



**Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory  
of  
Kathleen Wakeham**

An Interview  
Conducted by  
Emerald Rutledge  
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Collection: The Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project

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Emerald Rutledge 00:05

Hello, everyone. Thank you for joining us. Today is December 2, 2021 and we are recording an oral history with myself, Emerald, and I am talking to Kathleen Wakeham about her life history. This is a Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project interview, a project with the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and we are recording from Atlanta where I am currently and the East Village in New York where Kathy is. I will refer to Kathleen as Kathy throughout the interview. Okay, great. So welcome. So I'm so excited for our conversation. It's been so great getting to know you this far.

Kathy Wakeham 00:49

Thank you Emerald. It's been a pleasure two weeks ago, and then our pre-interview today.

Emerald Rutledge 00:54

Yeah, yeah. So it feels good, it feels good. And I'm excited to have your history archived, and for people to be able to learn and grow from it. Thank you so much for sharing your memorabilia with me. I was so excited. I was gonna ask you like, or I was excited to see the poster that you shared from a dance that you had mentioned.

Kathy Wakeham 01:15

Yes.

Emerald Rutledge 01:16

And yeah so it seems like you've also done sort of like your own archiving in your apartment too, right?

Kathy Wakeham 01:24

Yes [laughs]— buttons from one of the dances we had [note: and from other organizations and political actions].

Emerald Rutledge 01:29

Yeah. Yeah, that's really lovely. So okay, so we can just start— let me flip my page just a little bit. Alright so we can start by you just giving me sort of an early biography. Where you were born, where you grew up, talk to me a little bit about your siblings, and any sort of like transitions that you made during the earlier part of your life?

Kathy Wakeham 01:54

Sure. Well, I was born in New York City, and my father was in the building trades. We had a rent-free apartment [note: because my father worked in the building]. However, he was fired because he had a fight with a coworker. So he not only lost his job, but our apartment. This was in 1952. At that time, there was a housing shortage in New York. It was after World War II, and

during the Korean War. A lot of urban renewal was going on in New York. So there was a drastic housing shortage. I remember going with my mother to all kinds of apartments, and many of them were very rundown places. Still, we wound up in Yonkers. That was the only place she could find. Yonkers is a city north of the Bronx.

We stayed there until 1961. It was on Ravine Avenue, a working class area. It was only integrated in the sense that we lived together, everybody on the same block. But then there was an African American house and a white house and we didn't live in the same building. So in that way, it was integrated. And then Ravine Avenue was overlooking the railroad tracks [note: of the New York] Central [note: and the Hudson River] and the Palisades, which is very very nice. It was very nice growing up there. And then there were a lot of fires because the housing was [very] old. So we decided to move to the projects near Getty Square. I have three siblings. I'm the oldest and I have a sister three years younger and two brothers. One is six years younger and the other thirteen years younger [redaction]. We just had a three room apartment for three children and two adults. My parents had another child on the way and fires were all over [note: the block]. We needed a bigger place. In the Schlobohm housing project, we had five rooms, which is very nice [laughs]— just like moving into a mansion.

Emerald Rutledge 04:33

Yeah. So you talked to me a little bit before about how the housing, the Schlobohm housing projects that you all moved to, sort of became segregated and you refer to it as "zip code is destiny."

Kathy Wakeham 04:49

Oh yes! All of Yonkers back then and even now was very segregated racially as well as economically. When I was in grammar school, I remember tutoring for free, children in the better section of Yonkers. And even though I did that, they tracked me to the secretarial courses in Commerce High School because there's that saying about "zip code is destiny." Because Ravine Avenue by the river and Schlobohm were poor and working class neighborhoods. In both places when a white family moved out, a Black family would move in instead of integrating [note: the neighborhood].

First it was predominantly white and now I know that both places, Schlobohm and Ravine Avenue, are predominantly Black. And it was done intentionally. That happened even here in New York City. People would complain to mix it up [note: integrate].

Emerald Rutledge 06:01

[Laughs]— yeah, I hear you. Give me a second. I'm just gonna change.

Kathy Wakeham 06:07

For sure.

Emerald Rutledge 06:08

There we go. Okay great.

Kathy Wakeham 06:10

But then there'd be hostility, you know, like white people would think, "Black families moving in— oh, Black families get everything," you know, "they get everything." And there was a lot of jealousy and anger. And I think it just promotes more racism. They think that the other person is getting more than they are.

Emerald Rutledge 06:35

Yeah, yeah. Okay so you talked about being tracked to the— or how lower class students were tracked into trade and cosmetology—

Kathy Wakeham 06:45

Right, yeah.

