



The Greens (WA)
30th Anniversary History Project
[1990-2020]

An interview with:

Ms RUTH GREBLE



14th September 2020 at her home in Cottesloe

The Greens (WA) acknowledge that First Nations peoples, as the original inhabitants of this country, have a special cultural and spiritual connection with the land and water. We believe that their rights and responsibilities as owners and custodians must be respected.

We hold that First Nations peoples have a right to self-determination and political representation, and must be partners in the development and implementation of public policies, programs and services that affect them.

This interview was recorded on Noongar land and the Greens (WA) acknowledge that these lands were stolen and sovereignty was never ceded. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

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INTERVIEWER

David Worth, Greens (WA) History Project Working Group.

TRANSCRIBER

Ruth Greble, Greens (WA) History Project Working Group.

NOTES TO READERS

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INTERVIEW DISCLAIMER

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INTRODUCTION

Ruth Greble was spurred into community action by the decision of the ALP Prime Minister Bob Hawke in 1984 to change the ALP's uranium mining policy. She, and her mother, were supporters of Jo Vallentine's initial Senate campaign in 1984.

Ruth joined the Greens (WA) in July 1993. Over the last nearly 30 years, Ruth has filled all of the office bearer positions in the Curtin Regional Group and has been a significant financial donor to the Greens (WA).

Ruth has also been very active in other organisations such as the Abortion Law Reform Association, the Women's Electoral Lobby and Birds Australia.

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TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:02] DW: My name is David Worth, and it's Monday, the 14th of September [2020], and I'm interviewing this morning Ruth Greble in her house at Cottesloe. Ruth, thanks very much for giving up your time this morning for this interview.

GREBLE: It's a pleasure, David.

DW: Can I just start with where you were born? And when?

GREBLE: I was born in San Diego, California, in 1948. My father enlisted when Pearl Harbor was bombed and he was still in the Navy at that time.

DW: Did your mother work at that time as well, or was it just your father?

GREBLE: No, I was the youngest of three children and she had been a trained nurse, which required at that time training at the University of California, a science degree. And then two years after that, which she was able to do because residents of California had their tuition fees paid by the state. Otherwise, her family could never have afforded to do that. But her father was very keen for her to have an education.

I mention this because it is very formative in my life and in my experience of the Greens. My grandfather had three years of schooling in England, in London before he went out to work at the age of eight. So, she more than made up for that.

DW: Yes, it's hard for us to understand. Children of that age working very long hours in factories, in cotton mills or whatever, you know, 10-hour days.

GREBLE: So, he was treated reasonably by the times. But he went to work for a tea merchant and he slept in the warehouse and had rats running around, that sort of thing. But his older sister got him out of that and into service. But my father had a very different education, a privileged education. And he told me that my granddad was one of the top three best read men he'd ever met in his life.

DW: So, your father, he was born in America as well?

GREBLE: Yes, he was born in New York.

DW: And your father's name?

GREBLE: Edwin St. John Greble.

DW: And your mother?,

GREBLE: Ruth Holmes Angell.

DW: It's a beautiful name. Do you have many memories of growing up in San Diego?

GREBLE: None at all, because we rapidly moved to San Francisco. That's where my memories start and then subsequently we were on a farm in the California Valley. So, the wildfires that are sweeping through at the moment caused me some pain.

DW: Oh, it's outrageous because it was also very large and destructive last year as well. So, they've had two years of very, very bad fires.

GREBLE: That's right. All my all my family is, beyond the immediates, in the United States. And I went camping with my cousin four years ago. My cousin and his wife, we went to six national parks, Yosemite, all through there and the drought and the wildfire potential was more or less a very hot topic of conversation. We're very worried about it. But as far as I know, he is okay.

DW: Yeah. And in these times, all we've really got, I suppose, are phone calls and Skype to try and keep in touch with your family, make sure they are okay.

GREBLE: Yes.

DW: Did you go to primary school in San Francisco?

GREBLE: No. In the small farming community in a place called Gridley.

DW: Gridley?

GREBLE: Yes. I went to elementary school until I was nine years old.

DW: Right. And what about high school?

GREBLE: That was in Tauranga, New Zealand, North Island, where we had gone to live. And subsequently, Perth Modern School for six months when we migrated in 1962. And my final three years were spent at Albany Senior High School. I completed the year 5, or what you'd call year 12 now. And it was a very small class in 1965 compared to the school at large, not many people, not many students got to that level. They were all there because their parents wanted them to complete high school.

DW: Yeah, those moves from California to New Zealand to Perth were based on your father's work needs?

GREBLE: Well, not so much needs, but he and Mum, I think, to put it simply had a bit of wanderlust.

DW: Right.

GREBLE: And they were able to do that.

DW: And they were young enough at that time.

GREBLE: Yes.

DW: Because you are, it's '62. you're about 14.

GREBLE: Just I had my 14th birthday in May just after we arrived [in Perth].

DW: Right. And how long did you spend in New Zealand before you came over?

GREBLE: Four and a half years.

DW: Four and a half years. So, basically, you've been in three locations with wonderful environments, California and New Zealand and now Perth.

[00:05:05] **GREBLE:** Yes.

DW: Do you think that had any impact on you?

GREBLE: Of course.

DW: Yeah. In what ways?

GREBLE: Well, you certainly have a broader understanding of what life is like outside the immediate vicinity that you are living in.

DW: Whereabouts in New Zealand is Tauranga?

GREBLE: Tauranga is on the North Island in the Bay of Plenty.

DW: Right. That sounds also a lovely location growing up as a child. Were there any issues as you were growing up that had an impact on you in terms of your later adult life?

GREBLE: Well, most of them, I think they all do in a general way, they form ...

DW: Because you were a bit young for the Vietnam War issue I suppose?

GREBLE: That was in 1969. That was the first public march and demonstration I ever took part in. I was working as a student librarian and there was a march through Perth. I very much wanted the soldiers to come home. I didn't think they had any place there. And it was war. And I understood what that meant because of the family history and the service, military service that had been ... happened in my family and also I well understood the tragedies for all sides that happen.

