

**LESBIAN**

**HERSTORY**

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**Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory  
of  
Sharon Deevey**

An Interview  
Conducted by  
Cait McKinney  
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Cait McKinney 00:05

So today is August 23, 2021. My name is Cait McKinney and I am in Vancouver, British Columbia. I'm talking today with Sharon Deevey who is in Westerville, Ohio about her life history. This is a Lesbian Elders Oral History [sic: Herstory] Project interview for the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Hi Sharon! It's nice to be with you today. I'm looking forward to talking and helping to record this document about all the amazing work that you've done in your life.

Sharon Deevey 00:47

Well I look forward to it.

Cait McKinney 00:49

Okay so to start, I'm going to ask a basic question which is, can you tell me about your childhood— where you grew up and what you were like as a kid?

Sharon Deevey 01:01

I was the oldest of three girls in a white Protestant family. The most notable thing about my childhood is that I went to a different school every year till the 10th grade. And that is because my father was transferred several times. And then, I was also part of a large group of children right after the Second World War. So sometimes they had to reopen schools that have been closed, even if I was still in the same town. So I moved a lot and learned to be friendly, somewhat cautious. By the time I was in the eighth grade, I applied to go to a boarding school called Northfield School for Girls in Massachusetts. My father had gone to the boys school and it was right near where my grandparents lived. So we stopped by there and I put in an application, and I went there starting in the ninth grade. So basically at age 14, I pretty much moved away from home. I mean, I went back for the summers but I was four years in that particular school. And then that school gave me an opportunity to apply for a scholarship to go to what was called the English Speaking Union. And I went to a boarding school in England for a year, which was very interesting. And then came home and went to Swarthmore College near Philadelphia.

Cait McKinney 02:37

What was your experience, like with boarding school? Did you enjoy it?

Sharon Deevey 02:44

I did enjoy it. I'd had some conflict with one of my sisters, my middle sister, and some conflict with my parents. And when I got to Northfield, they liked me— you know, it was fun. I loved the classes. It was a beautiful school in northern New England and it was a great place for me. I met Democrats for the first time. I came from a pretty Conservative Republican family and I met people with all kinds of different ideas. And because so many of us were on scholarship, there were students— the student body was much more varied than it would have been if I had gone to

school in Connecticut. So there were children of fishermen in Maine, and there were African American students from Tuskegee, and quite a wide range of students.

Cait McKinney 03:42

What did you like studying in school and what were you like as a student and a young person?

Sharon Deevey 03:50

I was enthusiastic. I mean, I was a bookworm. I love reading. I read all the time. I liked really all the different classes. I mean, probably english and history were my favorites, and yet, I always was drifting over into biology and things like that.

Cait McKinney 04:12

And after high school, you said you started at Swarthmore. I'm curious how you made that decision to go there and what you wanted to study.

Sharon Deevey 04:23

I had looked at several different colleges. My real big adventure was that I wanted to go to McGill in Montreal because I was a great fan of Canadian tourist literature that I used to send for— my neighbors had old copies of National Geographic and in the back of them were these tourist ads. So I sent away for— I mean, I literally had boxes of Canadian tourist literature. So I took a train up to Montreal and the first thing they asked me in my interview was, "had I applied to Swarthmore College?" and I said, "no, I hadn't. I had never heard of it." Apparently people who wanted to study classics, Latin and Greek, applied to both schools. But when I came home, I looked into it. I went to Swarthmore for the interview, and they said, "we don't think you'll fit in here" but they accepted me. And I went, I went.

Cait McKinney 05:21

What year did you start there?

Sharon Deevey 05:25

I started in '63. I graduated from high school in '62 and then spent that year in England as an exchange student, and then started in '63, graduated in '67.

Cait McKinney 05:41

Going to university in the 1960s, I imagine there was a lot of political activity around campus and involved in the life of being a student at that time. Do you remember any issues that were important to you or that you became aware of at that time in your life?

Sharon Deevey 06:03

Let's say there are two things. I mean at the time, Swarthmore being a Quaker school, there was a lot of social activism, anti-war activity. I dated a Quaker boy for a while and learned a lot about activism through that. And we had— Dave Dellinger was one of the speakers that came to campus. So yes, there was a lot going on. And we actually went to the March on Washington— somehow we got there from school on the bus. It was an anti-war march. So yes, I was quite involved with that kind of thing. I think the other important thing is Swarthmore— they showed the films of the Holocaust, which I had seen first at Northfield. But one of the ways I got involved with the man that I married, who was Jewish, was because we were again watching the Holocaust films, and I remember walking around the village of Swarthmore just talking about that. Trying to make sense of why some people are discriminated against and some people aren't.

Cait McKinney 07:12

Did you meet him at college?

Sharon Deevey 07:14

Yes.

Cait McKinney 07:18

And when did you graduate and what did you do next?