Emerald Rutledge 06:46

And middle class— yeah, yeah. So now you say— well, at that time, you said that— you eventually moved to the East Village, right? And how long have you been—

Kathy Wakeham 07:02

Oh, this was years later because when I first moved from my parents' house, a boy who I grew up with, told me that he's moving and he knows this nice place, two rooms in a lady's house. It was [note: formerly] a doctor's office, believe it or not. I thought, oh, this is my chance to move. I moved there from my parents house with the aim of going to college because at that time, one of my goals was to be a history teacher and they thought, you should just be a secretary. So I moved to my first apartment. It was in North Yonkers. And then after several moves, I wound up in the East Village, where I am now for the past forty-eight years.

Emerald Rutledge 07:51

Right, right, right. Okay. Gotchu. Yeah. You mentioned originally wanting to be a history teacher. And you mentioned your job at Columbia as a library secretary, and you were doing school full time. So talk to me a little bit about that transition from living with your parents, having three younger siblings to getting to the point of moving out and going to Columbia.

Kathy Wakeham 08:17

I think at that time, I had self confidence. This is the good thing about being tracked to a trade. My father had a saying that, "you could do whatever you want as long as you had a trade to pay the rent." I had very good secretarial skills so I knew that I would have a job. So I took the

apartment before I actually had a job. And then I went to— I still remember the name of it, Rapid Employment Agency in Times Square, and they sent me to Columbia University to work in the library. And as an employee, I had free tuition so it was great.

Emerald Rutledge 08:58

Yeah, yeah. Okay and about what time is this?

Kathy Wakeham 09:03

I was at Columbia from 1968 to 1973. I was there during all the upheaval concerning the anti-war movement. This is during the Vietnam War. In 1968 the students took over the campus and it was closed for a week. And then it happened again in 1970. It was against the US invasion of Laos and Cambodia. So a lot was going on at that time.

Emerald Rutledge 09:40

Right. Alright so talk to me about— 1968 seems to be like a really significant year for you— and so tell me a little bit about it. Tell me about the Seven Wells. Tell me about your time at Columbia. Yeah, so let's talk about it.

Kathy Wakeham 09:57

A lot was going on in January of '68. That's when I began [note: working] at Columbia, and I started classes. And also it was the first time I took a major trip by myself. In those days, it was cheap to travel. I think it was like \$300 for airfare and hotels and everything. I went to the British Isles for a couple of weeks. So that was significant. Started the travel bug in me.

I knew I was gay, and I knew there was a lesbian bar in Yonkers. So I decided one night to just scope— I remember, like it was yesterday, these friends of mine, straight friends of course, were over and one of them was engaged to a man and they left. And I said to myself, I should really start getting my life in order. Yeah, they're engaged and all this other stuff. So after they left I took a bus down to Seven Wells, and that's the name of the bar. It's also the address. Now I think it's the office of one of our US [correction: New York] State Senators, Andrea Stewart-Cousins. I don't know whether she knew it was a lesbian bar [note: It was also in the movie, *The Hustler*. There was a pool table in the bar, and it was filmed for the movie.] I decided to go there and I started hanging out there in the hopes of meeting someone and just, you know, feeling myself. It was a working class bar and it was interracial. Most of the time, the women were quite friendly. They knew that I was, this new kid on the block, that I was just coming out. And they were very, very into roles there. Like, one time one woman invited a few of us over to her apartment, and she was talking about her lover— but she didn't stay lover— she said, "oh, my butch is sleeping inside." And that's what they would say: "my butch," "my femme." They wouldn't say "my partner," "my wife." It was very different. Yeah. And then one night, I went home with a woman named Kathy. I think that's what you're referring to.

Emerald Rutledge 12:29

Okay, gotcha.

Kathy Wakeham 12:31

Now it dawns on me, Kathy. She was a petite woman, very butch. And I thought, you know, to just come out. We went home together. But she did have a girlfriend. I was very hurt. Then when I saw her next time in the bar, I'm ashamed to say, I made this scene. They said, "get out, get out." Luckily though I was working at Columbia at the time and there was an ad [note: in the student newspaper, *The Spectator*] for a dance. It was [note: sponsored by] the Student Homophile League. This was pre-Stonewall. They had a phone number so I called the number. And I met two of the members of SHL. One of them was Martha Shelley, who was working at Barnard College at the time as a secretary and the other was a student, Michael Montgomery. They told me about SHL and the different bars and their loves and crushes and everything.

So I went to the dance. And I met a woman there who said, "Oh, do you want to go down to the Village?" I said, "Sure." We went to the Checkerboard. It was a lesbian bar on Christopher Street and there I met another woman named Dee. She and I became lovers [redaction], and I moved in with her for a few months but it didn't work out. She introduced me to what we would call "the life" meaning gay life. We used to call people, "Oh she's a gay girl, he's a gay boy." It was a completely different vocabulary in those days. And the other bar where we would hang out was Kooky's on West 14th Street. All of these bars were mafia-run. But the person who ran the bar was Kooky and she was a woman with this [note: bouffant] blonde hair-do. And her lover was, of course, a very butch woman. [Kooky] would always water down the drinks and go around, "hey, do you want another drink, girly?" And then they would literally ration out the toilet paper to the bathroom. But we were just so happy to have a place to be [note: ourselves]. After you'd been there a few times, you j felt more relaxed, [note: you would see a] familiar face when you walked through the door, or someone you were cruising last week comes back and says, "Oh, maybe I'll have the courage to say something." So it was a comfortable space.

