



**Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory
of
Diane Wormser**

An Interview
Conducted by
Hannah Leffingwell
12/03/2021

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.

Hannah Leffingwell 00:03

Hi, Diane, thanks for joining me. Today is December 12, 2021. My name is Hannah Leffingwell. I'm in Brooklyn, New York. And today I'm recording an oral history interview as part of the Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project, which is a project of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. My interview today is with Diane Wormser, who's calling from New Jersey. So Diane, where are you in New Jersey?

Diane Wormser 00:28

I'm in Basking Ridge, which is the Southern portion of Northern Jersey. Not far from Morristown, Bridgewater. Thank you for having me. I'm really excited about this interview.

Hannah Leffingwell 00:42

Yeah, me too. So just kind of, in a very general fashion I was wondering if we could start with hearing a little bit about your early life, where you were born, where you grew up.

Diane Wormser 00:53

I was born in Pennsylvania and before I was one, we, my family and I moved to New Jersey, a suburb of New York City. I have two sisters and a brother and I was the third of the four kids. We, you know, as baby boom—I was born in 1958. I was part of the later baby boom generation. So there were tons of kids in the neighborhood and it was a very typical suburban life.

Hannah Leffingwell 01:32

And what was your family like?

Diane Wormser 01:37

My family seemed in many ways, a little bit of the oddballs of the neighborhood. We were not a family that did keeping up with the neighbors in terms of new cars, or expanding the house the way other people did. My parents were of a culture to be conservative with resources, not being showy. So actually, I thought we were poor because we didn't do the same things or spend money in the same ways as the people around me. I was brought up in a Unitarian Church tradition. My parents are Jewish, were raised Jewish, and they brought a lot of their Jewish values into my upbringing. But Unitarianism gave us, gave me, a platform to learn about many ways of approaching spirituality, and the practice of, and practices that add to, and I was taught that everybody might have a different way, that it didn't— we didn't have to be the same to be right. We didn't have to be the same to be in community. And that was an upbringing; those values really have stayed with me as an adult.

Hannah Leffingwell 03:02

So that's interesting, I'm kind of wondering how that affected your coming out process to have that kind of sense of diversity in your spiritual life.

Diane Wormser 03:16

Well, I was introduced to lesbians and gays through the church that I attended. My parents enrolled me. I was an early adolescent and the school did not have Sex Education. And my parents enrolled me in the Unitarian version of Sex Education, which was very open minded and very inclusive, and I was taught about many different kinds of sexual expression and identities. And, again, this is in the early seventies, when I was pretty, you know, adolescent and our church was one of the few places that would rent public space to the Gay Activist Alliance of New Jersey. That was it, you know, many public spaces, religious or otherwise, just would not would not have it.

It should have been easier for me to come out, but I was afraid of losing my family. I was afraid because I knew that people would get sometimes disinherited or disowned. So I was fearful, but at the same time, that upbringing must have strengthened me because I came to it younger than many people. I knew I was gay in those early teen years and it was a very conservative community. I think if I had been in a community where my parents were the norm, rather than the exception, I might have come out earlier. Although we were, you know, 20 minutes, 30 minutes drive to New York City, we were a good 50 years behind New York in cultural ways. So I waited to come out until I was in college and in another city, and across the country in California. And when I came out to my parents, they were wonderful. They were like, "Oh, you know, I'm glad you told us, we knew." They had figured it out. They never objected, I never faced losing my family over this issue. So I was very lucky. I wish I could have bottled them and be able to give them away to— I certainly met many, many people who were disenfranchised from their families. It was heartbreaking because, for me, I love my family. I'm very family oriented, it would have been a tremendous loss.

Hannah Leffingwell 05:58

So what was your first experience of being socially engaged with other queer people? I mean, was it before you realized in yourself that you were gay? Or like, did you have experience around queer folks before you came out, or as you came out?

Diane Wormser 06:18

I have two answers. I became aware of my intense feelings for women when I was a child. But I didn't have an awareness of sexuality. I just, you know, there was just this girl, this redheaded girl that I just worshiped her feet, you know. So that was before I had an identity, or was even thinking of sexuality through this group at the Unitarian Church. They rented the group, Gay Activist Alliance, at 12, 11 or 12, I met, you know, en masse, a number of gays and lesbians— mostly gay men, they would talk to me— the lesbians, for some reason, did not. But I just felt

like, these are my brothers. I felt very comfortable engaging with them and part of me just relaxed in a way that I didn't feel around my own peers. But I didn't know what that meant at the time. It was later in high school that I realized, when I had already started being sexually active heterosexually that, you know, something didn't feel right. I knew what it was, but I wasn't willing to explore it in that town. Was just not the place to. It just felt dangerous, felt like I would be bullied. I had— well I had been bullied, but not for that, just for stupid young teenage reasons. And unfortunately the way I put a stop to that bullying was through violence. I took the bully and I beat her up and nobody touched me for the rest of my school years. So that was a tough thing to talk about with my kids as I was raising them because I didn't want to say "Well, just beat them up and that'll end it." Anyway, I got off track.

