



**Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory
of
Barbara DiBernard**

An Interview
Conducted by
Miriam Harrow
11/22/2021

Collection: The Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project

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Supported by a two-year Mellon-funded Community Archives grant, LHA is facilitating The Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project which seeks to continue the Lesbian Herstory Archives' commitment to collecting and sharing Lesbian stories.

Miriam Harrow 00:03

Hello and thank you for joining me, joining us for this oral herstory interview. Today is Monday, November 22, 2021. My name is Miriam Harrow and I will be interviewing Barbara DiBernard as a part of the Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project, a project within the Lesbian Herstory Archives. I am currently in Saratoga Springs, New York, and Barbara is in Lincoln, Nebraska. So to start us off Barbara, where and when were you born?

Barbara DiBernard 00:30

Okay. I was born in Dover, New Jersey in December of 1948.

Miriam Harrow 00:36

And what was your family like? Your childhood like?

Barbara DiBernard 00:42

My family identified heavily as Italian American. All of my grandparents were born in Italy and came to the US and stayed in that northern New Jersey area. I had a great childhood. There were 50 acres of woods in the back of our house that my mother's cousin owned and so that was kind of my personal playground as far as I was concerned [laughs]— and it had a swimming pond in it. And so it was great. I loved having that. I think the fact that I'm so attuned to the outdoors now is linked to that part of my childhood. So I have one sister. She's two years younger. Heavily oriented around food, Italian food [laughs]— great holiday meals and cookies that we make at Christmas and distribute to dozens of people. I did well in school. So I really had a very, very nice lower middle class childhood.

Miriam Harrow 01:57

And what kinds of schools and summer camps did you go to growing up?

Barbara DiBernard 02:03

Well, my favorite was girls camp. It was Camp Morris in Hackettstown, New Jersey. The boys got it in June and July and the girls got in in August. It was my favorite time of year. I went when I was eight for two weeks. No homesickness, no nothing. I was happy, happy at camp and then I went every summer till I could get to be a junior counselor and then a counselor. And I'd probably still be there if they hadn't, you know, knocked it down and built a housing development. I liked it that much. But it was a really important part of my childhood. Being outside but also I didn't have an analysis at the time. But you know, being with women, being with girls, having our space doing stuff outside. I went to public schools. We had elementary, like up through eighth grade, so I did that. Then a high school that was just walking distance from our house. And then I decided— well, I knew I was gonna go to college. My parents were very clear on that: like this is why your grandparents came to the US, so your generation should go to college. So I was the first one in my immediate family and cousins to go to college and so it was

a big deal. I only looked at women's colleges, although I didn't identify as lesbian. But I knew I felt more comfortable with women. And so I ended up at Wilson College in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania: small, private, women's college. And probably the reason I chose it is because one of the counselors who was older than I was at Camp Morris was going to Wilson and gave me the tour when we went there just to check it out. So that's all pretty intertwined there. And then I didn't know what to do for a year and then everybody said go to graduate school. So I went to SUNY Binghamton in upstate New York for my masters and Ph.D. And strangely enough, I ended up writing my dissertation on the Irish writer, James Joyce. That's a whole other story. But that's part of my legacy or heritage, I guess.

Miriam Harrow 04:38

Yeah. And just a question about your time in undergrad. So you graduated at Wilson College with a BA in English in 1970? How— so you were in college from about 1966, '67 to 1970. What was the social and political climate of that time on campus and did you get involved in any political activism or social justice issues on campus at the time? Or off campus?

Barbara DiBernard 05:07

Yeah, I'm glad you asked. Good question. I was completely naive I think when I went to college. I mean I had no reference in my family for political action. And actually, we were— sort of as immigrants, even though I was like the next generation, it was like let's be nice and fit in— so I wasn't thinking that way at all. My parents always took me to vote with them. I knew they were Republican but I didn't really know what that meant. Anyway— but it was at Wilson College that I became politicized. And as you pointed out, this is a very, very ripe time for political action across the country. My roommate, Nancy, got involved in anti-war activity before I did. I just didn't get it. She just— I can remember her like trying to help me get it and I somehow finally got it. Oh if I don't do anything, I'm still taking a stand, you know, I'm still being political. And so we— by junior year, I was going to marches in Washington DC which was very accessible from Chambersburg. I was at a couple of those big marches like in '68, '69. And I remember watching somebody there who I figured was the FBI or somebody taking photos of everybody who went by and it's like, oh so that's what it's about. But when Nancy, and I think only three others protested at graduation, they wore big skull masks kind of making them about eight feet tall as they walked into graduation. And I just, I couldn't do it. You know, my parents were coming and my aunts and uncles and I just, I wasn't that brave yet [laughs]— so

Miriam Harrow 07:30

Were they protesting the war?