Emerald Rutledge 15:35

Yeah, so talk to me I guess about, more broadly, the significance of lesbian social spaces for you. Like, you've mentioned Kooky's. You've mentioned the Checkerboard lesbian bar. You've mentioned Seven Wells lesbian bar. So talk to me, like were there other lesbian—

Kathy Wakeham 15:55

Oh, yes. There was another one called Gianni's and that was on West 19th Street [redaction]. I heard over the years that the owners of Gianni's were the former owners of a bar called the Sea Colony. That closed before I came out, and I think it was on 8th Avenue in Greenwich Village. But Gianni's was a popular bar and then on West Third Street, there was Bonnie and Clyde's and

that was owned and run by a woman, Elaine. She has an Italian name, [note: it's spelled] Romagnoli? [note: A few years later, around 1974,] she opened a restaurant upstairs [note: called Bonnie's]. When you were feeling lonesome or down or something, you could go to these places and be sure that you would run into somebody to talk to or just a place to connect [note: with other women] Especially when you're working or in school [note: you had places to go]. I always went to school at night, except graduate school [note: where I was full-time and worked full-time]. Anyway, they were places to feel connected, and at home because you were not judged. That's what's important, I think, because a lot of times, I don't know about everybody, but I just felt like everybody knows I'm gay and they'll gossip. When I came out and told my high school friends, they wanted nothing to do with me. They had this thing about, "oh if people see us with you, they'll think that we're gay." And one of them, thought that if people saw her with me, she would to have a hard time meeting men [laughs]. Instead, if you say "I'm a lesbian," [note: to a man] it's like, what's the expression? Honey to a bee or something?

Emerald Rutledge 18:02

Oh, yeah, yeah, gotcha.

Kathy Wakeham 18:04

Yeah, that they will be the man to change a lesbian.

Emerald Rutledge 18:09

Yeah, yeah.

Kathy Wakeham 18:10

But anyway, they dropped me immediately and I felt very hurt. I was also close with these friends of the family. They were a couple on Long Island. And they too, wanted nothing to do with me after I came out. These were significant relationships. [redaction] I guess on an unconscious level, I felt I had to make new friends, find new community. At that time, the easiest thing to do was to go to the bars and meet people. Form friendships as well as loving relationships and sexual relationships.

Emerald Rutledge 18:53

Yeah. That is one thing that— oh yeah, so you were talking about the Student Homophile dance at Holy Apostle.

Kathy Wakeham 19:06

Yes, [note: the SHL Dance] at Holy Apostle and that's where I met a woman who introduced me to the Checkerboard [note: Her name was Eileen]. The Church of the Holy Apostle is on Ninth Avenue. Ssince then, they've had many lesbian and gay dances, and it was the site for the first

Gay Synagogue. Now, they have a food pantry. They do many many good things, and they're not judgmental, naturally.

Emerald Rutledge 19:36

Mm hmm. Yeah, so I think that was a really important point that I just wanted to underscore that you said about the difference for you of like joining the Student Homophile League and building community and also attending bars. That for you, the bars were also really into roles, that sort of dynamic, but was also an important space for you to like build community and connect with people especially as you had lost significant relationships after coming out, right? And the Homophile League was a little bit different and it was also that sort of like community building space, and the opportunity for you to connect with other lesbian and gay people, but was not as much into roles in that way. In terms of—

Kathy Wakeham 20:19

Right, and there were very, very few women in the Student Homophile League.

Emerald Rutledge 20:25

Oh, okay.

Kathy Wakeham 20:26

Very, very few. I think it was only Martha and I who belonged and the rest were men. It was nice to connect with other gay people except, I missed connecting with other lesbians. So the bars filled that void. And then soon after, Stonewall occurred and out of Stonewall, GLF the Gay Liberation Front began. And that, of course, had many more women than SHL, the Student Homophile League, and there, people were not into roles. Some people were but most of the people weren't. And most of the women were college educated. It was much different than the bars.

Emerald Rutledge 21:23

Okay.

Kathy Wakeham 21:24

The bar lesbians were more into roles than the college educated women like at GLF. There was also DOB at the time, Daughters of Bilitis, and there people were definitely into roles.

Emerald Rutledge 21:39

Okay. Were you a part of Daughters of Bilitis or no?

Kathy Wakeham 21:43

I only went a couple of times. When you walked in, these older very butch women would come and treat you like a little kid and sit you on their laps. It felt like, very condescending. It was a nice safe space but at that time, I preferred the bars. And then later on of course, I preferred GLF.

Emerald Rutledge 22:08

Mmhm. Yeah. So talk to me about your time being involved with GLF. You talked before, in our other meeting about GLF being important to like sort of shaping and widening your perspective in terms of political issues and engagement.