Sharon Deevey 07:24

I graduated in 1967 and both Marty and I went down to Eastern Kentucky. He had worked there, through the domestic Peace Corps— I can't think what it was called. But I had gone down to visit Eastern Kentucky and I walked into a one room school that's like, wow, that's where I wanted to be. So I applied to teach in Wolfe County, Kentucky. I remember the superintendent's wife, asked me, "Now what kind of crazy girl are you?" [laughs]— but they gave me a job. I lived with a family and Marty came down from— he actually left graduate school and came down to teach. So we taught one room schools at the opposite end of the county, [note: and lived] with two different families, and then in the middle of the year, decided to get married. I mean, we were living in an atmosphere where there was nothing but marriage, and kids, and a lot of poverty so it seemed to make sense at the time. We got a trailer and our neighbors built us an outhouse, and we lived there for a year. It was a wild year. It was the year that Martin Luther King was killed and Bobby Kennedy was killed, and from there, Marty got a job at the Institute for Policy Studies and we moved to Washington. And I got a job teaching at Sidwell Friends School.

Cait McKinney 08:59

A lot of your career at that time was devoted to teaching and you've had several different professions, which we'll get to, but I'm curious to hear what you liked about teaching and if you have any memories that really stick out for you from your early years teaching?

Sharon Deevey 09:19

My grandmother Deevey had been an elementary school teacher and was very enthusiastic about it. And when I first took a teaching class at Swarthmore, I was totally intrigued. I mean, I liked working with the kids. I think I thought I could make a contribution. I think I— what I learned was that teaching was sort of like nursing— harder than it looks. A little bit like library work— a lot harder than it looks. But yes, I liked teaching; I assumed that that's what I would do. There were people at Swarthmore that said I needed to go to graduate school. At that time, I couldn't fathom what that meant.

Cait McKinney 10:12

So we're in the late 1960s now in your story, and— we're mid 1960s to late 1960s now and your story— and your life changes a lot during this time period. So I was hoping you could describe what your experience of coming out was like?

Sharon Deevey 10:34

Well, it was a big change. There were a group of us meeting through the Institute for Policy Studies. Marty was connected to a lot of different people and I met Joan Biren and a number of other interesting people. There was a song that we had— maybe from a record or something— why can't we go on as three? And at some point, Marty Wolfson and Joan Biren and I thought we could go on as three. And we tried that briefly.

I was— I could look back and see that I've had a terrific crush on one of the teachers at my boarding school, but I had no inkling of being a lesbian. I don't— hadn't really heard about homosexuality, except for reading James Baldwin. And suddenly, you know, I was completely smitten and started a sexual relationship. And, you know, we worked out some kind of schedule and it got tense. We were at the time living in a collective with another couple and another guy— seven or six of us in the house. We had a sense of being revolutionaries. We knew the people that were involved with the Weather Underground. I mean, it was a lot of thinking that we were making a different world and then it sort of started to come apart. The first thing I remember— Joan and I took a trip out to the ocean and we were sitting at a beach when I heard on the radio that they were talking about the Stonewall March. So this would be 1970— was the first anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. And Joan reached over and took my hand, and right away, the people on the beach commented. I mean, I couldn't understand how it happened so quickly and so we sort of got up and left. But that was my first sense that I had come into something that was not only thrilling and felt absolutely right but there was danger involved. So Joan and I stayed together for a couple of years. We got involved in The Furies Collective and then both of us were asked to leave The Furies Collective. And then I sort of went on from there.

Cait McKinney 13:14

What did you like about Joan?

Sharon Deevey 13:17

[Laughs]— how she's smart, she's witty, she's passionate. I don't know but it just all felt right. It just all felt right. And her face was so soft. That's what I remember. The face was so soft. There were starting to be things to learn about homosexuality. There was a movie called *The Boys in the Band* and other than that, there wasn't too much around to figure out what was happening. And we kept it a secret for a while. Charlotte was out of town. Charlotte was doing something in Vietnam, I think, or Japan or somewhere. So when she came back, we started talking to her about it and then Joan met some lesbian women from New York. And we traveled up there briefly and some of them decided to move to Washington— that's all what happened before The Furies started.

Cait McKinney 14:17

And what happened with Marty during this time?

Sharon Deevey 14:25

No, at this point, there's two Martys [laughs]— Marty Wolfson and I divorced fairly amicably as I remember. Actually, our lawyer was Mary Helen Mauntner who started the Mauntner Project for lesbians with cancer. She was a friend. And right— then Marty Gibbons comes into my story after Joan and I separated. I met Marty Gibbons at a workshop that we did. The Furies were involved in some kind of workshop. I don't remember. I met Marty and ended up dating her and living with her for almost eight years. And it was with her that I moved to Ohio.

Cait McKinney 15:16

Do you remember when— in what year the split with Joan, and the relationship with Marty started?

Sharon Deevey 15:16

Probably about '72. The Furies' time was actually quite short.

Cait McKinney 15:38

Even though The Furies time was short, I'd like to circle back to it for a moment since it's such a significant political moment and activist group in lesbian feminist history. So could you talk a little bit about what drew you to the group and what kind of work you were interested in? With The Furies?

Sharon Deevey 16:03

Well, I think part of what drew me to the group was the fact of meeting other lesbians. I mean, the women that came from New York were very interesting, very dynamic. We had gone to a couple of lesbian bars but that wasn't an easy alliance in the beginning. You know [laughs]—

those of us in the women's movement, we liked to circle dance at the lesbian bar and no, the people in the lesbian bar liked to bump and grind. I mean, you know, it's just different politics. Different life experience. But I think all of us had some sense of trying to make change in some ways.