Barbara DiBernard 07:31

Protesting the war, yeah. And it turns out— well, later one of them did experience pretty severe ramifications for having done that, like getting a bad recommendation, not getting into the Peace Corps. You know, so it wasn't without risk but, you know, I was in the mass marches but not in this sort of more personal way. So then the other thing I should say is even though, you know, we had probably a handful or less Black students at Wilson when I was there but it was the '60s, late '60s. And we— some of us did protest to ask that Black Studies be part of the curriculum. And I can remember sitting in front of the classroom building and trying to persuade people not to go in and go to classes. However, I had my typewriter with me. And I was typing my Chaucer paper as I was protesting [laughs]— so you can see, I was kind of like, mmm yeah I guess these are my beliefs but I wasn't— it was hard. It was hard.

But— oh and my big success and others and then I'll stop. It was a small, private, women's college when I got there in 1966. We had to wear dresses to dinner. It was like, a sit down dinner and everything. And I thought '68— we were just like, this is ridiculous! You know? Let's just wear pants! I mean, let's just wear our jeans. And, you know, sounds ridiculous now but it was a big deal. But a bunch of us did it, you know, wore jeans and pretty soon like all of those arcane rules just kind of just seemed like they just ended. I mean, it was like 1969. But I remember a classmate saying, "Well, you're talking about freedom, your freedom, but what about my freedom? It just makes me disgusted and I can't eat knowing you're sitting over there [laughs]" I still remember that! Anyway so there was— I did get involved in some political activity and it was at college which I think is very appropriate. You know, to learn new perspectives when you're in college and to begin to take your place in a larger structure. So—

Miriam Harrow 10:11

Totally.

Barbara DiBernard 10:12

Yeah.

Miriam Harrow 10:13

And so you've mentioned that you weren't out as a lesbian in college, but did you know any other lesbians in college? Was there anyone who there were like rumors about or was anybody out on campus?

Barbara DiBernard 10:25

You know, nobody I knew. And this is— the entire college has 700 students. So, you know, it's small. My roommate, same Nancy, her little sister, not her biological little sister but they assigned us a student two years younger to kind of mentor, told Nancy she was lesbian. And

frankly, we weren't appalled. But we didn't know what to do. Really it was just like— I don't think we were very helpful to her. There was sort of some rumors of some, you know, maybe some lesbians but nothing was out that I knew of. You know, by that time I'm among the more liberal, non-traditional students, even though I was still trying to get good grades and fit in. So I don't have any stories about the teachers or anything, which is pretty strange.

Miriam Harrow 11:42

Yeah, I mean, you know, a different time.

Barbara DiBernard 11:44

Yeah.

Miriam Harrow 11:45

Definitely. Yeah so you mentioned that you went to Binghamton for your masters and your Ph.D. And so after you finished that degree, or those degrees, did you teach or live anywhere else before your longtime position at the University of Nebraska Lincoln?

Barbara DiBernard 12:04

Yeah, my first job was at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, Twin Cities. And it was at the University but it was— they had a general college sort of, within the larger structure of the University. So the general college students weren't fully admitted, like to liberal arts or law or whatever yet. So in a way, it was great because it was all the non-trad students. You know, people who are veterans, older women who are non-traditional age who are going back, brilliant people who couldn't fit into a system very well. But so the students were great but I could never teach anything other than Intro to Lit or Intro to Composition. And the classes were like my Lit class had 100 students in it and that just didn't fit my style. Anyway, I was there for two years. They were good years but I was looking around so I didn't really put down roots very deep there. And then in 1978, I got this job at Lincoln, at the University of Nebraska Lincoln and stayed! So I've retired from there and I'm still here so—

Miriam Harrow 13:26

Yeah and how long did you work— how long did you teach at the University of Nebraska Lincoln?

Barbara DiBernard 13:32

33 years.

Miriam Harrow 13:33

Wow.

Barbara DiBernard 13:34

Yeah.

Miriam Harrow 13:36

So yeah, so moving to Nebraska. I guess my next question is to tell me a little bit about your early time in Nebraska. What it was like when you got to the college and how you got involved in their Women's Studies Department from the English Department?

Barbara DiBernard 13:53

Yeah, so I came as a— with a very traditional education in terms of English Ph.D.s You know, all that stuff, all 18th century lit and Shakespeare and Chaucer and just all of this stuff. And so, and as I said— my dissertation was on an Irish writer, James Joyce. And so I came hired to fit a slot, which was 20th century British fiction. That's how it was traditionally parsed out. And so here I was. I didn't know anybody. You know, I've never been here, I didn't know anybody but I had a good job. The University here had somewhat surprisingly started a Women's Studies program in 1975. So it was fairly, fairly early in terms of, across the country, Women's Studies programs. I had never heard of Women's Studies. I didn't know you could look at literature that way. But— and I said the University started the program. No! A few women started the program and took a chance and pushed and did all the bureaucratic work that you need to do to start a program and so on. So thank you to them! And they were very welcoming to me when I got here. Like, I was just kind of stunned I think. Like just do whatever the next thing is. And they asked, "Well, do you want to teach some of these Women's Lit classes?" And I said, "Well, you know, sure!" Even though I didn't know even what the field was about, I knew how to prepare a course. That's one thing graduate school gave me. So I was assigned a Women's Lit course and I started preparing it. I was just like my head blowing off, you know. Because here it was, everything I'd been taught was politicized, was traditional, was from a certain point of view. Nobody mentioned these great, fantastic writers who spoke right to my heart. And so—

Miriam Harrow 16:27

So what were some of those texts and writers that blew your mind and kind of awakened this in you?