DW: Student librarian, so you were doing a library course, at UWA?

GREBLE: No. It was an archaic system that is past, faded, thankfully. It meant that you went to work as a student librarian for an organisation, as you do. And in my case it was the City of Perth and you studied at night school. So, you worked a 40 hour week and then you studied at night school to a curriculum set by the Library Association of Australia, taught by their professionals at ... we went to Perth Technical College, and that's where the lectures were held.

And then you sat exams at the end of the year and the exams were tested not by your lecturer, but by somebody else from another part of the country. They thought that meant that it was all objective. But in fact, there were a lot of people who were good students but didn't pass. So doing three units a year, it was possible to pass in three years, but most of us took five. And that's what happened to me.

DW: Five years. And so, you were working at the City of Perth for five years?

GREBLE: No, just for one year and then I went to work for West Australian Newspapers for two years, which was really a fluke because they - newspapers - never took trained librarians or student librarians. But I got lucky with Mr Rosendorff. Hans Rosendorff was the librarian there and he was a sensational fellow. The retrieval time of information: journalists would come up to the front desk and say, 'I want diddle-la-la' and Hans would translate that into which file and the file was with the journalist, on average, I counted within 25 seconds. So this was a key point with me later in my career as a librarian to get fast retrieval, accurate retrieval, and it meant I was a little bit off-centre for most librarians.

DW: And I suppose working at WA Newspapers, then you'd get a lot of information, I suppose, about current events, like that?

GREBLE: Oh gosh, yes.

DW: Protests ...

GREBLE: Oh, gosh. Right there. And then, and a lot that didn't get in there in the press, too. From there, I got a job with the Metropolitan Water Board, which had gone in with the Public Works Department with a technical library that served both departments in Dumas House. And it was a weird, weird arrangement because the structure of the library was supervised by a board that met once a year from representatives of the different departments. But the Public Works had the librarian in charge, and then the second person down was a Met Water Board person, and then the first assistant was a Public Works Department and the next person. It was just an arrangement. It wasn't politics.

This is the old public service where you were there, you had a job for life as long as you didn't get caught with your hand in the till or something. But it meant that decisions were made supposedly without fear or favour. Nobody was on a contract. And the budget of both the Water Board, the budget of the Public Works Department, I think was the highest capital budget expenditure in the State bar none. And that means all the companies, too. So, there were very huge programs that were undertaken and that also covered all the building of public buildings ... schools, hospitals, down to jails and everything like that.

So, working with engineers and architects and being part of the forward planning and so on, especially with the more intimate knowledge of the readers that

specialised libraries give you, means that you're part of the organisation. And it was very demanding and I loved it.

DW: In terms of your jobs at the WA Newspapers, then at the Water Board, how many librarians were employed?

[00:10:52] **GREBLE:** Very few, very few specialised libraries and they still are today very few. The largest one I've ever worked in was at the Institution of Electrical Engineers in London, and I became the Assistant Librarian there in 1978 as a result of my career trajectory. And also I had stopped travelling around Europe. That had 12 people.

DW: In terms of your activities with protests against the Vietnam War in 1969, what did your family think of that? Were they supportive?

GREBLE: I think they were in the march, my Mum and Dad.

DW: In the march, okay

GREBLE: Somewhere.

DW: And your sisters?

GREBLE: I have no sisters.

DW: Sorry, your brothers. You had ...

GREBLE: Two older brothers.

DW: Yeah. Sorry. And did they participate?

GREBLE: One was in Brisbane, I doubt it, the other was in Perth and he, Bill, was at university, he ultimately got a PhD at UWA. For the long time that he was there he participated, and he was an active member of a group that was recording and reporting political events around the metropolitan area independently and assessing crowd numbers and so on. And that put them at odds with *The West Australian* and other newspapers and media outlets in Perth.

And eventually - he could tell you the story - but eventually the authorities tried to shut them down because they would say, 'Our estimate is there's a crowd of 2,000 here'. The Police would say only about 400 people turned up. So, and that would be what the newspapers [used], *The Daily News* or *Sunday Times* or whatever, which were all owned independently, independently of each other so the media scene wasn't anything like it is now.

DW: At home, sitting around the kitchen table at night, was politics discussed?

GREBLE: Oh, gosh. It wasn't just at night. It was breakfast, lunch and dinner. And my parents never belonged to a political party, but they were, due to the slice of

American life that they came from and they came from very different slices, it was your duty as a person born in America to learn how government is run and take part, because, as my mother said many years later, 'There is a profound difference from being a citizen in your own country and responsible than to being the subject of a monarch'. And we are still subjects of a monarch today, but it was just the expectation that if you're able bodied, you should have an opinion at least, but then if you're able bodied, you should be doing something and at least know about stuff and, you know, think about it.

DW: Did your parents become Australian citizens?

GREBLE: They did as quickly as they could, in 1963. The time in New Zealand counted towards that.

DW: Okay. That therefore makes sense in terms of protesting, your feeling that fulfilling that part of the role of a citizen, that you would also have some impact on government because you'd vote about what their policies ...?

GREBLE: Certainly did.

DW: And what about religion at home with your family?

[00:14:21] **GREBLE:** I've never been baptised. Neither of my brothers, oh beg your pardon, one of them did when he was 14. My parents were brought up in Protestant Christian faith and they didn't want to impose that on babies, so they said we could all make up our mind later on. And we did have to make some observance on Sunday. We could, when we were older, go to any service we wanted to and take part and see. They encouraged that.

But if we weren't going out on Sunday, then we'd sit at home and have Bible reading for half an hour or so and have a discussion. What do you think was meant? What is this? What is that? So, there was nothing about taking literally the King James version of the Bible, because it was, I knew as a child, that it was a translation of a translation of a translation.

DW: Your parents sound very well-educated and interested in the wider world. Did they have an expectation that you would go on to further education?

GREBLE: Absolutely. They had an expectation that I would, I and my brothers, would be thoughtful and go on to do something we really loved and make the most of what we had.

DW: And at high school, did you have a view to becoming a librarian or how did you move into that sphere?