Hannah Leffingwell 08:18

No, that's really interesting. Yeah. So I mean, tell me a little bit about— how did it feel to leave that town considering the kind of complicated relationship you had?

Diane Wormser 08:29

A relief! I could not wait, oh my gosh, I, oh my gosh, it was like I could breathe. I lived first year of college in Philadelphia. This was in 1976, and this very colorful, loose cannon of a— she might have been living on the streets, I don't know— sort of found me and made it clear she was a lesbian. We hung out and she kept writing me notes and poetry saying, "Oh, you know, forget about men. They're, you know, you won't get anything compared to what you could get with a woman." And I'm like, yeah, yeah, sure, sure. But she was a little bit of a loose cannon. I just, I wasn't going to do anything with her. But the next year, I moved to Oakland, California, and that was far enough away from anybody that I knew. I basically cut ties with people that I knew in high school— well, most of them— and how naive was I?

I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area not knowing that was the gay ground zero at the time. It didn't take long before I found out oh, you know, that was like an everyday experience, and I tapped into lesbian community in several ways, primarily through the women's music. At the time was very— I didn't really go to bars early on, it was women's music concerts, and there were groups, and interest groups, and cafes, things like that. Olivia Records had started a few years before I arrived so they were blooming and really becoming a powerful presence. I felt like, I felt at home, I felt like that was the mystery all through high school of, you know, trying to be something that I wasn't. And here I was, I could just breathe and be. Even though I was not initially in a relationship, I didn't come out because I fell in love. I came out because that just felt like where I belonged. I had wished for a girlfriend for a long time and it didn't happen and I finally slept with a friend. And that wasn't a good idea. So the actual experience, I think I was still out despite that first awkward, unpleasant experience. It was several years later that I started my first real relationship.

Hannah Leffingwell 09:05

So how did you feel about different words, like, at that moment when you've moved across the country? You know you're attracted to women, you've befriended gay men in your hometown, and you go to Oakland and you have this extensive women's community, this extensive lesbian community, and it's the 70s so you have Women's Lib going on. So what's the, I mean how are you kind of piecing together the different words about your identity, or about the way you feel about your sexuality in that moment?

Diane Wormser 11:49

Well at that time, the word dyke was being reclaimed. In the sixties, it had been a derogatory or earlier it was a derogatory term. We were reclaiming it. Gay men were reclaiming uh— women and men— okay, we're reclaiming being sexually open and sexually free. It was the beginning of— well, sort of the peak of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. So identified as a lesbian, as a dyke, as a woman who loves women. You know the spelling was W-O-M-Y-N, cause we didn't— you know, there was a presence of lesbian feminist separatists who didn't, who wanted to separate and not do things with men. I appreciated women-only spaces, but I didn't entirely feel comfortable with saying, "I want to be away from all men, because my father was a good man. I love my brother, I have cousins, you know, I didn't have very many male friends but I didn't want to say "all men are bad." But I did appreciate the separate spaces at times. There were women who literally created communities to only live on a land with women and no men allowed. I feel bad for any of them who gave birth to boys because then difficult choices came up. And I don't know how all these communities settled those predicaments. Even the— I'm skipping ahead— but later, when I lived in New York City, I went to the Michigan Womyn's Festival. Women who had children who were male, at a certain age, the male children were not welcome. So that's sticky, that's difficult, and can be solved in many different ways. And again, because of my Unitarian upbringing of being inclusive, it's not my tendency to be excluding people, you know, for long periods of time. Or all environments.

Hannah Leffingwell 14:15

So you're in California in the mid seventies.

Diane Wormser 14:25

Yes. '77 through '80. And during that time I became politically active, I was culturally very active. Mayor Moscone and Councilman Harvey Milk were murdered by Dan White, and the murder itself was troubling. Then during the trial, Dan White claimed that eating Twinkies created sort of a temporary insanity. And when he was acquitted, it created an eruption of upset in the gay and lesbian community and I was living in Oakland, which is across across the Bay from San Francisco. I watched live coverage of the riots. I was afraid to go in but I certainly felt the anger that people— I mean, literally people were setting, turning over fire, turning over

police cars and setting them on fire and just, it was just an outpouring of— not so much for Mayor Moscone but because Harvey Milk, was— you know, the justice was not done.