Barbara DiBernard 16:35

Well, one of the first ones was a small book of short stories by Tillie Olsen called *I Stand Here Ironing*. And Tillie Olsen, a working class woman, had grown up in Omaha, which is right down the road from here. And somebody from the Women's Studies program here nominated Tillie Olsen for an honorary degree because Tillie also never got to go— she had to drop out of high school— she never got to go to college, although she wanted to. And so Tillie Olsen was coming and I was gonna get to meet her. And so I started reading. And I read her book called *Silences*, which basically laid out the whole thing. It's like, why is only one out of 12 books that are published by women? That are reviewed, that are taught, it's even less that are, you know, kept in

print. And so I just said, "Okay, well, that's me! I've got to stop. I've got to intervene in my little teeny corner of the world." So I decided I would never teach another course that wasn't at least 50% of the texts by women, no matter how I had to get them. So Tillie Olsen. Margaret Atwood was new to me then. Audre Lorde, Alice Walker way back when. And all together, I just realized that everything I'd been taught was just like tunnel vision. So I had to change that. You know, it was scary but it was just exciting and liberating. And students were flocking to these courses. In fact, the guy who did the scheduling for the English department told me like, "I can't schedule enough courses for Intro to Women's Lit. It's going to take over the curriculum!" Yeah, we are! But you know, they were trying to like just contain it in a way. So anyway, I may have strayed from your question. But so they were very specific writers and books and texts and classes. It was really a very exciting time when that was just opening up. And students wanted— I mean I wanted it and the students wanted it. And so there we were able to sit together and read and talk about these books. Fabulous.

Miriam Harrow 19:25

Yeah. Was there any kind of like— so were lesbian texts and feminist texts being— I guess were you encountering them at the same time? Because you mentioned Audre Lorde which I think of the authors you just mentioned, she was the only lesbian of those kinds of feminist texts that you read. So was she the first lesbian writer that you read? Or the first one you remember?

Barbara DiBernard 19:52

Oh wow, good question. First one I remember reading who had an impact and then a whole sub text here that I won't go into. But this is the home of Willa Cather, great lesbian author but nobody is saying lesbian for decades here. They were— so that's the kind of overall atmosphere. And I should say that it was a friend, not in academia, who gave me Audre Lorde, who gave me her essay, "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action," and just basically said, "Here, read this." And that changed my life more than any single piece of literature writing I've ever read. And so I think it was— it's important to note that that came to me from outside the University, even from outside the Women's Studies program. So yeah, so then in '85, Gilbert and Gubar published this, you know, you're in English— they have those huge anthologies of like the Norton Anthology of American Literature. So they published the Norton Anthology of Women's Literature in English in '85. And this was great because now I had access as did everybody else to all these texts that we didn't, couldn't find before. I mean, some of them hadn't been republished or they were just obscure. So there they were. 1000s of pages. But then I got the department to send me to a seminar that was by those two authors. Basically on how to use this book, you know, this anthology and what we could do in English departments. And that was like— I was out by then, to myself and to others. And it was just like, first of all, they're not— even when they're lesbians in this book, the intros don't tell you that. Adrienne Rich. I mean, really [laughs]. So I teamed up— I found some other lesbians who were attending and we protested and wrote some stuff. I don't know that it helped right then. I think when they

republished a new edition, they did better. Anyway, that's sort of a larger answer to your question of, you know, it was not happening very well in academia, that that lesbian inclusion was just a given as it should have been. So—

Miriam Harrow 22:40

Right. Yeah. So you mentioned that by the time that conference came around, you were out to yourself and to others. So were— I guess yeah, so I have kind of a small set of questions about coming out and what led you to that, and who around you was out? So I guess I'll start with when, how, and why did you come out when you did?

Barbara DiBernard 23:05

Yeah. So I came out about 1981. So I was— '48, '58, '60. So I around 30. And it's my belief now that I wouldn't let myself come out when I was still geographically near my biological family. But Lincoln— not many people know this— Lincoln was like a hotbed of radical lesbianism then. Julia Penelope, who's a great linguist and scholar and edited the original *Coming Out Stories* and anthologies on class and a lesbian separatist anthology called *For Lesbians Only*, well she was here when I got here. And she was just like, uncompromising. She didn't have any of my instincts of like, oh I better be nice and not wear the skull at graduation. But she was also not treated well and wasn't here for very long. Maybe we overlapped for three, four years. So several women, including Julia, had started the Lincoln Legion of Lesbians. And so they were active at the time that I got here. And as I was coming out and recognizing, you know, my own sexuality— I mean, the Lincoln Legion of Lesbians should be known far and wide. And we had, they had dances, they had potlucks, they had raffles, they had we had you know Maxine Feldman and Holly Near. And I mean, every musician came through. This was the time when they stayed in people's houses. And, you know, we found a church that would let us use their space. And so all around me was this vibrant lesbian culture. So that made it easy and also very exciting.