GREBLE: No. I moved into it really a lack of ... I knew at 17 ... I don't know why I knew this so early, but it has proved to be correct and accurate ... that I wanted to

be of service to others and do something I enjoyed. And also, I wanted to have a reasonably good salary. I wasn't into impoverishment.

DW: Were those values and focuses similar to the other students you were sharing life with at Perth Mod, because was that a selective school?

GREBLE: No, it had ceased to be a selective school at that stage. It was only because we were living in Subiaco. But then my parents had the idea they'd like to go to the Albany area to farm once again. And that didn't turn out.

DW: Right. Did they then return to Perth?

GREBLE: They did after a year, but I stayed on.

DW: Away from your family.

GREBLE: Yes.

DW: What, living with other boarders?

GREBLE: No, the Country Women's Association ran a hostel for girls called the Rocks Hostel in the old Governor's mansion overlooking the harbour. So, it was a mile away in old terms, 1.5 kilometres away from the high school. So, if you didn't have a bus, you walked. So we walked to school and back every day, but it was cold.

DW: But very independent it sounds. Being independent and a Year 12 student, as a woman too, I would imagine still probably living in pretty sexist times?

GREBLE: Oh, very. That was going back to the career choices: the career choices for the girls who stayed on were teaching, nursing. Even if you went on to and were successful at getting your matriculation, getting into university, it wasn't expected that you would go further. But the girls wanted to. In the year ahead of us, the dux of the school was a girl called Shirley. I can't think of her last name. I later learned that when she went to UWA, she wanted to do geology and she was prevented from completing the degree because one of the compulsory courses was run by a man who didn't think that women should be geologists. So, this is in the late '60s and she could not do that. There was no avenue of appeal at the university. He simply didn't think that she should. So, he failed her. A dux student.

And I worked with a woman also, called Jenny O'Neill who became my best buddy. And sadly, she's no longer with us. But she had done ... she had got to university. Her parents were teachers so high, high expectations there. She did a Bachelor of Agricultural Science. And all the boys in the class came to her for soil science questions because she was the go-to for that and she met with similar opposition. She wasn't failed, but she was given a very low mark for soil science, which all the boys knew that was dead unfair because she was the best in the class.

When she graduated, she applied for 80 jobs. This is, you know, about 1960, 80 jobs and wasn't accepted even for an interview for any of them. But I was well aware and it was a bit of a shock because even in California, where my mother had come from, there were expectations. But she and her fellow students who graduated in nursing, they were working.

DW: Outrageous, really looking back now from where the possibilities are for young women going through education. But one of the big movements also with the Vietnam movement in the late '60s was the women's liberation movement. So, did your interests cross across into those areas as well?

[00:20:09] **GREBLE:** Not until the 1980s.

DW: Right. And also the Australian environment movement began to kick off in the late '60s, like the Australian Conservation Foundation. Did you have any interest in those issues?

GREBLE: Well, I just thought they were good things, but, um, I was actually very busy. It was hard working. I became promoted way too early. And I also wanted to study, to start my university degree after I completed librarianship. And then I fell in love and played basketball. And I wanted to do lots of other things. So, no, activism wasn't really for me. And I'd been put off really by the degree to which politics consumed my parents and people that they knew.

So, much as I love them to death, you just couldn't go to see them and have a cup of tea without saying, 'Do you know what happened in that darned silly ...?' My Dad subscribed to an independent, a very, very well respected weekly called *US News and World Report*. So that had come in and everything would be devoured.

DW: And he would have a great time now with Twitter and politics, wouldn't he? Because it's so instant, whatever happens around the world, it's on Twitter.

GREBLE: I'm not sure what he'd ... I can't imagine anyway. Yeah, I can't imagine.

DW: You mentioned that you moved overseas. Was that long after you finished your library course?

GREBLE: Yes, it was. And I'd been a librarian in charge of the place, the Public Works-Met Water Board. And my boyfriend and I really wanted to go and have a nice, long overseas working holiday that we saved up for. My boss wanted me to just take six months on, you know, long service leave, which I had half pay, and I said, 'No, time to go'. So I went.

DW: What year was that?

GREBLE: We left in January 1977.

DW: And you found library work, as you mentioned, over in London?

GREBLE: Oh, very, very easily.

DW: Right. Yeah.

GREBLE: And my boyfriend was a chartered accountant, experienced chartered accountant, and he also found work instantly.

DW: How long were you overseas for?

GREBLE: I ended up being away six years.

DW: Until 1983?

GREBLE: Yeah.

DW: And what brought you back then, to Perth?

GREBLE: My father became ill in 1982 and he died here on the 4th of April. He wanted me to stay [away]. There were complications with ... illness in the family elsewhere. I don't want to talk about that. But after he died, after a few weeks, my mother came to stay with me in London. And then she went on to the United States. We both came back. I cleared up my job, finished, you know, and terminated my rental of the flat. And we got back here on the 28th of December. It was well and truly time to come home.

DW: 1983?

GREBLE: '82. So, it's more or less the start of 1983, fresh.

DW: And did you come back and find it easy to get a position here as a librarian?

GREBLE: No, I didn't look for a position as a librarian. I'd actually gone into business for three years outside libraries in the last three years, and that was tremendous. And I was offered a position over in Sydney, with the company that I was with in London, and that would have been running the office for service delivery to the shipping industry up the east coast of Australia. The man who offered me the position had been promoted to be the Australasian manager, and he wanted me to run things for him.

And it was an enormous boost to my ego but - and I knew I could do it - but I didn't want to leave Mum on her own here with things as they were. There were difficulties that she had to face and she needed support. So, I stayed here.

DW: Stayed in Perth. And what position were you able to obtain here?

[00:24:55] **GREBLE:** Well, first thing was to, um, really to go back to that degree that I hadn't finished. So, I thought being older and things, I'd do that part-time and work part-time. And I was able initially to get part-time work until I knew things were settled, as a typist and clerical. So, I went to the Commonwealth Employment

Service and got a job there and they sent me out temping. So that was fun. And I mean that it really was fun. I'm not being sarcastic.