I mean, the first group we were in was called Those Women and that's what they called us. That got started because we actually had three girl children that we were all taking care of. And we were trying to get them in daycare, but we wanted the daycare to be sexually progressive or something— I don't remember all the details. But people started calling us those women. And then we started thinking of ourselves as a group and what could we do. There was some discussion about writing pamphlets, writing articles— I had written a couple of articles, one for my hometown newspaper, when I was in Kentucky, and then one for Quiksilver Times when I was in Washington. And there was just a sort of energy to do something. Some of that probably came from Charlotte Bunch who'd been active in Women in the Church. Rita Mae certainly had— Rita Mae Brown certainly had an energy to be writing and communicating. So we would just— kept meetings, you know, what are we going to do? Who are we as a group? What are we going to do? What are our priorities? And one of the questions that came up is, could we both make a revolution and do childcare? So there was discussion about how to manage the children and a decision was made that something else had to happen with the children.

So Joan and I had been taking care of this baby and we basically ended up tracking down her mother and returning her. So that was another part of *The Furies*. And then we got close to putting out the first issue and I had written an article called "Such a Nice Girl," because that's what they used to say. Sharon, before she got into this lesbian stuff, she was such a nice girl. And so my article, with some revisions, was included in the first issue of *The Furies*. But by then Joan and I had been asked to leave because of class issues. And what had happened with— you know, as we came together for women's liberation, there was this excitement about being women together and then as *The Furies* came together, there's excitement about being lesbians together. But once we got to that point, then class differences came up and people felt the class differences very, very strongly. And that's part of what the issue was about— those of us that separated from *The Furies*.

Cait McKinney 19:39

Can you say a little bit more about what those class issues were?

Sharon Deevey 19:49

There were parallels made between racism, where white people oppressed black people and sexism, where men oppressed women, and class were middle class women oppressed working class women. It was a very persuasive argument. I was considered middle class; I think that's legitimate. My— neither my parents finished college and I often had the experience of moving to

an area where most of the people around me were more prosperous than I was. But I've had a very privileged education. And yes, I think it's true— middle class and therefore, you know, I made sort of assumptions about not realizing how hard it was to make a living. Not realizing what it would have been like not to have as privileged in education as I had.

Cait McKinney 20:55

So in this time period, your life is changing a lot, and you're becoming more of a writer and coming out and getting into feminist and lesbian activism. And you're also developing ideas about your sexuality and living those ideas in practice. And you've talked about a few different sexual and romantic relationships in this time period. Wondering if you can talk more about how you thought about polyamory and monogamy during this period and how your ideas about that were emerging or changing?

Sharon Deevey 21:41

In the early years, I absolutely believed in what became called polyamory or non-monogamy. I think that was influenced by the radical left where there was, you know, an openness to multiple relationships. We couldn't marry. Our relationships are not legitimate. It didn't really occur to me to copy the heterosexual model. In those days, I mean, you know, to be a lesbian was to love women and sometimes you love them overnight and sometimes you love them for weeks [laughs]— and you know, sometimes you set up a very careful structure where you had three nights here and three nights there. It was open, it was negotiated, it was honest. We weren't really dealing with emotions at that point— took me years to feel jealous. I mean, not only, I just simply didn't feel it. One person told me I was trying to live like a post-revolutionary in a pre-revolutionary society. Good point, probably.

And then when I met Marty Gibbons, I was like alright, we'll settle down. Well, of course, I was out of The Furies and we were going to move to Ohio. And I don't know, maybe we're getting older. But I know, when we were in the process of breaking up eight years later, the therapist said to us, "well didn't you all make a promise to be together forever?" And we looked at each other and said, "no, that didn't occur to us I don't think." So I did stay with Marty for eight years. We were monogamous, but sort of haphazardly, I think. We did both get interested in other people at the point where we were breaking up. And then I met— well, there was one relationship I had with a woman I met in Cleveland, who is private about her life. So that was a five year domestic settle down. Rent a big house, you know, both being nurses. I did that for five years. And again, I didn't realize that that meant I was supposed to stay for the rest of my life [laughs]— I just— I missed that somehow. I missed that. And eventually, I met a woman named Lana Wall just as I was moving to Columbus and lo and behold, she believed in non-monogamy. She had always been non-monogamous. She had two partners and I volunteered enthusiastically to be the third. And that worked for me for a long time. I actually stayed in a relationship with Lana for 25 years. Did not ever live with her, negotiated an open relationship with her, and dated several

other people again for a short time or a longer time and it was all on the table. It was negotiated, respectful, and in the more conservative atmosphere of Central Ohio, people really thought I was strange. But it worked for me. And I can remember one lesbian who was close to Lana saying, you know, "well, all lesbians have secret affairs" and Lana and I just looked at her and said, "no, no, no, we don't want to live like that. We don't want people to have secret affairs. We want to put it on the table, see whose needs are getting met or not met." That kind of thing. But I also did learn about jealousy. By then, I was much more in touch with my feelings. I've worked as a psychiatric nurse and I realized that for many, many people, non-monogamy is extremely painful. And then I also had times that I felt jealous. So I came to understand it a little differently.

Cait McKinney 25:53

Do you remember what year it was that you got together with Lana and moved to Columbus?

Sharon Deevey 25:59

Yes, 1985.

Cait McKinney 26:02

Okay and you're with Lana from 1985. You said for 25 years.