So coming out to myself and to a lesbian community was fairly easy actually. And I didn't have any great angst, you know, even that much surprise. I mean, when I look back, a lot of it made sense, you know, camp and women's college and just my preference for women's spaces. And, you know, I always thought it was kind of fun that I came out to this traditionally conservative place, state anyway— Nebraska still is— and came out and became radicalized when I had grown up in New Jersey and didn't, you know, pick up on any of that. So that's one part of your question.

Miriam Harrow 26:19

Yeah and so were— well, I guess, so on Julia Penelope for a moment. Was she putting in any kind of radical work in the curriculum changing in the school that you carried on after she left?

And why did she leave? You mentioned she was treated poorly, like what was happening with all of all that?

Barbara DiBernard 26:47

So Julia started a class. I think she just called it Lesbian Novels. And I'm not sure of the date. I wrote it down. Oh, I wrote down that she taught that class in 1978. So that was pretty early. I mean like I said, Women's Studies, that pretty much just started. And a friend of mine took that class. There are still a couple of women around who took that class and of course it was just revolutionary, locally and nationally. Julia identified as a separatist, not just identifying but, you know, had her political and social beliefs as a separatist. And she asked that men not be allowed to attend her class but that she would meet them separately. Yes, this [laughs]— caused quite a stir. And it was in the student newspaper for weeks at a time. I'm not sure how it actually ended. I think a couple men insisted on attending the class but then didn't follow through. So Julia was out there. And then after she left, I don't know exactly why— I mean, I've talked to a few women who knew her well or worked with her when they were grad students. And they just say she was very unhappy here and, you know, just was not treated well. I would assume that at least partly means she was publishing all kinds of stuff that the department and the University in general did not value her work and did not reward it. And I don't think she ever got to be a full professor here. So it took me a while, but a few years later, I said, “well, we need this lesbian course” and so I designed it and then it became 21st century Lesbian Literature, a course that I taught till I retired. That was a great course I have to say. It was a great course to teach and the students were always, you know, fantastic. And we had just excellent discussions. And—

Miriam Harrow 29:32

Yeah, can you tell me a little bit more about that course and the guest speakers that accompanied it? The kind of people that you brought to campus and how they intersected with the texts you were teaching?

Barbara DiBernard 29:45

Hmm, yeah. So I framed it kind of as beginning with *Well of Loneliness*, which you could arguably say was the first sort of out lesbian novel in English. And then coming up to, you know, right now: writers who are writing now and whose books we could go read and then they could come here. So and I tried— and to me lesbian had to be interpreted very broadly and also literature had to be interpreted broadly. So like those Ann Bannon pulp novels, we read and talked about. And Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich. I tried to be inclusive and diverse, always include something that had to do with disability, for instance. Often these were memoirs or, you know, nonfiction, because that's what was available and was usually quite impactful for all of us to read and think about. And I always— well, we had Native American writers and Chicana writers and African American writers. So yeah I figured, okay here I am, I'm in a University. I have privilege. I have some modicum of power of access. I can apply for a visiting speaker

[grant] and bring some of these great writers and it turns out at the time, the honorarium was like \$2,000, if you could get it. That was a lot of money to a lesbian, to many lesbian writers. So would be, you know, their airfare and hotel and \$2000 bucks or so. And most of them were very happy to meet students and come to class and, you know, be very, very generous with their time and their energy.

Anyway, we had Minnie Bruce Pratt— first by herself, then Minnie Bruce Pratt and Leslie Feinberg— who were together, came together. That was fabulous. Chrystos, who's Menominee— Chrystos' poetry is great if you don't know it. Dorothy Allison. Beth Brant. Barbara Smith. Judy Grahn. Elana Dykewomon. Carolyn Gage. Lillian Faderman. And all of these people would, as I said, generously come to class. Sometimes because I would always teach that Lesbian Lit as a night class, we would meet at our house, and it was just a very special thing to have the author there and to be gathered together. And then there would always be a public reading as well. But and then I would— I really tried to do it right and get as big an audience as I could. So for here, like 300 people at a poetry reading, that was pretty good. So I would just do a lot. And since I'm, you know, in the lesbian community, I could figure out how to get word to people. And I never wanted it to be for the University only course, although a lot of people over there, frankly act like it. You know, they don't care if anybody else knows about it. Anyway, so that's one aspect. And then I appreciate your bringing up that I considered it a kind of activism to contact these writers to enlarge their audiences to get them a small honorarium. And then, you know, here I was, I considered myself a very shy person growing up. And here I am with my heroes, you know, like having dinner with Leslie Feinberg. Woo, like it doesn't get better. So it was good all the way around.