DW: No, but March '83 was when [ALP Leader] Bob Hawke won the [Federal] election, came into power.

GREBLE: He did.

DW: Did you rediscover an interest in politics at that time?

GREBLE: Well, I was a Labor voter.

DW: Right.

GREBLE: But he changed that completely when he drawled into the news that, 'Argh, the uranium policy, we're just going to have three little uranium mines, just three. That would just keep it to three'. And I just - jaw dropping. And I realised I've got to think again before I let those buggers, pardon my language, in. And my mother was implacably opposed to uranium mining. She'd, you know, experienced and educated nurse and she led actually, I followed her in a lot of ways.

DW: What were the options then? Obviously, I suppose Jo Vallentine got into parliament in '84, but there weren't many other political options?

GREBLE: No, there weren't.

DW: There were, say, the Australian Democrats?

GREBLE: I'm not even sure, I can't remember that. But I remember my Mum saying, 'There's a young Quaker who's going to run for the Nuclear Disarmament Party for the Senate'. She just, 'I don't fancy her chances, I think I'll go down and see if I can help'. So she did. And then a week or two later, or some time later, not immediately, I thought I should. So, I went down to stuffing envelopes or whatever, and that was the start.

DW: Fantastic, and also a positive start because she was elected.

GREBLE: Oh yeah.

DW: For the Nuclear Disarmament Party.

GREBLE: Yes! Yes! So, that was a success when you back somebody that first of all, the cause is what you like. Secondly, yeah, the person is excellent and she runs straight and I'm afraid I'm biased. I have a childhood favoritism or bias towards Quakers. Very practical, you know, in what they do. And so that was more or less a big tick, too. But it was, you know, that combination of intelligence and knowledge and straight talking and fabulous rhetoric and doing, so and everybody is the same. This wasn't sort of, you know, some authoritarian hierarchy. And treated respectfully too, which ...

DW: You mentioned earlier, you got involved with the women's liberation movement in the '80s.

GREBLE: Yes, not because I thought that was a good idea. But as so much activism and lobbying is done, one by one, your friend, somebody you know and trust is doing something, you think, 'Oh, why would they do that?', you know, question. Okay, I'll go along. You know, she wants me to come along, so I'll come with her. Well, that was it with the Women's Electoral Lobby in Perth. And the person who did that was Megan Sassi. She's one of the finest lobbyists I've ever met in my life. Sadly, we lost her 30 years ago to cancer. Megan was the business and science reference librarian at the State Library. She was the first woman appointed to a head of department.

While I'd been away, my folks had sent me newspaper clippings. She [Megan] wanted the laws changed on abortion and I thought, 'You mean it's illegal?' So, when she came to see us on the front verandah, she ... sorry, I'll go back a little bit. My Dad in particular was a very good library user, and he'd made her acquaintance over at the State Library and they just had this serendipity. They hit it off years before, and had very good conversations and so on. And Mum too, so because he died and Mum was back, Megan came to see her and I was back and she knew me too.

So, we had a cup of tea on the front veranda and that was a pivotal moment. I asked her why, what's this about, you know, the abortion laws in Western Australia. I mean, I had lived here for so many years and didn't know. So, she explained that to me and she said, 'I'm with ALRA [Abortion Law Reform Association]. ALRA is the pro-choice community based ... I happen to have a leaflet here'. Now, this is one of the great skills of lobbying: 'I happen to have a leaflet'.

So, she pulled it out of her handbag and gave it to me and there was a membership form. She said, 'If you feel like it, you know, we'd love to have you as a member'. Well, Mum got it. And she signed right away. I put mine down. 'Well, I'll think about this. I'm not too sure'. But that issue came to define me in public life, many years later. If you told me, I'd be facing the media and talking about this, I would have said, 'No, you've got the wrong person'. But there it is.

DW: The effort to develop your personal skills into ...

[00:30:49] **GREBLE:** I didn't go into it to develop personal skills. There was no one left who would talk about abortion publicly. There were so many women who are very frightened or who would have violence in their family if their, the menfolk in particular, knew that they were campaigning like this. But the second thing that Megan did that day was after we had this talk, she happened to have a leaflet for the Women's Electoral Lobby [WEL] as well. So, she pulled it and said 'We meet, this lovely group of women, it's very feminist' and so on.

Well, I've been brought up with feminist ideals. My father had actually named them and what my great grandmother had done to try and get the vote for people, for women in America. And a very astute remark, actually. I'll digress, if I may. He said, 'You know honey, the women who get the laws changed and achieve [things], they face some hellish conditions and they're the ones who do the work and then their daughters take it easy'.

DW: Get the benefits?

GREBLE: Things start to backslide. And then the next generation, the granddaughters, have to face and do the same. Well, a very percipient remark. But to go back to Megan Sassi on that day on our veranda, she told me and it's just coming back to the feminist movement. And I said I would come along to the next meeting was a Sunday morning. And she said it was non-party political. So, I thought, that's good for me. That was very good.

So, I said I'd come and it was in a house in West Perth near Thomas Street. It was Women's Health Care House, something like that. And the first meeting I went to was jam packed, people sitting on the floor and very joyous because the Burke [ALP State] Government had just got in - another election. And so, I did join. But I remember thinking before I went, and I'm not sure I should say it, but this is really so many years ago. I thought, 'Gee, what am I going to wear?' [laughs] And I knew that quite a lot of feminists wore overalls, you know? 'Oh, no, I would just go as yourself. And that was, of course ...

DW: But was the focus of the Women's Electoral Lobby [broader] other than changing the abortion laws? Did it have a broader set of aims?

GREBLE: That was a minor part. That was a core. But yes, it was for equality across economic, social, legal, religious equality across the board. So, it was a wonderful umbrella under which different activities could take place. It was an incorporated group. We had funds coming in and a Treasurer's position. It was run very, very well. But a flat structure, not authoritarian. And that was another thing that kept me in the Women's Electoral Lobby for so long. I'm still a member.

And in fact, today I represent the -what remains of the - West Australian division of the Women's Electoral Lobby in Women's Electoral Lobby, Australia, the national body. And we're going to have our annual general meeting on the 1st of November by teleconference. But I think I'm ready to drop back from any responsibilities now.

