to doing that. When my husband was alive I did a lot of entertaining and you get used to it and I like it. In fact, my children are all of that bent; they like to entertain, they love it – and they're all good kids too. They do their share of good works, you know, they're conscious of their good fortune and I think that's what it amounts to.

Do you?

I do.

Would you say that's your driving force?

Yes, I do, I do. I'm very thankful for what I've got and I think when you do these things it makes you realise just how lucky you are. So, if there's anybody out there that feel they've got spare time on their hands it's very fulfilling.

Your husband's been dead a long time - - -

Yes.

- - - **although I rather sense you still miss him.**

Yes.

And he also did volunteer work of some kind, didn't he?

Oh, yes, he was always very aware of people who needed help. He worked whatever time he could give because he had a young family and a big job. He did put in quite a lot of time with St Vincent de Paul.

What did he do for them?

Well, he used to go out sometimes of an evening and go and see people and help them with a little bit of advice which he was – he'd be very good at that – and then we always had the time when we'd do the pickup of all the clothes and you'd take the kids off in the car and go and pick up the bundles of clothes in those days – they used to do the St Vincent de Paul runs and - - -

Where would they pick the clothes up from?

They'd call, call on the people.

From people's homes?

Oh, yes.

Not from the big bins?

Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, the people's homes and some of those were - Bellevue Hill especially (laughs) the things that people threw out very nice – but he did a lot of that but he got a lot of satisfaction out of it too, particularly got a lot of satisfaction out. So, you know, it wasn't all – what's the word I'm looking for? – altruistic.

Yes, I understand what you mean. Well, people often say that that's the case, the reason that they like to donate their own time or energy to particular things is because it makes them feel good.

Yeas, there's nothing wrong with that, you see.

That's right. It's a very strong motivating force.

Yes, yes. Yes, I suppose – and if you do it I suppose you shouldn't talk about it too much. I feel I have. (laughs)

Well, you've had a lot of attention in the last few weeks because of your long period of service.

Yes, yes. Yes, and it gets to be a little bit embarrassing because people say, "Oh, dear, that's fantastic", you know, and I think, well, I'm sort of just used to doing it, you know. It just – it doesn't take a lot of time.

And you're available and you enjoy it?

Yes, I am.

Are there any other things you'd like to say today for this interview about Meals on Wheels in general?

I think it's very hard to find people to do these jobs. They're always looking for places to advertise where the majority of people will see it, so I think that probably word of mouth is the best way of ever advertising anything. So, I feel that if I were in a position, if I were younger - the mere fact that that's the way I started because somebody asked me - that I don't, couldn't put my finger on anybody that I could say, "Yes, there's a chance that they may do it", but I'll think about it and see who is – see if I can rope somebody in.

Have you recruited people in the past?

No.

Never?

Well, I did one but it wasn't her cup of tea. I think – not that she wouldn't do anything because I know she mentioned something this week where she'd filled in for her daughter who was serving meals at the Matthew Talbot and she said, "Oh, Pauline", you know, "I was so surprised, when I saw the age, too", but I don't think and without being judgemental I don't think Meals on Wheels was her cup of tea, you know. I don't know what was but to each his own.

Yes, some people are just not suited, I suppose.

Yes.

All right. Thank you very much, Pauline.

Thank you, Margo.