Sharon Deevey 26:06

Yes.

Cait McKinney 26:07

I want to—

Sharon Deevey 26:10

We had a couple breakups. They were for a little while, but we got back together. And like many lesbian relationships, it evolved, in the last few years, into friendship but I absolutely considered her my primary person and she had my legal papers and things like that.

Cait McKinney 26:28

I want to return to your transition into nursing. Can you talk about when that happened and what brought you to that decision to enter nursing?

Sharon Deevey 26:42

Yes. In Washington, I had gotten involved working in printing and publishing. I had gone for one year to the technical school, Washington Tech, and was interested in printing and publishing. Which I got interested in because I was running the mimeograph machine for the Women's Liberation Office. I worked for four years at the Washington Post running a copy camera. We got involved in strikes. It was complicated times because computers were just coming in. I left the

Post, and for one wonderful year, worked for the Folger Shakespeare Library doing microfilming. But that job paid \$7,500 a year which was not really a living wage at the time.

And my partner, Marty Gibbons, had a sister who had some mental health issues and I visited her on a psychiatric ward and was totally fascinated, just absolutely fascinated. Then, when Marty was doing graduate work at George Washington, we used to go to the Library of Congress on the weekend because we could walk from there, where we lived to Washington. And I got interested in studying nursing history because it seems so much an aspect of women's history, which the feminist movement have been looking at. And nobody else seemed interested in it and nurses were sort of discounted, like they weren't part of feminist history because they weren't doing male jobs. I mean, some of feminist history in the beginning, just looked at when women broke into male activities but I was interested in what the women were doing and what the nurses were saying. And applied to three schools. I applied to Yale. They said I needed a sugar daddy to pay the bills. I applied to Columbia. Columbia said, I was too erudite, which was a word I had never heard. I had to go home on the train and look it up. I applied to Case Western Reserve in Cleveland, and they said, "you are just the kind of student we are looking for and here we have lots of scholarship money." So Marty and I moved to Cleveland.

Cait McKinney 29:05

What year was that? That you started Case Western?

Sharon Deevey 29:10

'77. I graduated in '81. And it was awesome. You know, it just again— it was sort of like Northfield. They liked me. When I get in a place where they like me, it's really very exciting and rewarding. And I was the editor of the student newspaper and there were several of us who were older students because most of us students had either a partial or a full undergraduate degree before we started. So you know, there was a friend who worked in the steel mills and just a lot of interesting older students. I wasn't the only one. And they had— my friends in Washington told me when you move to Ohio, you can't be out. But I was used to being out. I was totally out on my jobs with the Washington Post and Folger Library. And I was fretting and then pretty soon, I had a class on homosexuality, which showed this nurse walking off into the sunset fired from her job [laughs]— well, I came out. I came out to the professor; I came out to the students. Each group thought the other one was going to drive me away, but it went fine. You know, it was fine. Did I answer your question?

Cait McKinney 30:34

Yeah, it's so interesting hearing you talk about how feminists at that time didn't think of nursing as a kind of feminist job but you did it anyway and it was so clear to you how it was engaged with your feminism. What did you like about nursing?

Sharon Deevey 31:03

Oh my goodness, you get to meet people that you would never meet socially. You get to meet people across religions, across class, across, nationality, across states of health and ill health, across states of mental illnesses and mental health. And to some extent, I was always somebody that collected other people's stories. Maybe that's partly because I've moved to a new place, you know, and how do you get to know people in a new place? You say, "well, tell me about yourself." I mean, even as a child, I asked my mother, you know, "can I just go knock on somebody's door and ask them how they live?" "No Shari dear, that's not very polite." But you know, eventually, that's what public health nursing is. And that's what anthropology is and anthropology is what I got into doing when I was in my Masters and Ph.D. program. You basically go knock on somebody's door and say your [correction: ask their] story. And basically, better than that, tell me your darkest secrets. I mean it's very interesting work. Now, the rest of it is a lot of high tech skills and that part was harder to learn. The chemistry was hard to learn. But the actual interaction with patients is, in my opinion, the greatest privilege in the world. And the nurses get to be really at the bedside, you know, or in the seclusion room, or in the home talking about hospice or whatever. I mean, it's emotionally intense, it's intellectually challenging, it's physically demanding— if the working conditions were not so bad, it would be the best job in the world. But there's always overscheduling, understaffing, rotating shifts, you know, all the downside parts of it. I probably could not imagine being a COVID nurse right now.

Cait McKinney 33:10

Yeah it's— I think the hardest job at the moment as we're doing this interview, which is a year and a half into the COVID-19 pandemic. It's interesting hearing you talk about nursing because you talk about it in ways that connect it to your interest in writing, and also to the interest you develop in archives and keeping and telling stories. And so I'd like to move into talking about archives. Could you start by talking about when you first became aware of archives, as organizations that were interesting to you?

Sharon Deevey 33:56

While Marty and I were working on weekends, in the Library of Congress, and I was sending for all these nursing history books. I got interested, particularly in a woman named Lavinia Dock, who was a Quaker, and had worked with Lillian Wald at Henry Street in New York. And she'd been a public health nurse. And let me go back. I actually think there's something else that predates this Lavinia Dock story. And that is, I had a work study job at Swarthmore, in what was called The Swarthmore Peace Collection, which was a special part of the library. And I suppose that was an archives. They had— what I worked on was this paper clippings about Jane Addams, the social worker from Chicago. And I realized at that time, that even though I was a history major as an undergraduate, we really haven't studied any women at all in history classes. So I really enjoyed that work in the Peace Collection.