DW: It's interesting in terms of your later joining the Greens, WEL had a similar, I suppose, structure in terms of it was a national body with state branches. And it also, I think from my memory, a lot of its decisions were done by consensus? People just didn't vote and overrule people and so on.

GREBLE: Ah, but the Greens do consensus beautifully. Consensus in WEL was very often, you know, who sort of spoke loudest and elbowed in.

DW: And how did you move into the Greens from your involvement with WEL and BirdLife Australia and so on?

[00:35:02] **GREBLE:** Mum and I had become supporters of the Greens as a result of Jo Vallentine's campaign and also some of the forest campaigns. So, we were supporters. It was a category that doesn't exist now and we got the newsletter and so on. It was the Bunbury Regional Hospital issue that turned me into joining as a full member.

DW: Remind me what that was, because I don't know that issue?

GREBLE: It was during the Court [Liberal] Government, Richard Court was the Premier and they were and I'm sorry, I don't have the Bunbury Regional Hospital files because that's all gone to the Murdoch Library with the WEL Archives. But it was, I think, early in 1993 that WEL had an approach from a woman who didn't want to name herself. But she was a middle level nursing executive at the Bunbury Regional Hospital. And they'd had, she and others of the executive had been pulled into a very confidential meeting where they were told that St John of God Association was going to run the proposed expansion of Bunbury Regional Hospital, which was badly needed.

There would be a St John of God Hospital alongside the Bunbury Regional Hospital, a public hospital. But the management would be all St John of God, and she was very alarmed. She had gone round to, she had dropped this information off as such. But basically, she got a response from Women's Electoral Lobby that she hadn't got from anywhere else. And so, it fell off the back of a truck. We had to protect her identity. And there were many issues there because of the abortion and also reproductive health, sterilizations, vasectomies, all this kind of thing.

And at the WEL meeting, WEL General Meeting, we decided that there were two main issues because we could not concentrate on everything. We saw it immediately as a national issue, not just a local one. And we said reproductive services are paramount. Also, the industrial relations, the working conditions, because the *Sex Discrimination Act* Federally had been passed¹. And in the year after [ALP PM] Bob Hawke came out, '83, '84, I can't remember [1984], but also the *Equal Opportunity Bill*, Western Australia's Bill had passed². And I had the joy of being in the public gallery when that passed. Both of those Bills excluded religious organizations from having to comply. May I stop now?

DW: Yes, we can.

[Interruption]

¹ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex_Discrimination_Act_1984

² See <https://www.wa.gov.au/government/publications/equal-opportunity-act-1984>

GREBLE: Yeah, thanks. So those two Acts excluded religious organizations. And I was part of the Working Group. That's the way WEL worked. It didn't do anything unless there were women members who wanted to take action. So, they became the contact person for the Action Group. And the [Bunbury Regional Hospital] Action Group was myself, a couple of other women, but very notably Joan Williams and Noelene Hartley. And Joan Williams. Well, I'll just go back a little bit. This Action Group, we were up for several months work. We treated it as a national issue. Joan Williams was willing to go to Bunbury and attend and be the liaison person for the Bunbury folks.

I think Vic Williams, her husband, went down there with them. And you would know them as [Foundation] members of the Greens, sadly passed away. And they were also covered under the grandfather clause for people who are also members of other political parties. But that's another story. Joan, a peace activist, of course, a writer and a very good communicator. So, she was authorized to represent WEL there. Ultimately the campaign, I'll try and wrap this up in a nutshell. Ultimately, the campaign was so successful, the Court Government was caught off balance and under a lot of pressure, not just by WEL, but by so many other groups.

[00:40:05] The community in Bunbury was alerted to the national significance of it, mainly by Joan. When she came back, she said they had no idea they're on the national agenda. And it was so important that the Minister for Health, a Federal minister of health made a trip to Western Australia to go down to Bunbury to talk to them and then go back again, and I can't just think of his name. Say Richards, but I'm not sure, a large person who was very active and still is a commentator, I think, on media³.

We asked members of the State Parliament by a letter that we sent to each and every one of them to take action and to do something. Very few replied. But two of them issued media releases. And now this comes to it, finally, is the punch line, that one was Diana Warnock, a Labor Member for Perth and a member of WEL, a long-time member of WEL.

The other one was a wonderful media release from the [Upper House] Member for South Metro, Jim Scott, the lone Green 'ranger' in the Parliament. We read that and said, 'Wow'. And I thought. No more stuffing around, I've got to join the Greens if a man - he's not alone - if there are men in the Greens who understand this so well, who understand it, who understand the women's position. This is so much like my Dad, I've got to join. So that's it.

DW: Jim Scott encouraged you to join us?

³ Graham Richardson, ALP Federal Minister for Health, 1993-94. See

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graham_Richardson

GREBLE: No, he didn't encourage it. It was his media release and I jumped straight in.

DW: So that's a very interesting story in terms of history repeating itself, because the later Barnett Liberal Government set up a similar structure for the new hospital of Midland, which is managed by ...

GREBLE: Correct.

DW: ... St John of God and there's all sorts of issues around women's reproductive ...

GREBLE: Correct.

DW: ... services not being offered by them because of their values and so on. So it's interesting the how that history does repeat itself.

GREBLE: It does. And the campaign to change the abortion laws in 1998 was run out of my home. We used the money that we had for media and that was a stroke of genius. One of the many, many volunteers who contacted me then was a young woman who was a single parent. I had to get her name right. It was Alison Xamon, [Greens (WA) MLC for East Metro region] and she was the President of the Murdoch University Student Guild. So, I had faxes to and fro with her.

Well, the rest is history, except that was a Midland Hospital and St John of God taking over. She [Alison] was hammering that in Parliament, as she does. And we did try, some of the women from - who were active around the abortion debates got in touch with me and said, 'Ruth, we've got to do something'. And I said, 'Well, who's we? 20 years later, you've got the contacts. You go!' They didn't.