Kathy Wakeham 22:26

Oh yes. One of the wonderful things of GLF was that we took the name Gay Liberation Front from the National Liberation Front, because all these national liberation groups were occurring throughout the world at the time. The whole group had a leftist philosophy, and we were multi-issue. As I was saying earlier, we had a dance to support the Panther 21 of New York to raise bail money for them. Some people in GLF were very opposed to that because they thought we should only focus on gay issues, not other issues. We also went down to Washington for the Moratorium in November [note: 1969] to protest against the war in Vietnam. I hitchhiked down there with GLF friend Stephanie Meyers. We couldn't find GLF— [note: I think we stood at the wrong side of the National Mall]. Many of us thought to be involved with politics, it was important to have a broad focus. Their [note: GLF's] whole idea was intersectionality but we didn't call it that. We looked at class, race, sexism, gender, everything as [inter]connected. In December [note: 1969], some people, particularly the men, didn't like that [note: focus]. They formed another organization called the Gay Activist Alliance to focus only on gay issues. But GLF continued focusing on anti-war issues, racism, sexism, and other issues.

Emerald Rutledge 24:22

Yeah. So you were talking a little bit about the multi-issues, sort of stand and perspective of Gay Liberation Front, and so talk to me a little bit about the dance the first Gay Liberation Front Women's Dance in—

Kathy Wakeham 24:39

Oh yes, that was in April of 1970. We felt that in a lot of [note: GLF] dances, there was this [note: very heavy] male energy [redaction]. When you're in a predominantly gay space for some reason, it tends to be mostly male. I don't know why that is but it is. So we decided to have our own dance. We leafleted the bars in the neighborhood and one of them was Kooky's like she said about, "oh, you girls better watch out, you're not going to have your dance." And we thought "oh, so what! We're going to have our dance." And it was down the block from Kooky's, by the way exactly one block away. Because GLF had space there. We worked with what we call Alternate U, Alternate University, and it was a leftist place, and it was on the corner of 14th street and Sixth Avenue on the top floor.

So we had [note: our] dance and it was nice and we're having fun and then these guys came and they looked like they were from central casting. Typical mafia— and we didn't know whether they were police or mafia. We figured they were mafia. Anyway, they identified as police but didn't say anything. We were afraid. Then the first thing we did was to flush down any drugs we had [laughs]— like LSD or marijuana or whatever, just in case they were police. And anyway, they managed to break up the dance. But we reported it in the underground presses and underground radio stations like WBAI about what happened. It encouraged us to have more dances. And another thing about the dance is that there were— in those days, we would say transvestites, now we say transgender— some of the women did not want to have transgender people at the dance. Sylvia Rivera and Marsha Mason, who everybody knows, wanted to be at the dance because they identified as women and many of the women said, "no, they're not women, they can't be [note: at our dance]" so Marsha and Sylvia, they did feel very hurt at not being included.

Emerald Rutledge 27:03

Yeah, yeah. And I think that too, just sort of reiterates the point of intersectionality. And thinking—

Kathy Wakeham 27:10

Yeah.

Emerald Rutledge 27:11

Yeah and like, especially now, and I can just hear it now as you're talking about it. Thinking about the urgency of that, of like how do we cultivate these spaces that are as inclusive as possible? How do we define ourselves and build community in such a way that is not exclusive, either intentionally or unintentionally, right? Like, how are we intentional about building those kinds of spaces that respect and honor our differences but also are inclusive in a way that is, yeah, intentional, I think is really important. Yeah. So give me just one second here. Right, so we are talking about Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson. And, yes, so you've talked a little bit about Columbia already. But just like how we were talking about 1968 was a really formative and important year for you, you also highlighted Columbia as like a really important space for you both as like coming out in a sexual way sort of, but also politically, and sort of a coming of age moment for you. The space I think is about like five years, right?

Kathy Wakeham 28:25

Five years I was there [note: Columbia]. And it was a coming of age. I always say, it was by accident that I happened to be there because it was through the employment agency. Little did I know then, but it helped me come out and helped form my political identity. It was a very

intellectual process too because there was so much going on then, and I had access to the library and lectures. It was—

Emerald Rutledge 28:57

Yeah. Sorry. So what one other protest that you mentioned that you were talking about? 1970 in May?

Kathy Wakeham 29:09

Yes, that was the Lavender Menace. This was at the Second Congress to Unite Women. At the First Congress, Betty Friedan labeled lesbians as a lavender menace because we would tank the movement, the Women's Movement, as lesbians would be a turn off to other women. We were just verboten. We should not be there. So we decided to invade it. We had tie-dyed a lavender t-shirt with Lavender Menace stencils. We wore a shirt over [note: the t-shirt]. So we went there to the conference and then in the middle of it, somebody took down all the lights, and then we barged the stage and we took off whatever we were wearing. Because we had the lavender T-shirts underneath and said, "lesbians are here and we're important." And then the whole weekend, we participated in their workshops and there was a dance afterward [note: the next evening]. I think that several women did come out [laughs]— because of that it was very groundbreaking. Because [note: finally] lesbians were included in the women's movement.