And to some extent, the work I was doing on nursing history, just as a hobby, was following up on that— kind of learning about the history of women. And somehow— I don't know how I learned it— there was a question about whether there were some of the personal papers [note: from Lavinia Dock] in the National Archives, which was right there down the street in Washington. So somehow I made an appointment, I went into the National Archives, it was, I guess, classic archives requirements: leave everything behind, put on white gloves, have only a pencil, and they bring you a box. And you open it, you think, what's this gonna be? And there was nothing about Lavinia Dock. She had a sister whose name was something else. And it was the sister's work papers. So it's a very disappointing experience. On the other hand, as sort of— a ruler of historical materials that experience got me very interested in archives.

I'm pretty sure I also visited the Nursing Archives, which are in Boston, and took them a complete set of the newspaper that I had edited as a student called *Vital Signs*. I'm not absolutely positive but I know I was going to Boston because I had family there at the time. And I just looked them up— they're still there. So that was probably my second archives experience. And I always somehow knew about the Lesbian Herstory Archives. I think that my ongoing connection with Joan Biren— I think she was connected to them. I just had heard of them. I just knew from both Charlotte and Joan in *The Furies* that we needed to save things. And when I had first come out, I couldn't find anything to read. I couldn't find anything in the public library about lesbians— I just, it was very frustrating for me that I couldn't find anything. So I think I had this sense of I needed to save things. So I did save a set of *The Furies*. I saved some of the early magazines that we had. And in nursing school in '78, I started writing a journal. I wrote probably two, three times a week— all the way until about seven or eight years ago. I planned to put my journals in the Lesbian Herstory Archives and at one point, I think I even had it in a will. But then I took a writing class. Everybody in the writing class, and they were all my age, we all had journals. And the writing teacher said, “read one from 25 years ago.” And it was painful to read [laughs]— I realized that I had always put all my most intense emotions, especially the anger, into my journals and it has been very healing. It has enabled me to go on being such a nice girl and to function but there was a lot of blame and anger, that I really didn't want to be my final story. I also saw examples where other people were getting a hold of people's journals that should have been protected and we're talking about, you know, people who shouldn't have known personal details about people were coming to them and saying, you know, what about this? And I decided that just because I wrote, I really didn't want to be the voice that told all those stories. I thought, by this time— I mean this is 10 years ago or so, you know, there's a lot of lesbian stories that have been written, I have a paper trail of things that I have published— that's enough. So to the horror of my writing group, I pitched my journals all around Columbus. So I didn't do anything with those.

In 2013, I was unexpectedly and inexplicably extremely ill. Didn't know what was happening and I thought ooo I could run out of time here. That's when I boxed everything up and send it to

the Lesbian Herstory Archives. In the meantime, I had visited the Leather Archives in Chicago. My present to myself after finishing my Ph.D. in nursing was to go with my friends who were going to the International Mr. Leather [note: conference in Chicago]. And we had a tour and got to go to the Leather Archives. I think that's all of them [note: archives I visited].

Cait McKinney 40:17

I want to get back to a bunch of topics that you've brought up in your response, including preparing your own papers and in 2013 when you started to fall ill. But before we return to those things, I wanted to talk a little bit more about your practice of keeping things through your life. You said that, you know, beginning as early as the early 1970s, you were always aware of the Lesbian Herstory Archives and aware of keeping records from your life and from the communities you were part of. Were you always intending to send these documents to the Lesbian Herstory Archives? And if so, why that particular organization? What appealed to you about it?

Sharon Deevey 41:06

Yes, I did plan to send my journals and whatever publications I had. I don't think I knew of any others. When I got to library school, I discovered there were a lot of lesbian archives because there was an entry in the big books that was the directory of archives. But you know, even though I've lived in Ohio, I was still an East Coast person. I kept always thinking I would go to New York and visit the Archives, although I didn't. I was a member for a while; I got the newsletter. So I was just still thinking, like somebody who lives in Washington, is going to send her stuff up the train route to New York. And yeah, I don't know what else to say about it other than that. It just seemed that that was an important thing to do.

Cait McKinney 42:20

You also started to talk about your life as a writer and I want to focus on that more as well. So you've published many things in your life, including poems, but also two books about your life. Can you talk more about those books and what writing has meant to you?

Sharon Deevey 42:38

First of all, I would say that writing as an emotional outlet was always extremely helpful. And once I got into nursing school, I found that when I was mad, it was really helpful to write something, and the poems and the books came later. What really my writing was, was just a series of articles. So I have— I published some of the first articles on lesbian issues in nursing magazines and at that point, that was not an easy thing to do. But I published one about how to manage if your— how teenagers manage when their parents come out. And then I wrote one about a patient that I took care of, an older woman, took care of on the psyche unit. And I did publish an article for my master's thesis that was in the *Journal of the Gay Lesbian Medical Association*. No, that's not right. That was in the *Journal of Gerontological Nursing* and then my

Ph.D. article was in the *Journal of the Gay Lesbian Medical Association*. So I had, you know, sort of kept copies of those things.