DW: Were there any other Greens in your early days in the Greens who were mentors or inspirations? You've mentioned Alison and Jim. Were there other people?

GREBLE: Oh, every one of them, just about. Well, some people came into the Greens because they wanted to exercise their egos and change the Greens. And they obviously ... it always does and still does attract people who want power for power's sake. But Giz Watson [Greens (WA) MLC for North Metro region] made a big difference. She was ... 1996 she was elected. So, she took her place in Parliament I think in July '97.

And what happened with the women's movement? I want to say this overall. If I can make a general comment due to my activism in 19', what was it, 1984, that I joined Women's Electoral Lobby and there were so many women who got into Parliament, there were high expectations. They had done excellent work. From the Women's Electoral Lobby, I learned how important it was to have good people in Parliament who could ask questions, who could in Parliament ... who could point

things out, who could ultimately - and you have to be patient - get funding, get this done, get that done, get laws changed, which take far longer than most people realise. You know, I did too.

And gradually, those active, noisy, fantastic women, once they got into Parliament or positions and, you know, director of this or that, went quiet. And Women's Electoral Lobby in the 1990s had to work hard to get responses out of Members of Parliament. And so, disappointment after disappointment came. But when Giz Watson became a Member of Parliament, we always got a response, always. And that started to make a big impact on women who thought they were Labor voters.

But they were fed up and they felt very badly let down. They said, 'Well, how come the Greens, they've only got well, you know, almost nobody in Parliament, but they can listen and do something. How come they can do something? Why can't you with a big, huge major party? Why can't you do that? Why can't you be like Giz Watson?'

DW: The other big issue in the year you joined, in 1992, in the Greens was the ballot as to whether the WA branch should join the Australian Greens. Can you remember that at all and what your position might have been?

[00:45:46] **GREBLE:** Oh, gosh, yes. That was excellent work that Lynn MacLaren did. She was the [WA] delegate.

DW: That was the second ballot. Yeah, there was one in '92 [too].

GREBLE: From my memory I joined in 1993 and I went back through my diaries and I think that I'm right. In 1993 was the year that Jim put out that [media] release because I have in front of me the list of my commitments to the Greens. And it starts on 6th July 1993, with the Curtin Greens meeting and keeps going through.

DW: So, you would have missed that first ballot then? And as you said Lynn was on the Liaison Group for the '97 ballot.

GREBLE: And what she did, going to and fro and negotiating, I just, you know, take my hat off to her, we wouldn't be a national party without that.

DW: Did you support the proposal to join the Australian Greens?

GREBLE: Yeah, sure.

DW: So, it didn't get up in '97. Then there was another vote, the final one, 2002, I think. So, you would have supported it?

GREBLE: Definitely, yeah.

DW: As you said, you got very involved with the Curtin Regional Group from early on. You're the Secretary for a couple of years, a Permanent Rep twice, '96, '97, according to the records in the office.

GREBLE: Yeah.

DW: Membership Officer, Treasurer. How did you fit that in as well as your work at WEL, and I'd imagine you said you went back to Uni?

GREBLE: Yes, I went back to uni and I worked for a year for a union and various other things. It's a good question. In preparing for this interview, I went back over my diary. So, I keep notes and some pages are so full of commitments there's no room for anything else. I do not know how I did it, David. It comes at a cost. And so. That's all I can say.

DW: What was the union you work for?

GREBLE: Oh, I went for one year to the Australian Services Union [ASU] to take the position of Research Officer because my friend Ruth Ellis was on maternity leave and she had asked, she'd approached me. She knew I'd just finished university, majored in anthropology and industrial relations and completed Honours by then, with my dissertation on industrial relations. And she asked me if I would consider being the Research Officer for the ASU just for 12 months.

So, she put my name to the Secretary, Margaret Dwyer, and I was given the job, but in fact it turned out to be being an assistant to the Training Officer and it was very problematic all through there. But I managed the 12 months. I stuck with it, although normally I'd wash my hands of it and get out because it was so badly run and things were not under good management. But if I had done that, they would have done ... possibly ... it would have jeopardized the position itself and Ruth might have had nothing to come back to.

DW: Right.

GREBLE: So I stuck it out for 12 months and then she [Ruth] took over where'd she left off.

DW: And after that, what further employment did you have?

[00:49:15] **GREBLE:** I got sick. I was very sick at the end of that job. And then my grandmother in the United States died at the age of 100. And it meant that I had to go there and help sort out her affairs. So that was a severe disruption to the pattern of my life and when I came back, I found temporary or casual work. And then I had major surgery early in 1995. And after that I thought, let's call it quits on employment. I was able to, if I was careful, just to stop employment altogether. And that coincides with a rise in my activity in the Greens. So '95 and yeah, and in the State election campaigns too, the North Metro [campaign].

DW: It would seem you got active ...

GREBLE: The policy group.

DW: ... in everything from about '96?

GREBLE: Yes, yes. And I was able to because I wasn't in paid work. No Nuke Rally, just in August here I have an ... on August 3rd, 26th, 27th. September, well, there's at least four commitments a month for a couple of years. And coming up to elections, many more so there's just the ones that ... I think I was a Returning Officer at one stage with Brian Fleay. And I have held all the positions on Curtin.

DW: How big a group, how many members did Curtin Regional Group have at the time you were active?

GREBLE: [laughs] We had trouble ... well, I think approximately 40 or something like that. We had trouble making quorum.

DW: Right? Well, I suppose people don't like coming to meetings. They like doing things in the main.

GREBLE: They were nice. They were pretty good meetings to come to. But some people really don't like the ... first of all, the process, which has got to be consensus and that's time consuming, but it's economical in the long run. And secondly, they don't like tussling with policy issues that they're are not very interested in.

DW: You were also the Co-convenor for the Regional Group in 2004 and '05 and then '13-'14.

GREBLE: Yes.

DW: What were the tasks that you saw yourself having to undertake as the Co-convenor of that group?

GREBLE: Well, it's being a lynchpin for everybody else because it's a flat structure. It's the group that decides what to do. And that's the mantra, that's the broken record: it's the group that decides. It's not you. It's not him. It's not your friends. It's the group that decides, so we'll put that to the group and see what it says. The period 2003 to 2004 was with a man who recently joined in and was very enthusiastic and he was frustrated.