Miriam Harrow 34:23

Yeah. So sort of speaking of kinds of ways that you enacted personal, I guess interpersonal activism on campus, as opposed to like large scale political involvement, were you out in your classes when you came out to other faculty members and the community as you were becoming a part of the lesbian community in Lincoln? Or did that take a little bit longer to come out in classes or did the classes you were teaching out you in their titles?

Barbara DiBernard 34:56

Yeah, that's a good question. Good perspective on that. So it took me the longest to come out to my students. I mean, I was out— I mean I was out in the community. I was out in my department and out in some ways in the University in terms of LGBT activism, but I really reached my own homophobia, I think when it came to students. I was scared. Like, what if they don't like me anymore? You know, what if they don't listen to me anymore? What if they don't respect me? At the same time, I'm teaching Audre Lorde who says, "Your silence will not protect you." I could not continue to teach Audre Lorde and be a hypocrite, basically. So one night we were doing an exercise, we're sitting in a circle and we were talking about Audre Lorde's *Zami*

and we were— I sometimes would do this, each person would speak and just be uninterrupted and just wait until everybody was done before we referenced each other's comments— and so when it came my turn, I just said it like, "Well, as a lesbian, this book blah blah blah." You know, and I just— I don't even know what happened after that because I was just kind of like stunned. Of course, nothing negative happened. I mean, the students were more than generous. Some of them recognized this was a big deal and wrote me notes or, you know.

And then after that, I came up with a system that might not work for everybody, but it worked for me. So I would ask the students in the first week to write a letter to me, "Dear Barbara, here's what I want you to know about me" because I really, I can't— I can only interact with people if I know something about who they are and who's out there, you know, you're not just talking to a blank wall. And so I would write them a letter the first week and give it to them. And it would say, here's what I want you to know about me and I would just identify as a lesbian feminist. Talk about my partner, Judy, our cats, you know, that I grew up in New Jersey. I mean, all sorts of stuff. But among that is like, I identify as a lesbian feminist and I want you to know that. And somehow, that worked for me. And so okay week one, we've done it. It's just part of the, you know, atmosphere now. If people are uncomfortable, they can say something, they can write something. If I refer to a partner in class, they know her name. So, I just continued doing that for every class, not just Women's Lit classes for the rest of my career. And a couple grad students tried the same thing, after I said this is how I— it didn't always work out well for everybody. I think it could be very personal in terms of how you do everything. So anyway, that's a long answer but that was hard. And it's not to say that I didn't experience some blowback because I did. I mean back in the, especially in the late eighties, early nineties. I was just looking at some student evaluations. It's like, "this is a Women's Lit class, not a Lesbian Lit class. I don't need to know the professor's sexuality." "No, I don't want to read about any—" they always say "anybody's sexuality." Yeah right! You know, somebody might check like "excellent teacher" on the evaluation and then write all this stuff like, "I was so uncomfortable, and this was unnecessary, and her hero is Audre Lorde, who's a big time lesbian. That's a problem for me." So some of that was very painful but luckily, I have friends and I had Judy and they would still help support me and keep going.

So and also, I should say, while I'm talking about this, I did want to be out on the whole campus. And I wanted anybody to feel like if it'd be useful to talk to me, to be able to find me. Well, I was the only DiBernard in Lincoln. So, you know, back when you had a phone book, that was pretty easy. So and some people did, including faculty members who said like, "Help. Where have I landed? Where are the lesbians?" So anyway, but that was very important. And it was a kind of activism and it at times took a lot of energy.

Miriam Harrow 40:37

Yeah, and so in terms of like students and classes, so at some point, you helped to build the LGBT Studies minor at the university? And you designed the Intro to LGBT Studies course?

What was the process of creating that like? Was there any pushback from the administration? Or was it really backed by the administration?

Barbara DiBernard 41:03

Yeah, you know, by that time, when we put together the minor, there really wasn't any pushback than I was aware of. And I was one of the three people really putting it together. So there were lots of other programs by then who had LGBT minors or majors. And, you know, we did all the paperwork. It got put under women's, which is now Women's and Gender Studies. And that might have been the only kind of pushback, you know, like they were willing to be the home. And I don't know, English or Psychology might not have been. On the other hand, it was interdisciplinary so it didn't really fit in an individual department. I'm not sure if there was a second part of that question.

Miriam Harrow 42:02

No, yeah. That's totally an answer.

Barbara DiBernard 42:06

The intro course — well, we needed an intro course. You can't have a minor without any sort of— and so I got to do again what I had done, however, 20 years before, with Women's Lit. Okay so lots of reading, a lot of research. It was easy by then to get other people's syllabi, you know, virtually or by the internet and to do that kind of research. So but I mean, it is ironic that I didn't— once I really switched to Women's Literature and Women's Studies, and Women's and Gender Studies and LGBTQ studies, I had no training in anything I was teaching, as opposed to what I had been led to believe was the way you did things [laughs]— so I think that was great. I was sitting in the same office in the same building and it was like, I had a new job, you know, a great job that I helped design.

Miriam Harrow 43:15

And yeah, when was that course or that minor started? It seems kind of the early 2000s.