But one other thing that influenced me, my anthropology professor who helped me graduate from my Ph.D. in nursing program was Erica Bourguignon, and I became friends with her after I graduated. And I ended up basically being her— she called me her archivist. She had a 27 page CV of her publications and she had the articles in notebooks. But they've been badly xeroxed, and they were a mess. So I basically helped her with what were pages and pages of articles. And I think that's what got me interested in thinking, well gosh, I should pull together my own articles. So I did— it's a notebook called "Whines, Opines, and Lesbian Lines", and I just— you know, I had everything in a little sleeve and it was organized and so that's one of the the things that I wanted to send to the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and I did send a couple of other copies of that—I think to somewhere in New Mexico. And then I sent one to Joan Biren who was going to try and get it into the Smithsonian, but they only take originals. They didn't want any copies of anything. So she sent that one back to me. And at one point, the Ohio History Center sent published in your local gay press, a call for papers from the [note: local] gay lesbian community so I did put one copy that I had into the Ohio Historical Society. I think you were asking me about writing. I went back to archives [laughs]—

Cait McKinney 45:47

Well, I think that's important though, because you also go to library school at some point. Was that decision related to this interest?

Sharon Deevey 45:57

Yes, when I was in printing school at Washington Tech in DC, I actually started library school for three weeks and it was like, oh this is terrible. I mean, I loved libraries but library school was terrible. I just— probably I had to do cataloging which even when I got to library school, the second time was terrible. Yes, after I got ill, I was looking for gentle work. I clearly could still think; I could still talk but I would be so fatigued. I'd just be unbelievably fatigued and nursing jobs and mandatory overtime and mandatory night shift and all that kind of thing. So I thought well, I'll go to library school. I kept going back to school, because I did well in school. School was something I could manage. I succeeded in school. And I think from— I had endometriosis diagnosed when I was in my late 30s so I always had terrible periods. I was always tired. I just— nursing working conditions are terrible so I thought I'll go to library school. And my grandmother, my grandmother, Holbrook left me a little bit of money, which enabled me to do that. So I went to library school, which was fun, except for cataloging. And then the ideal job opened. They wanted a librarian at the Columbus AIDS Task Force. Well, wow, that was for me. I was a nurse, I was a librarian, I've been in the leather community, you know, I just was the right candidate. So I got that job out of nursing school, I mean of library school and it was one of my most fun jobs. I wrote grants. I got a big grant from the National Library of Medicine. But then I

was still having health problems. And that was— you know, HIV work at that time was challenging. So—

Cait McKinney 48:07

What year did you start library school and where did you do library school?

Sharon Deevey 48:14

Must have been from 1999 or 2000. I finished in 2002. I went to Kent State University Library School, but they had a program on the Ohio State campus. So I literally could walk from where I lived.

Cait McKinney 48:37

Then right after you graduate, you start the job at the Columbus AIDS Society.

Sharon Deevey 48:43

Yes, that was my first library job.

Cait McKinney 48:46

And how long did you work there?

Sharon Deevey 48:48

I worked there two years and then I left with the notion that I could be— work part time in the library and I wanted to be an endometriosis educator. And there was a woman in town who was recruiting people in various types of alternative medicine to basically do private practice. [Laughs]— that was my brief attempt to think I could do private practice. I had started the endometriosis— the local support group here and ran that for a little while and I was in touch with the Endometriosis Association in Milwaukee and ended up going up there and working one summer. They were very supportive because almost everybody up there had stomach issues and diet issues. And they were very helpful. Because somewhere along there— we sort of missed one major hurdle, which was that in 1994, I was in the hospital three times at Ohio State and then also went up to Cleveland Clinic and at that point I was diagnosed with what's called gastroparesis, paralyzed stomach. I was a pretty sick puppy at that point and had to go on a special diet. I eat six times a day, small meals, bland, low fat and I've done that now for more than 25 years.

Cait McKinney 50:23

So throughout this period in your life, you're struggling with your health, and also bringing activism around health into your professional life, too. And then, in 2013, you start to get quite ill with something new. So can you talk about what was going on in your life at that time and what that experience was like?

Sharon Deevey 50:51

Yes, by 2013, I had actually left work. I learned to say retired, but basically left work in 2006. At that point, I became eligible to get social security. And my last job was my best job. I was a case manager for the local area agency on aging. So I was doing home visits to elderly patients who were being taken care of at home when they really needed nursing home care, but there was a special program that we had called Passport. And I had done that— I just literally couldn't keep up so I took Social Security.

I've made myself a really good life. I got to be the disc jockey for senior line dancing. I was line dancing and I was taking photography classes at the local Senior Center. Made some very good friends. I did separate from Lana sometime during that process, but basically was doing really well. And then I had this— some kind of attack. I didn't understand what it was. I was for four weeks in a row in the hospital. They didn't really figure out much of what it was and so I just sort of kept going at a slower pace. For all those years I was sick, I tried to only ask a new doctor once a year, you know, what is going on with me? Because I always get my hopes up that they figure it out and they don't.