Emerald Rutledge 30:33

Yeah. Okay, so we can transition a little bit to talk about significant relationships in your life. So you mentioned Dee, and I imagine this is 1968 [correction: 1969]?

Kathy Wakeham 30:51

[Crosstalk]— Dee, she's the woman who I met at The Checkerboard [note: after] the SHL dance at Church of the Holy Apostle, and we hit it off and then I went home with her. She lived in Astoria, Queens. We had a relationship. I moved in [note: with her] a couple of weeks later, but it didn't work out. I moved out several months later but she— I guess she introduced me more to what they called "the life," gay world in New York City like the bars and the lingo and introduced me to her friends, and to feel comfortable instead of being the new kid on the block. And to me, it was significant.

Emerald Rutledge 31:44

Yeah. So you mentioned also, Nancy Hoffmann, between 1972 and 1973, that you had a relationship with who was an art teacher?

Kathy Wakeham 31:57

Yes. She introduced me to the world of art. Acrylics and watercolors, which I've continued to do over the years. It was a significant relationship in that aspect, being exposed to the visual arts and being able to express myself in that medium.

Emerald Rutledge 32:23

Yeah.

Kathy Wakeham 32:23

Sadly, we did break up after a year or so.

Emerald Rutledge 32:30

Yeah, so talk to me— you were talking about Sara and then you mentioned Darlene Abdel, who you dated for three years, right?

Kathy Wakeham 32:39

Yes. Yes. We met each other at a bar called Gianni's but then the bar changed its name to Ariel. And that bar too— for some reason it went from mafia-owned to women-owned [note: that is the reason for the name change] but it was the same space, Gianni's, Ariel, and we met there. We were together for three years. We didn't live together. I did live with Nancy and Dee but not with Darlene or Sara.

Emerald Rutledge 33:13

Okay. And you said that Darlene was a science teacher and she introduced you to—

Kathy Wakeham 33:17

To snorkeling and marine biology. That is something I never thought to do because I'm not a good swimmer. And then she [note: Darlene] explained that it's beautiful to see the sea and under it and the coral reefs and the fish. You just had to wear what they call a snorkel vest and it's safe whether you could swim or not. It's very, very safe. It's something that people don't know. I thought oh, how can I do that? I am not a good swimmer. I mean, I love the water but honestly I have a fear of water. But with the snorkeling vest, I felt very, very safe. And it was a beautiful experience when you see the coral reef and the fish and everything. So it was very special what she introduced me to. And she would take her students on marine biology trips, and I think she had a Master's degree in marine biology [note: she did]. So she was a specialist in this field.

Emerald Rutledge 34:25

Yeah, so at this time, were you still traveling? Cause you mentioned being introduced to traveling a little bit before this, right? You went to the British Isles for a couple of weeks, right?

Kathy Wakeham 34:36

Yes, yes. England, Ireland, Scotland for a couple of weeks. And then in 1971 I took a trip to Spain, Portugal and I crossed over to Morocco. It was very interesting. And then I took trips out west. And out west, it was mostly to see friends who I knew on the West Coast. And once I stopped in Colorado and went from there to the West Coast.

Emerald Rutledge 35:09

Yeah. So when you were traveling to Europe, were you going by yourself? Or were you going—

Kathy Wakeham 35:13

At that time, I was by myself. And then Sara Pyle because we were together— let me see from '76 to about '79. We went to the Yucatan for about a month in Mexico [note: to see] the Mayan ruins and it was very interesting. We also spent about a month— well, I went one week by myself, let me think, yeah, one week by myself to England and then I met her in Paris, and we stayed there for a couple of weeks. And then we went— it was a nice trip. Then we went to Switzerland. Oh I remember you mentioned you wanted to go to Switzerland. Yeah, we took a train from Paris to Locarno, and then this [note: bus] thing flies up [note: the mountains] to a place called Vergeletto. Her sister's in-law had a house there. She [note: her sister] married a Dutch fellow. And it was like Heidi country. You could go above the timberline and it was very beautiful.

Emerald Rutledge 35:56

Yeah. Wow.

Kathy Wakeham 36:20

Very lush. And then on the way [note: home], we went by Zürich and there the mountains are more craggy. It was interesting, like the North is more craggy and the South is more lush.

Emerald Rutledge 36:34

So were you at all like during these trips, connecting with other lesbian and gay people as you were traveling? Or were you just sort of like hanging out?