Barbara DiBernard 43:22

Yes, I think so. Yeah. I don't have the exact date but yeah, early 2000s.

Miriam Harrow 43:29

Awesome. And so my next couple questions are just about Judy. And so, when did you meet? What can you tell me about your love story? Did you start off as friends or colleagues? Were you in the same lesbian community? Just whatever you want to share about your relationship, your longtime relationship?

Barbara DiBernard 43:55

Yeah. So we met probably in about 1985, early eighties. And that's when it seemed like all the lesbians did was have potlucks here [laughs]— so we met at a friend's house at a potluck. She wasn't as impressed with me as I was with her at first meeting. But you know, so yeah, so we were first friends. We would have lunch every couple weeks and see each other at events or plan to go to events together or a concert or something. And then, I think well— at some point, I should talk about the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. But Judy and I ended up [there together]. There was great excitement in Lincoln about the Michigan Festival and a lot of women were going. So being lesbians, we had meetings and organized who would drive with who and you know,— where we would camp together and what banners we would have.

So we got assigned by someone else to ride together because I didn't— my car was really old and I didn't want to drive my car. So I think that was in '86. And it was just like, we started talking, you know, the minute we got in the car and we were still talking 14 hours later when we got to Michigan. And so that really deepened our relationship. And then it still took us a couple years but we lived separately. We each had our own house and Judy had a daughter who was in high school. And we both had been burned anyway. So we were like okay, okay, this works for us for now. And then in '88, we went to Michigan together and decided on that trip, that we were going to make a commitment to each other. So our anniversary is '88, and is connected to the Womyn's Music Festival, which just seems really important and lovely to us. Then we decided, once Judy's daughter Sarah was off to college, we decided to live together. Since Judy has post-polio, and wasn't using a wheelchair, but probably would be soon, we couldn't find a house to live in together that was really accessible. So Judy owned a small rental house on a double lot and we ended up working with an architect who said, you know, I'm gonna have to start over. So we sold off everything from that old house, the doors and the windows and the cupboards. And then, he built us this fabulous house that's totally accessible on the first floor. And so that's— so when we started living together that was, this is our house. And literally, it's made of brick.

Miriam Harrow 47:35

Yeah. So onto the Michigan Womyn's Festival. That was the next topic. So when did you first go and how many years did you go for? And just like, what is important about it for you?

Barbara DiBernard 47:55

Yeah. So I went first in 1985. And the way I remember it, you know, is a friend said, "Okay, here's what to take. Get these things together, come and sit in my back seat, we're going to Michigan." And I only had a very vague idea what it was. But from the minute I got— before you even get there, well, I should say past tense before you even got there, you see these cars, you know. You'd be waving to all the lesbians who were on the way to Michigan with you, and you'd stop for gas, and they'd all be there. And you know, just this— and then when we got there and pulled into the gate, there's a huge sign that says, "Welcome home!" And it was just, I'm getting emotional even now. You know, all these years later, forty years later. It just felt like yes,

yes, this is home. And so I loved it. I just took to it. I went to every concert and lots of workshops. And the overwhelming thing is like everything here was made by a woman. So the stages which were temporary, but you know, the lighting was, the sound, the kitchen. The kitchen alone, like feeding up to 7,000 women in the woods, on a wood stove, wood fires, like who would even think of that? Well, lesbians would think of that [laughs]— so and I think, in some ways, the best part it was like I came out at such a fortunate time for me because I had a local lesbian community and I had a national one. I mean, I may sound proud, prideful, but it's like, I felt like I was part of something big. I could talk to any woman there and feel like we had something in common, whether that was realistic or not. In some ways it was because that happened [laughs]— we did that. And there's such joy.

I mean, I can think of a time when they— I was not much of a runner but I ran— and they had a relay race. So I just joined up with three other women and we ran the relay around, you know, around the land. Well, the handoff thing was a tampon. You know just like, yeah. So and there'd be spontaneous parades and drumming, but it was also serious. There were workshops on, you know, violence, or on post-traumatic stress, or separatism, or racism within the community. But it was within a setting where it felt anyway— I know, there's differing opinions— to me, it felt like at least we're trying to talk about it. We may not always be successful, but we're trying. I mentioned Judy has post-polio. She said at the time, Michigan was the most accessible place she'd been. And, you know, that's not that easy to do in the woods. But they just designed things, knowing that women with different mobilities would be there. So it was through lesbian feminism that I first saw ASL interpreters. That was just part of what we did and took the rest of them decades to catch up. Which frankly is why, when people criticize lesbian feminists, is one of the reasons that it feels upsetting to me is that like, I thought there was a lot we were doing and trying to do, and we didn't do it perfectly.