After two or three meetings, you know, we had a conversation outside the meeting and he said, 'Ruth, I want a real debate. You know, we all need to get somewhere', and I said, Peter, 'We don't debate'. And so, I almost had to sit him down and tell him what the process was. And he quit being Convenor after that. And it was down to me, which I really didn't ...

Oh, boy. So that's happened a few times in my life where I go being co- something and the other person pulls out and I don't. And the 2013 Annual General Meeting, Jane Ralls put her hand up to be Co-convenor and I went to the meeting not expecting anything, but I knew Jane. Marvellous letter writer, fine brain, very committed. And she hadn't come to the meeting having asked anybody or sounded anybody else out to be her Co-convenor.

So somebody from the meeting did put their hand up, but they'd only just joined and they hadn't been confirmed as a member. So, there was a bit of problem there. I don't think we ever saw her again because Jane didn't want to work with her. And harsh though that may seem and pretty offensive, I guess, under the circumstances, but it was a good call. So, the meeting was absolutely dead quiet, not a pin dropping. And so, I put my hand up and she beamed because she was hoping that I would say so. We were a good team.

It was very hard for her. And towards the end, she wanted to, you know, chuck it in. But that was a sensational year, actually. We saw the meeting numbers, we had 36 people at a meeting once, new members pouring in. It was very thrilling. It was, she would remember, a sensational [2013] Federal election result involving a recount. And during the recount, 1,365 votes were lost. We participated at the recount and there were more Greens there at the recount than anyone else. Giz Watson once again was sensational as our leader. And we had people coming from the Eastern States for that recount.

DW: That was Scott Ludlam?

[00:54:59] **GREBLE:** Oh, yeah, that was Scott Ludlam. So, it was thrilling to see the activity. And I think if anyone's interested, take a look at our Convenors' Annual Report for that and you'll see how many, and what was done. Fantastic.

DW: You never put your hand up to be a candidate yourself. You're more willing to be working in the background?

GREBLE: That's right.

DW: What type of roles did you have supporting election campaigns?

GREBLE: Oh, I was I was just one of the donkeys really. That's not a put-down, but I mean, no, I don't want any leadership roles. The other thing that happened, and we've got to get to this some time, is that I've been a big donor to the Greens. My mother died at the very end of 1999 and she left me a legacy there. I thought that I should use her money to pour put back into the Greens.

So, I talked to John White, who was an excellent member of the Curtin Greens, and he was the Treasurer for the State Greens. And I said, 'Look, I want to donate to the election, but I don't want this to be public. I mean, you have to make a receipt, but I want no publicity'. I was by then fully aware of how much the Greens

needed money. It was just the element in everything we did, which would make a difference because we had such skills, such intelligent, committed people, beautiful organization.

As Robin Chapple [Greens (WA) MLC for Mining and Pastoral region] said many years ago, when you've got no money, you've got to really organize well. And boy, have we ever organized well. So, the deal was that a six-figure sum, which was unheard of in those days, would come into the election in time for the 2001 election. And it was John's role to persuade the Greens and make a statutory declaration or whatever was necessary to Reps and the Election Committee that this was coming from a member who was in good standing, who wanted zero publicity. All the legal requirements would be met and it would be distributed in such a way.

Now, it couldn't be accepted now, but I did make a condition that there would be a certain fairly high floor to the amount that was spent on Giz Watson's campaign. So, it was disproportionate. And at that time, we did not have enough people to go in, candidates to stand for all positions for all electorates, not north and south, Upper and Lower chambers. So my big fat donation went in and I thought, 'Now I cannot take part in any election committees'.

DW: Right.

GREBLE: Because sooner or later some people will know and the conflict of interest will be perceived and perception is 85% of the game. I didn't want leadership roles anyway, as you mentioned. I knew what I was good at doing, but I knew that I - as far as I know, without prying into other people's financial affairs or anything among the Greens - I had one special contribution that I could make, and that was funds. And I could do that because I don't need a lot of money myself to live with my dog and everything. And I could make a difference. And I knew that it did make a difference by then and it has made a difference.

DW: Certainly the 2001 [State] election made a big difference in terms of the Members of the Upper House that were elected.

GREBLE: Yup, yeah, that's it. So as I get older, I can't do as much. It's a young people's party. I want to see younger ones leading it.

DW: It's a fantastic contribution.

GREBLE: But it's what I can do. Other people donate their time and skills, fantastically. They spend so much time away from their family, away from their children. They give up so much and I think they give up far more than I have. It's to me, it's not giving up, it's just sharing around. I haven't felt that I've given up a lot. In time, yes.

DW: But also, your contribution to the Curtin Regional Group, because in a number of elections, the Curtin, the electorate in Curtin have been very successful, like the Nedlands by-election in 2001. I think the Greens got a two-party preferred vote of 46%⁴.

[01:00:00] **GREBLE:** We nearly got there.

DW: That's right.

GREBLE: We nearly got there. Yeah.

DW: And other elections as well.

GREBLE: Yes.

DW: You know, so that can you foresee a chance that either Curtin itself as a Federal seat or some of the Lower House seats in WA in that area could become Greens?

GREBLE: Yes, yes, of course. Absolutely. And you do that by very fine lobbying, which is persuasive. It's not the conflicting in-your-face shouting and this is where, with a tiny handful of Greens MPs, they're doing it the wrong way and making life more difficult for us. The success of the Curtin Greens has been ridiculed by people in, for example, in Swan, and you say, 'Well, where's your result?'

There's been within the Greens, unfortunately, this obscured ... there's jealousy and nastiness about, you know, all the rich people in the Western suburbs and it's got nothing to do with that. It's the intelligent persuasion which Curtin has used instead of other tactics. That's what's done it. And I just think we're getting past those stages now, but 20 years ago, that was very much raising division, division within the Greens, within the Regional Groups, it was crazy but there it was.

DW: You talk about that change over the 20-year period. What do you think have been the greatest changes you've seen in nearly 30 years membership of the Greens (WA)?