Then somewhere along the line, I guess in '15, I had a bleed out of my bottom. It wasn't clearly rectal. Maybe it was vaginal, urinary— I had a CT scan for the urinary question and there was a pulmonary nodule. Who would have thought you can see the lungs on the CT scan for urinary stuff. Anyway, they said they checked and I didn't think to ask about it and they didn't follow up till December of '17 and I was like, what was that pulmonary nodule? So at that point, followed up on that and eventually that was diagnosed as what's called neuroendocrine [note: or NET] cancer. It used to be called carcinoid cancer. And neuroendocrine cancer is when the neuroendocrine cells which are spread throughout the body— most cancer is in a specific location: breast, colon, skin— that kind of thing. But the neuroendocrine cells are spread throughout the body so these little tumors— well, two things: they can secrete all kinds of hormones and substances that they shouldn't be secreting and then they can form into tumors. So in May of 2018, I had what's called the right middle lobectomy— they took out that part of my lung. The tumor was confirmed to be neuroendocrine. I ended up in a nursing home for two weeks while they took care of me. And then I applied to get a scholarship to go to a NET cancer patient conference. Because once before, I'd gone to a patient conference on sleep issues and that had led to me being diagnosed with severe sleep apnea. So I really believed in these patient conferences.

So I got the scholarship and I went to Nevada for a conference and that got me interested in trying to do education and activism about neuroendocrine cancer. What's interesting is because it is so rare, the physicians and the patients are almost like friends. They clearly are in league together, working on this issue in a way that I haven't seen around other kinds of medical issues.

So that led me to the first year. I sent out notices about World Neuroendocrine Cancer [patient] Awareness Day, which is in November, I sent out notices [note: to everyone I knew]— and then this past year during the COVID epidemic, I put together some of the writings I hadn't published and with some content in between and put out a memoir, called *The Zebra Reader: A Lesbian NET Cancer Journey*. The zebra is the symbol of neuroendocrine cancer for two reasons: they teach doctors “if you hear hoofbeats assume it's horses and not zebras” because they want physicians to assume that it's a common problem, not a rare problem. But this is a real [note: and rare] problem. And then zebra stripes are apparently like fingerprints. They're all different for each individual and that's also true for neuroendocrine cancer, the symptoms and the treatment are very individual.

Cait McKinney 56:15

So this period from 2013 to the present, where you are getting involved in the NET cancer community and dealing with your own pursuit of diagnosis and then diagnosis, how does your health in this time period relate to your relationship with the Lesbian Herstory Archives and starting to think about your personal papers?

Sharon Deevey 56:43

Well, I scurried around and mailed what I had. I have the note that I got from Deb Edel. And it's November 9 of '13. I don't want to forget my story that Joan Nestle had come to speak here in Columbus. Probably back in the early nineties, some kind of conference I don't remember what it was, but she just thrilled me because she stood up in the front of the room and she said, "I am a femme woman and I love a butch woman and that's how it should be." And that was exactly my experience. I mean, my Lana, had been stone butch and I tell you there's nothing like the privilege in making love to somebody who's been stone butch in the past. So that was my Joan Nestle connection. But I did you know, get back to a note from Deb Edel. You know, I don't know that I thought about preparing my papers or anything other than I have this collection and if I'm going to be sick, it's going to get thrown in the trash. But I, and as I said, I had eliminated my personal journals. But I still had the collection of my published articles. And then I had a set of *The Furies*. And there was a list on the Lesbian Herstory Archives website about what they owned and at one point, they did not own *The Furies* so I thought that was a real omission. Also, I forgot to tell you, I had visited the Ohio Lesbian Archives, which is in a church basement in Cincinnati. At some point, I did make a day trip there and found what was at the time a missing issue of *The Furies*, which I then sent to Joan [Biren]. She was working with somebody with the Rainbow History Group in Washington DC and they, I think, went ahead and somehow got it digitized. So I just had this sense that I had some things to give. I mean until I read your book, I really didn't know much of the details about what the Lesbian Herstory Archives was like in practical terms, but it was just the sense of “save what I can and make sure it's safe.”

Cait McKinney 59:16

What did the letter from Deb say?

Sharon Deevey 59:19

It says, “three boxes filled with wonderful published and unpublished writings and some assorted other things. We appreciate your organizing materials in advance and your sharing them and your sending them to us for the collection. Thank you. Best, Deb.” Oh, and I sent the contribution of \$100. I guess I had to fill this out. I had a Xeroxed copy of my published writings, originals, a few unpublished writings, miscellaneous. Oh, and dispose...all— you know, it was that donor agreement form.

Cait McKinney 1:00:07

How did you decide what to send and what not to send? How did you organize the documents before you sent them?

Sharon Deevey 1:00:20

No other than the fact that after I worked with Erica, I had put together that large notebook of my writings. I had just some samples of like lesbian— well, and a set of *The Furies* and some other publications from the seventies. It's just what I had been able to save. I mean, I wasn't any more organized or strategic than that and I can't tell you too much, because I was pretty sick at the time that I sent it. I mean, it was very much a sense that I had stalled, that I had assumed I had plenty of time to take care of this. And to some extent, I've downsized a lot because by then I was already living in a senior apartment. So whatever I kept was something valuable to me. And also, in my very interesting line dance world that's mostly straight, nobody's interested in the things I'm interested in [laughs]— and even Lana who, you know, played football for the Pacesetters, and had a very interesting lesbian history and a whole other part of the community, you know, playing football and dating hundreds of women and going to bars. I mean, it's been my own just sort of special interest that not many other people even asked me about. So I wasn't in a community of scholars that were looking at their scholarly publications and that kind of thing. I wasn't an academic. You know, I just was a tired nurse, librarian, line dancer who thought “even my story counts.”