But Michigan was fabulous. So I went from '85 through '95, every year. And then, and that was— '85 wasn't with Judy but all the other years were. And then I went in 2000 by myself because Alice Walker was going to be there and I like Alice Walker. It wasn't as much fun by myself, I have to say. And then we also, Judy and I, went to the National Women's Music Festival in Bloomington for a couple years and then we went to the National Lesbian Conference in Atlanta in 1990. So there were just these opportunities to literally be part of something, you know, much, much bigger. So that's not— I mean, even though I talk about the timeframe just working for me, not all of my friends who identify as lesbian have that, feel part of something national. I don't know what it is but for me, that was a big part of being lesbian.

Miriam Harrow 53:39

And how is the festival, the Michigan Womyn's Festival, how is it changing over the years that you went? For those 10 years and the one time in 2000? I guess also a follow up to that is,

were— did you or anyone you know, were any of them ever involved in the organizing processes of the Michigan Womyn's Festival or any of these other festivals?

Barbara DiBernard 54:07

Well, not organizing, although I met some women in Lincoln who were workers, which was quite a status thing to me. They would go and spend a month and, you know, be part of making it all happen. And one of them was quite close to Boo Price, one of the original organizers, who didn't stay through to the end but I didn't have any firsthand connections that way. And then I forgot your second question.

Miriam Harrow 54:44

Oh, yeah. The first one was just how was the festival changing over the years? Because it sort of has this contemporary legacy of controversy and separatism and then transphobia. And so how was that starting to emerge while you were going to the festival? And what were those conversations going on at the time?

Barbara DiBernard 55:11

Yeah. So the year that they had, or one of the years they had Camp Trans across the road I heard Leslie Feinberg was going to be there. And so I was like, okay if Leslie Feinberg is going to be there, I need to go over because I need— there's something I need to know. So I even wrote an article about this: “Crossing The Road, or What's the Nice Lesbian Feminist Like You Doing in a Place Like This?” And so I went over there and you sat around a fire. I heard various trans people talking and I can't— I'm not much of an absolutist. So like, I wouldn't say like, no, every trans person should be kept from the festival or every trans person should be in the festival. So at the festival, there was, for instance, a women of color tent. And white women were not— if you were invited, you could go in. But if you weren't invited, you knew that was space that they preserved and needed. And it may not be an exact good parallel, but I sort of felt that way about trans like, okay is there a way that you, that trans women can respect the need of other women who came to their feminine, their femaleness in a different way to have some space? And then and the opposite for, you know, women born women. [Redaction]. So I don't have any easy answers. I mean, the thing is like I said, we were trying to work it out at least and I would read things and feel like, oh, yes. Read something else and feel like oh, yes. So but my, you know, I think maybe it was inevitable that the festival end because that era is over. But it's certainly the biggest, the most divisive factor in the years I attended. I mean, I remember when S&M was a big deal. And then things were worked out where women who wanted to practice S&M had a certain area and they could be loud all night, but you couldn't be loud all night somewhere else. Or even just the seating, you know, chem free but you could smoke cigarettes, chem free but you couldn't smoke cigarettes, and then— all these different things. So but I sure wouldn't want to be in charge. I guess I'll say— I mean, I was very excited to be where we were trying to work things out, but I would not want to be in charge. So I don't know if that addresses the—

Miriam Harrow 58:37

Yeah, yeah. I think it's a hard question for anybody who was just a participant, or attendant, to answer. And it all kind of comes down to the values of the people who are running it. And every, I think every political or activist organization grapples with all kinds of who's included and who's not all the time. And I mean for me, for the Dyke March, we are constantly tripping over our words, particularly in the age of social media. But yeah, so to move on to kind of the more contemporary activism that you've been involved in. And so you mentioned that in coming out in Lincoln and you've wanted to be kind of a person that people can turn to as a resource as a known lesbian in the community. So what kinds of public appearances did you make or who reached out to you? Yeah, what kind of conversations were you having in the realm of lesbian political involvement and visibility throughout your career in Lincoln?

Barbara DiBernard 59:54

So there was quite a while when I was invited to be the token lesbian on a panel. And that was okay with me. You know, like I said I was willing to talk and I wanted to be visible. And those first times, it was hard. It was scary [laughs]— kind of like coming out to my students. But a lot of panels for like our social service workers through the state or county or other teachers at other local colleges who couldn't be out themselves or so there's that kind of thing. And then— oh, I can't even remember some of the reasons but I was, you know, on TV a couple times, just on the six o'clock news when something would happen in town or out of town. Like Brandon Teena was murdered, not that far from here. So trying to stay on top of, you know, newspapers using certain kinds of language, writing to them. And so, I'm trying to think. The big things were in— two big things— in 2000, this state adopted a, quote Defense of Marriage Act through a vote [note: which won big]. And it was and still is, even though we can legally get married now, the worst in the nation because it said only a union between a man and a woman is legal and not [domestic] partnerships or civil [unions], or anything else. So it was just like, we don't even want you to have rights through domestic partnerships. We don't want you to have any of these civil rights. So it was horrible. And conversations were horrible and the ads were horrible. And we lost big, big time.