Kathy Wakeham 36:47

Well two trips up to Montreal— I went once with a woman I was seeing Valerie Eads and another time was with Nancy Hoffmann. We wanted to find lesbian bars so we talked to these gay guys, who were cruising on the street. And one of them jumped back, like what does this woman want with me? We asked them where there are lesbian bars. And this is two different trips. So they took us there and, it's so interesting, to a restaurant. It was like, careful and then up this narrow staircase, so they have to knock on a door and they open it this whole room full of women. It was— so underground. To go through a restaurant then a staircase. This was in Montreal. It was in '71 and '72.

Emerald Rutledge 37:44

Okay.

Kathy Wakeham 37:45

But then on other trips, I found lesbian bars. And when was it? When I visited Chania, Crete in 1982, I went to an outdoor Women's Bar/Cafe. The women were very welcoming. In '85, there was a lesbian bar in Paris called Katmandu. That was fun. I met a Dutch couple there.

Emerald Rutledge 38:01

That's cool. Okay, so it's also really interesting to hear you talk about the experience of connecting to these scenes, even as you were traveling. I think that that's really interesting, really fascinating. So let's see. So left off at Darlene Abdale. And you were talking about, you went back to school in 1983.

Kathy Wakeham 38:24

Right.

Emerald Rutledge 38:25

Yeah. So tell me a little bit about that.

Kathy Wakeham 38:28

Okay, when I was at Columbia, I was a history major. When I became involved with Nancy Hoffmann, she encouraged me to write more because I always wrote poetry, journals, fiction, and nonfiction. So I thought oh to spend more time doing that instead of education. So, I left Columbia. Then over the years, during the mid 1970s and early '80s, I was a typesetter. I would have freelance jobs, part time jobs, and spent a lot of time doing political work in the tenant movement, union organizing, and writing. And then in 1983, I decided to go back to school to be a [note: clinical] social worker. I did my undergraduate work in psychology, political science, and then my MSW, Masters in Social Work. I was a clinical social worker for 25 years.

Emerald Rutledge 39:28

Okay. Alright and so you said— I think you said that you were maybe working at Elmhurst Hospital, right?

Kathy Wakeham 39:36

Yes in the alcoholism treatment program.

Emerald Rutledge 39:39

Okay. And that was where you met Rosalie Grossman?

Kathy Wakeham 39:44

Right.

Emerald Rutledge 39:45

Okay. In 1988, right?

Kathy Wakeham 39:47

Yes. 1988. And, we've been involved since then.

Emerald Rutledge 39:53

Okay, so since 1988.

Kathy Wakeham 39:55

Yes.

Emerald Rutledge 39:56

Okay. Okay. Cool. That's really exciting. So, have you had the opportunity to do a lot of traveling with Rosalie?

Kathy Wakeham 40:04

Oh, yes we've been very, very fortunate. We've traveled to Latin America, Central America, South America, Mexico and to Asia, which was very special.

Emerald Rutledge 40:19

Yeah.

Kathy Wakeham 40:21

I think we went to China about seven times. And then—

Emerald Rutledge 40:24

Wow!

Kathy Wakeham 40:25

Yeah and then to Southeast Asia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and India. We visited India three times, and it was very special. And the important thing for me, personally, is when I started traveling to Asia, I became interested in Buddhism. I became a Buddhist, because what I saw of the people who I met. This was in Southeast Asia as well as east Asia— Japan and China.

Emerald Rutledge 41:03

Wow, yeah. Okay and so this just like came about as part of like you're traveling there, right?

Kathy Wakeham 41:09

Yes. Our first trip to Asia was to Vietnam. And for us, it was a political pilgrimage because we were anti-war protesters. I would kid to people that "I went on a political pilgrimage and came back a Buddhist," but it wasn't that simple. That was the start of it. And then visiting Thailand and other places, I became very interested and decided to pursue Buddhism. Also, in the '60s and '70s, I read much about Buddhism.

Emerald Rutledge 41:44

Wow. Yeah. So were you religious growing up?

Kathy Wakeham 41:50

I was raised Roman Catholic and my education was literally split, like first to third grade was public schools, and fourth to ninth was Catholic, and 10th through 12th was public. It was mixed. But I was turned off by Catholicism because of the hypocrisy. One example that I remember was when we were living on Ravine Avenue. This was a poor working class neighborhood in the 1950s. The Church had people knocking on our doors to contribute money to build an air conditioned, modern convent for the nuns. And I just thought that was so hypocritical, because like I mentioned before, this was a neighborhood of poor housing, and we were always afraid of fires. I still have a fear of fire to this day and then for them to ask poor people to build a modern air conditioned convent?! Very few people had air conditioning in the 50s — even if you look at the TV program, *Mad Men*, they were going on about, "it's so hot, so hot," and they just had fans, and those were upper middle class people. So for nuns to want a modern air-conditioned convent with their vows of poverty seemed very hypocritical. I don't mean to be disrespectful to anyone's religion. But it was the hypocrisy [note: that turned me away from Catholicism]. And that the nuns were mean.