Cait McKinney 1:02:18

You sent some of your materials to different archives. Can you talk about the decision to split the materials between the Lesbian Herstory Archives and how you came to that decision?

Sharon Deevey 1:02:33

Yes, I saw your question about that. That wasn't the decision at all. That was just I mean, I wasn't strategic about it. It was like— I always knew I had to send these important things to the Lesbian Herstory Archives because that's what was there. That's what I knew about. And when the Ohio Historical Society put, you know, a full page ad in the local publication, and said come on this

day, I was like, do I have anything left here? Oh, I suppose I could take this [laughs]— so I did. At that point, Joan [Biren] had sent me a huge poster of the building, the house that we used to live in where *The Furies* was published, because she worked very hard with people to get it on the National Historic Register. So she'd sent me this beautiful poster. And I didn't have any room in my little senior apartment. So I took the [note: poster]— and I had a second set of my published articles. I don't even— somewhere there's a list of what I gave them but there was not a decision to split my papers. I mean, again, I wish— I hadn't been thinking in the way I imagined— well, Joan herself has been, I think, much more strategic or Charlotte has been much more strategic about what gets sent where just because of being more closely affiliated with maybe academics or people who work formally with archives.

Cait McKinney 1:04:27

What do you hope that people visiting the Archives might be able to learn from the materials you've donated?

Sharon Deevey 1:04:43

Well, the first thing is that I'm so grateful that somebody wanted to gather this material because my own experience of being in libraries and not being able to find anything lesbian was a lonely painful time. So the fact that somebody had the energy to make a space for everybody else to come, that mattered tremendously to me. I guess I would also hope that people might be interested in seeing nursing as a profession to admire. You know, there was a group called Cassandra Radical Feminist Nurses Network that I was involved with. Peggy Chinn is the one who's archived and digitized that. That was, at the time, a fairly closeted group of lesbian women. But it also was a group of nurses who were celebrating the positive aspects of nursing. So I think I did walk an unusual path by going from being a radical lesbian to being an ordinary psych nurse. Although the work is very difficult, it is so important and satisfying that maybe they're not a lot of other nurses in the Lesbian Herstory Archive, so that might be of value. I would also say there's the part about the fact that I live in Ohio and I have survived in Ohio. Very often, I was encouraged to move back to the east coast where I could find different kinds of lovers and whatever. I couldn't afford it. It's possible to live in Ohio on a lot less money. And I've made, I've made good communities here— both lesbian community and the line dance community. I'm grateful that I was able to stay here because I would have been seriously poor in other settings.

Cait McKinney 1:07:09

Sharon, is there anything else that you want to speak about today, as part of this life history?

Sharon Deevey 1:07:18

You know, one thing that occurs to me is to tell you about a project I'm working on tomorrow night. One of my line dance friends is active in local churches and I went with her for six years

to an evangelical church because I was really interested in learning why people hate us. People who are different than me. We know— neither of us go to that church anymore. I would recommend the book called *God Hates*, which is about the Westboro Baptists. It's an interesting investigation of the people that make homophobia the greatest sin in the world. My friend, who is the line dance teacher, now goes to a Methodist Church. They started, about two years ago, a support group for LGBT folks in the church. The Methodist Church is struggling as an institution as to whether they will separate over sexual orientation issues. So tomorrow night, I've helped organize a Zoom talk with PFLAG, Parent's and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. And in that setting in the church, which I'm only minimally active in, I feel like I'm doing exactly the work that I started doing fifty years ago, which is- the people are beginners on this issue. Many of the members of the church who are lesbian and gay are closeted, and then you have the straight people that have never met one before and half of the rest of the church is as homophobic as they can be. So it's a constant reminder that the efforts that we're making go on. And we've had speakers come in, and there are parents and grandparents of the non-binary folks. So that issue is being addressed and it does feel like the need for activism doesn't [note: ever] stop.

Cait McKinney 1:09:29

One of the things that's been most interesting about listening to you tell your life history is you've created all of these different situations throughout your life of coming into contact with people who are really different than you and that really drives you. That's a really rare quality and it's something that I really admire about you and your story.

Sharon Deevey 1:09:52

Thank you. I'm grateful for it. I've known people from six, seven, eight different religions and known them fairly well. Nursing brought me across the barriers of class and race in a way that I'm very grateful for. So I appreciate you seeing that.

Cait McKinney 1:10:15

Okay, so I think unless there's anything else you want to add, that brings us to the end of the interview. Does that sound okay to you Sharon?

Sharon Deevey 1:10:25

That sounds good Cait. I just wish I could ask you questions for an hour and a half [laughs]—

Cait McKinney 1:10:31

That is not the point. We're here for you today but it has been a real pleasure getting to know you a little bit as we prepared for this.

Sharon Deevey 1:10:43

Yeah, I appreciate working on this and I really did enjoy your book on information activism. That was just a great concept.

Cait McKinney 1:10:51

Okay, I'm gonna stop the recording and then you and I can chat some more about the donor form.

Sharon Deevey 1:10:56

Okay.