So after that, the local ACLU, Lambda Legal, which is a national legal defense organization, and PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) sued the state saying, you know, basically this is unconstitutional. And they asked for couples to write affidavits and be available for the press, basically. So I just really wanted to do it. And Judy checked with her boss because she was working with children, as a mental health counselor and you know that kind of, all those assumptions that go along with that, and her boss said, "Of course. You know, if anybody asks me about it, I'll say yes I know Judy. She's one of the best therapists we have." So we did it. And that was a really great experience, because Lambda Legal trained us and we got to go to press conferences. You know, it's like two past middle age ladies by that point like, what is the

problem? You know, we felt like we were good spokespeople. So anyway, so that went on and we did win at the federal level in Omaha but then we lost at the appeals level. So that was depressing. But I feel so proud that we did that and so proud that our names are on those affidavits. So that was a big thing.

And then this is not really activism. But we got married. We were the first same sex couple in the county to get our marriage license and to get married. So we were on the front page of the paper above above the fold [laughs]— and the nice thing about that is that we heard from people from all parts of our lives, which was just really heartening. Some people you wouldn't have expected to want to congratulate you on your marriage, but a lot of others did. So we've been, you know, pretty public and I again, I don't want people to think like this was just easy for me because it wasn't. You know, natural is a terrible word to use but it wasn't in my personality necessarily that I would be public and be a spokesperson and be in the media. But it was Audre Lorde who said, "Your silence will not protect you." Like, say what needs to be said or you'll die and it still won't be said. So, you know, and I also feel lucky to be in Lincoln because it's like the state capital's a few blocks that way. The University is here and there are a lot of good avenues if you want to do political work. There's, you know, it's pretty easy to find a place to fit in. I don't know if I were in New Jersey, if I would have found my way, you know, to what I needed to do as easily.

Miriam Harrow 1:06:01

Yeah, so you and Judy were involved in activism for marriage? Are there any kinds of other activism that you and Judy are involved in or independently involved in? I know you've mentioned a couple of times disability justice is something that is very close to both of you.

Barbara DiBernard 1:06:23

Yes, that's right. So we try to write letters or make phone calls when we come upon something that's not accessible and that should be. So we have a whole file of letters, most of which were not very successful, let's say. So we— I mean, we haven't been involved in a disability community per se, but we're kind of up on the legal aspects and we take action on sort of individual cases. So yeah, that's really important to us. And just well, it's just vital to our everyday lives.

Miriam Harrow 1:07:24

Yeah, I think those were all of my questions about activism. So is there anything at all that you wanted to share or talk about for the Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Archive that we haven't covered yet?

Barbara DiBernard 1:07:45

Mmm no, not really. You've done a great job.

Miriam Harrow 1:07:55

Okay, great. And so the last question, of course, is about your own connection to the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City?

Barbara DiBernard 1:08:05

Yes. So it's kind of like what I was talking about before. Feeling part of a large national, even international community, is like the Lesbian Herstory Archives. I've never been there physically but I know about it. I know where it is. I know about the updates. I send money. They send me newsletters [laughs]— and so that's just one. It's one of my institutions, maybe that's not the best word, but you know, kind of like in a way, like the music festival. I mean, it's a resource that's there for me, for lesbians, and that includes me. In the past, a couple of my students in the Lesbian Lit class have taken up a topic, like I remember one young woman wrote a whole paper on Joan Nestle, and then ended up actually going to the Archives and, you know, doing some research. So that was really exciting and it was a resource for students and then— oh so one of my, one of the grad students I worked with who identified as lesbian, sent a few of my articles especially about being out as a lesbian teacher, sent them to the archives. I think unsolicited so I assume they are somewhere. But and I— so there's that and there's potentially other things like I have a couple things. Julia Penelope made a crossword puzzle book for lesbians and then a card game kind of like Trivial Pursuit only it's, *Dyke: Do you know enough?* It's cards with this incredible information about lesbians. And I'm thinking like maybe LHA doesn't have a copy of this game? So there's certain things I might have accumulated that I think I need to check. So it's always there for me. Like oh, this should go to the Archives or maybe should go to the Archives. So it's very important to me, even though I've never been there.

Miriam Harrow 1:10:31

Yeah, I feel similarly, that it's not somewhere I've been physically but I've been very engaged with their online archival systems. And I'm happy to volunteer and to meet, kind of like what you were saying, what you've said a number of times about this sort of unspoken, national community, where I can hop on a Zoom with somebody who lives in a completely different part of the world, part of the country for me, and have a whole literary canon in common and have a whole common language. The Archives kind of provides that space, as well as a physical space of knowing that I can walk into that room and just see shelves of books lined with names I recognize and with the pages of those books being experiences I recognize, and that that doesn't happen in every archive or every bookstore or every classroom. And it should.

Barbara DiBernard 1:11:34

Yeah, well, beautifully said.

Miriam Harrow 1:11:39

Well, I think we've come to the end of the interview. So thank you for speaking with me today Barbara and sharing some pieces of your life with the project. It's been a pleasure to talk to you and to do this interview process.

Barbara DiBernard 1:11:55

Well, thank you. It's a great project and I'm really proud that we're going to be part of it.