When I was going to Catholic school, the nuns and priests would hit the children. They would never get away with this today. When I was in Catholic school, they had something called the board of education, which was a wooden board. And the girls, they'd smack your hands if you were bad. The boys would get it on the backside.

Emerald Rutledge 43:39

Wow. And it was called the board of education?

Kathy Wakeham 43:42

It was literally a board, a wooden board with a handle.

Emerald Rutledge 43:46

Wow.

Kathy Wakeham 43:47

Yeah, they would never get away with that now.

Emerald Rutledge 43:50

I mean, they did— it was something like that similar when I was in private school when I was a kid. But you were spanked, you weren't hit on the hand. You were like— everybody was spanked with the same wooden paddle. It was—

Kathy Wakeham 44:03

Oh so they hit children, too, and you're much younger than I, right? They still act this way.

Emerald Rutledge 44:09

Yeah. And it wasn't Catholic. The church was like— they weren't Catholic. They were, I don't want to say that they're Baptist, I believe they were non-denominational. And so it was like this really small, private school. And it was outrageous. I mean, like in hindsight, and my mom was a schoolteacher for 30 years. She never taught at a school where that was a thing. And so like why'd she send me to this school with these people that, you know, you could get paddled for literally anything?

Kathy Wakeham 44:43

This is how it was! Yeah, for anything you could get paddled. Anything. You know, literally for looking the wrong way, for coughing. And then this one nun, who my younger brother had, who is seven years younger than I, was very mean. This is first grade, and he accidentally had his zipper down. So the nun made him walk through the streets with a pink bow in his hair. Yeah, it's—

Emerald Rutledge 45:11

Wow.

Kathy Wakeham 45:12

I've gone out of the house, now with my zipper down, that doesn't mean anything. It's accidental. They were really brutal.

Emerald Rutledge 45:22

Yeah, that's so strange. But okay, do you want to talk a little bit more about— you were saying that you and Rosalie went to Vietnam with the idea of this, like a political pilgrimage in your mind. So do you want to talk a little bit more about like, what motivated that and the trip itself and like, maybe a little bit about what you learned?

Kathy Wakeham 45:42

Oh, sure, let me — because I always like to travel and discover new places and Vietnam was opening up. This was in '99. And it was opening up more for traveling. So we signed up to go— it was supposed to be a tour. There were only two other people and the two other people were former GI's. One was a Vietnam vet and the other was stationed in Europe. But we came together. It was interesting -- anti-war protesters and a Vietnam vet and a Vietnam-era vet. It just showed that people are people. He [note: Ben] showed us the place where he was wounded and how he was always fearful to have his back toward a door because he could be shot. We had three different guides, we started in Hanoi, central Vietnam, and then Ho Chi Minh City. In Hue, the guide and the Vietnamese people invited us to a special dinner and dressed us in special traditional costumes [note: robes]. It was the former king's residence. After dinner, Ben got up and started expressing remorse. It was very heartfelt. "I'm so sorry for the damage and destruction I've done to your country. And for all the people who you've lost." It was very, very touching to hear him speak of this.

Emerald Rutledge 47:23

This is '99?

Kathy Wakeham 47:24

Yeah, it was '99, March and April of '99. The people were friendly, but I could tell the older people, understandably so, weren't that friendly— I can understand why, because you could still see the destruction of bombed areas. It is a beautiful country. And you could see that there was so much work being done. They're trying to rebuild the country. We went back in 2005. But then, we only went to Ho Chi Minh City and through the Mekong Delta. We went on this small river boat on the Mekong [note: Mekong River], and we traveled through southern Vietnam, the Delta, and into Cambodia, which was very special because you could visit the villages along the River. But it was amazing to me that the people were so welcoming after what this country did to the Vietnamese and Cambodian people.

Emerald Rutledge 48:27

Yeah. So talk to me a little bit about, as sort of like our wrapping up question, if you want to talk a little bit more about your experience with like lesbian bookstores and things like that. And then talk about your connection to the Lesbian Herstory Archives. I remember you telling me that originally it was on the Upper West Side. And so just, you know, talk to me about what kind of space that was for you? What do you understand the Lesbian Herstory Archives, the significance of it in terms of, you know, at that time being able to build community with people and other lesbians? Yeah, so I'm all ears.

Kathy Wakeham 49:18

So let's see, the Archives came about, I think around 1977. And at that time, there were several lesbian bookstores. There were the Djuna Books and Labyris Bookstore. Djuna was the first one. It was a hole in the wall place but it was a nice coming together. There were different restaurants. Bonnie's, that was the restaurant above the bar, Bonnie and Clyde, and Mother Courage. And then there was a discussion group called Gay Women's Alternative that was on the Upper West Side. I think it was around 90th street at the Universalist Church. And from there, I started hearing about the Archives, and the Archives was around the corner from another bookstore, Womanbooks.