GREBLE: Well, the efficiency with which the Greens approach elections is tremendous. The professionalism which was there for many people. But I think we've seen the acceptance of people for what their potential is and a sort of an innate prejudice, I think, has faded. But one thing hasn't changed, nowhere near enough, and that is that we are still a fairly homogenous cultural racial group and we do not reflect the multicultural diversity of Australia and that's a bit sad.

DW: Why wouldn't people from other cultures, other races feel comfortable about joining the Greens (WA)?

⁴ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001_Nedlands_state_by-election#Results

GREBLE: Because if they go to meetings, if they have interaction with us, they don't see or feel or hear, they don't detect by their observation. There's not a disdain, but there's not respect for the communication that should be being made with them. It took us a long time to put our policies, our election material in different languages. It took us a long time to recognize that people who have disabilities are not necessarily in a wheelchair. It took us a long, long time and we're still not there yet. And we've had even such things as recognizing that dogs are culturally inappropriate to have at meetings for many people. I'll just stop there.

DW: One thing that seems to be important to you in this 30 years involvement with the Greens is maintaining your links to movements like the Women's Electoral Lobby. And you've been very strongly active. The birds, Birds Australia.

GREBLE: Yes.

DW: Why is it important for you to both be in a political party and a social group, like a movement group like that?

GREBLE: Well, I want to see change moving forward and I'm going back to early life in America. Make yourself useful. I don't have children. I don't have grandchildren. And if I don't make the most of my time on behalf of others, and I do it for myself. I do it for myself, because then I sleep well at night, if I've done something,

DW: Can I pry? And please tell me, no, [pauses] was there a decision not to have children in your life?

[01:05:20] **GREBLE:** No, no, no, not really. I always I thought that I would probably, you know, get married and have children and it just didn't work out. But I did have a criteria, which was that I was not going to have any children if there wasn't, if their father wasn't going to be around or wasn't dependable. And although it sounds very archaic now, in my youth, I didn't want to have any children without being married because then the child would be illegitimate, because ... this is one of the tremendous things that's happened in our society, in 40 years is that children are not discriminated against because their parents aren't married. It's wonderful.

But I could not have foreseen when I was a young woman that a couple could get married in a church under, you know, by a priest or rector or whatever, by a minister and have their daughter as the flower girl and their little son as the ring bearer, which is, no it's not going to happen! Children born out of wedlock were treated horribly, or they, you know, they're just hippies or something like that. So that was one. But no, I decided by the time I ... and I came very close to being married and starting that way, but it didn't work out.

And I decided that if I hadn't found a suitable partner by the time I was 38, it wasn't going to be. Fortunately, in my childhood there were a couple of women in the family who did not have children. One married a widower who did have children, but she had a career in a school and for most of her life before she was married in her 40's, I guess, and the other was unmarried all her life. Those two relatives of my father were treated with great respect and admiration and love. And I knew that there was nothing wrong with how they lived.

DW: Well, it sounds like you have a very wide circle of friends who love you and appreciate what you've done.

GREBLE: Thank you.

DW: What does it mean to you personally, your nearly 30 years involved with the Greens?

GREBLE: Oh, I'm, um. I'm a bit emotional about it.

DW: Do you want me to pause?

GREBLE: Yeah.

[Interruption]

DW: So, Ruth, so we just had a short break, I was just wanting to get back to what it meant to you personally to have been involved with the Greens over the last 30 years?

GREBLE: Well, something I haven't mentioned is, that goes back to my parents. What it's meant to me is that I've been grateful for having a fairly tough hide. It's meant being on the outer and apart from what many people would think was mainstream, it's meant being up there in the front of the advance of science, of strategy, of figuring out what to do for the future. You're right up the front and ahead of the rest of the race. It's been fantastic to be, know people like that, say Brian Fleay. Now, he used to work at the Water Board in charge of water quality when I was there. And then I met him again in the Greens. What a brain and what a fabulous understanding when he wrote *The End of the Age of Oil* so many years, what, 25 years ago.

So, it's meant being up front. But that means also that most people in the general population and in your neighborhood are way behind you. So, you are seen as supporting, you know, or being out of step or weird or something like that. Certainly vilified. And I'm grateful to my experience in the abortion debates, so that was ALRA 1983 and the laws were passed 1998, for giving me such a tough hide.

I learned there, even though around about 85% of Australians thought that it should be decriminalized, those that didn't could be vile. And that includes clergymen who would say publicly that, you know, 'You're essentially a murderer',

and this kind of thing that other people would too, and they, those sort of emotions pop up from people out of nowhere, it seems, because on all other issues, they may agree with you politically and so on. But that's what it's meant to the Greens.

[01:10:18] And there is something that I'm proud, particularly proud of working with the Greens. All our candidates are pro-choice so that when voters in Western Australia go to the Federal polls or to the State polls, if really that is the most important issue in their life or in their mind at the moment, they always have one candidate who is pro-choice and they do have a choice at the polls. And it's a secret choice because nobody can trace their vote.

And many women in the Women's Electoral Lobby that I worked with are in the Labor Party and they are still struggling to get the Labor Party to put up candidates who are pro-choice. They're decades behind us. But I am very proud that, with others and some have passed away, like Mary Jenkins was one. Certainly, Giz Watson has been a rock, but there are many others in the Greens have kept that policy forward. But if I may say one more thing about that, being on the outer, it's not that I want to be on the outer, but my parents gave me the strength to do what I thought was right. And they said, 'Even if there's a thousand people on the other side of the line, you have to be on the side of the line that you agree with'.

DW: Well, we might end it here. Now, is there anything we've missed in this interview in terms of covering 30 years of your involvement? And it sounds like you've got a lot more experience over the time you've held some very important positions, been very, very helpful to the Greens in terms of your donations. Is there anything we've missed?

That's been a long and productive career and very beneficial to the Greens to have you as such an active member. Thanks, Ruth, for your time this morning.

[01:12:18] **GREBLE:** Thank you, David. You've done a really good job. Thank you.

END OF TRANSCRIPT