These bookstores were very special because they would have poets come by to read their works or the Gay Women's Alternative would have writers like Blanche Wiesen Cook come by and discuss their writings. When the Archives came, a group of us started going there. I think the Archives was like a bridge to the so-called "bar dykes" and the "political lesbians." Because Joan and Deb, the founders of the Archives, were in both worlds. So instead of having this split of working class bar dykes and college educated movement dykes, you came together with both. Joan Nestle came from a working class background, and she appreciates roles and whatever people want to be. I think all of us sometimes feel more masculine and other times more feminine. We have all kinds of feelings. I think sexuality is very fluid. So the Archives gave a place or a space rather where you could be yourself and not worry if you didn't belong to this group or you didn't have a college education. It was just collecting ourselves and our lives together. And then once, I think in 1979, a friend, Bonnie Gray, (we worked together as typesetters, and she was also a union delegate) she interviewed me for a tape back at the Archives. The tape was about the early lesbians bars in the late and early seventies [note: and sixties].

Emerald Rutledge 51:59

For the Archives, right?

Kathy Wakeham 52:00

Yes, it was for the Archives. I don't know if they still have it because this was in the late seventies. And it was just an audiotape, not visual like this. But it was very special. And also, I think we felt it was and is important that we weren't and aren't just identified by our sex but by our lives. The Archives is a collection of diaries, poetry, fiction, photographs, and it gives importance to our lives and that our history could be a ground, the groundwork for other lesbians and young people. There's something before you and you can build on that. I think it's important to see what was before us so we could appreciate the present. That it just didn't come about that people can marry and have children, and that there was a whole history that we should acknowledge and appreciate. And the bars, it was very dangerous because there were bar raids. I was never in a bar raid. But I remember there was an after hours bar called The Snake Pit that I did go to a couple of times. There was a young gay Argentinian man there, and when the police

invaded the bar and rounded all the men up in a police station, he jumped out the window and was impaled on an iron fence, a pipe fence. So this is how dangerous it could be. He did live. But this is how dangerous the bars were. To finally feel comfortable in any space as an LGBT person is important.

Emerald Rutledge 53:59

Yeah, that's really lovely. I think that's also a wonderful conclusion to our conversation. Thank you.

Kathy Wakeham 54:09

Thank you.

Emerald Rutledge 54:10

Yeah, I want to ask you, is there anything else that you'd like to share that we have not covered today?

Kathy Wakeham 54:17

Okay, well I guess that being in GLF also introduced me to the importance of intersectionality. Over the years, I have been involved in other anti-war movements like against the Iraq invasion, and also involvement in the tenant rights movement. There's a group in New York City called Metropolitan Council on Housing. And for the past six years, I've volunteered on their tenant rights hotline. Since the late '70s, I've been involved in other things with Met Council. Since the early eighties, I testified to have strong rent laws protecting tenants. Also there was union work as I've been lucky to have had union jobs over the years. And then it seems like many LGBT groups are too single issue, instead of seeing the whole picture. That's why I love the word intersectionality. I wish we were all that way.

Emerald Rutledge 55:27

Yeah, I hear you. I mean, especially now like—

Kathy Wakeham 55:30

Yeah.

Emerald Rutledge 55:32

Yeah. It's like, yes, we should all be talking about the climate, we should all be talking—

Kathy Wakeham 55:37

Yes, yes and that's what's good about the Archives, because the originators Joan and Deborah, they were leftist as well as artists and lesbians. And, you know, they brought people together.

Emerald Rutledge 55:54

Yeah, yeah. Well, thank you so much, Kathy. It's been wonderful.

Kathy Wakeham 55:58

Thank you Emerald.

Emerald Rutledge 56:00

Yeah and I'm so excited. Thank you again for being so generous with your time and talking to me about your life and your history. I agree with you that this project, and the Archives in general are so important. And also for like understanding history and like historical trajectory and the ways that we have— that our lives are actively being shaped by historical experiences, right. And I think that having the opportunity to like go to the Archives and read about even what your sort of cultural experience was like and lesbian bars and other kind of lesbian social spaces at that time, was really fascinating to me. Especially because, you know, like the documentary that I sent you, people are marking the fact that, you know, lesbian bars are rapidly disappearing.

Kathy Wakeham 56:50

I know, it's frightening.

Emerald Rutledge 56:51

And so I think that you talking about the importance of bars and what that experience was like for you is really important. I think for people to conceptualize what this lesbian, gay, trans, sort of social experience to look like in the future, right? Like, how do we keep the bars open that are open? Or how do we cultivate other kinds of social spaces that are not necessarily linked to bars? And like, what does that look like and why's that important? And I think, yeah, I'm just so grateful that you've been so generous with your time and talking to me and sharing the memorabilia and things like that you have. I think that you have a wonderful archive yourself. And that's really, really, really special. So thank you!

Kathy Wakeham 57:40

Oh, thank you too, and also for your openness and your warmth, too. It's easy to speak with you, Emerald.

Emerald Rutledge 57:48

Thank you, I really appreciate it. So I'm gonna stop recording. Just give me one second.