Hannah Leffingwell 15:46

So you say you were politically engaged that time but you didn't want to be engaged in that way. So what did your political engagement look like?

Diane Wormser 15:57

Marches, learning— well, I was new to political engagement. So if there were demonstrations against sexism, against hatred, hatred towards lesbian and gays, those things started, so I would go to fundraisers and contribute. Not as much in person, it became more interesting when I graduated college and left the Bay Area, my political interest. I did a lot of reading. One of the formative books that I read was Adrienne Rich's book, "Of Woman Born." And she's a poet, she's a beautiful poet. This book was actually the history of Obstetrics and how it was taken from Midwives, from laypeople, and institutionalized and being carried out by men. That was a real, just burning awakening for me about that male prerogative. Not men personally, but that men should handle those things and how this was just for childbirth, but how it extended through so many layers of life in our culture.

Hannah Leffingwell 15:46

So you were becoming more politically engaged but something changed when you left? And you left for New York, right, that was the next place you went?

Diane Wormser 17:48

Yes. I graduated from college in California; I decided to pursue an art career in New York City, moved to New York.

Hannah Leffingwell 17:57

What kind of art were you pursuing?

Diane Wormser 18:00

I was a fine artist. I did mixed media drawings, mixed media sculpture. Not large pieces, they were more intimate. Often, they were rather vague. They weren't literal stories. I like the idea of offering provocative images, putting them together and letting the viewer create their own story, their own meaning. Often using the face— I loved using techniques that were based on indigenous fabrication. So fabrication is how do you put things together. So I didn't use glue or nails, I would tie, I would join things together.

Hannah Leffingwell 19:03

Were you doing a specific thing with your art when you got to New York? Or did you kind of want to see what would happen when you went to the city? Was there something that drew you

to the city as far as the art world, or was it community, or was it politics? I mean, why did you choose to go to New York?

Diane Wormser 19:18

The reason I chose New York City at that time, in my younger years— I no longer feel this way— but I felt like I'm going to pick the hardest city in the world to do art and if I could do it there, I could do it anywhere. Looking back on that, that's a mistaken view. Do it the hard way. So I wanted to pursue my art career in New York City. It was a big place and it was an extremely exciting place to be. And it was very easy to connect with lesbian community in New York City, although culturally it was very different from the lesbian community in California. Lesbian community, my experience of lesbian community in California was in Northern California, in the Bay Area, it was much more culturally diverse. It was more open minded. There were a lot of discussions, challenges were not considered personal violence. New York City seemed a little bit more segregated. Latinas stayed with Latinas, African American women hung out with African American women and I mostly hung out with white women. It seemed weird, and I didn't— there were a few opportunities to mix it up a little bit. In later years in— so I moved to New York City in 1980 and I believe the the Gay Community Center opened in the mid eighties. So there probably was more interaction and a little bit less rigid siphoning of the different communities at the at the Gay Community Center.

[Crosstalk]— so one of the things that that led me to a little bit more diverse experiences was the Lesbian Herstory Archives. I was living on 91st and Amsterdam, and on the corner of 92nd and Amsterdam was Womanbooks, which was not only a bookstore, I was reading voraciously, but it was also acting as a small community center. There were events there, readings, art, you know, art displayed and I think it was through there that I found that a block down 92nd Street towards Broadway was the Lesbian Herstory Archives. And I started volunteering there. And that was a more diverse group of women, and including older lesbians. Mabel Hampton in particular was, I believe, in her seventies or approaching eighties at that time, and that really awakened— you know, talking with Mabel— not me personally, we would all— there were volunteer nights so there would be half a dozen or two, maybe a dozen and a half women doing various things in, Joan and Deb's apartment. Became, you know, sort of overtaking their apartment; it was less and less living space, and more and more archive space. And while we were all doing our things there would be conversations, and just hearing Mabel talk about what it was like to— so if she was in her seventies in the 1980s then 40 years earlier in the 1940s she was in her thirties— and hearing about how in New York City, what that culture was like, and I'm sure she predominantly was in African American lesbian culture at that time. It just was wonderful. It just really opened my eyes that the life that I was living then had a context; it wasn't something that we just made up by ourselves. We came from a legacy of sisters, aunts, grandmas, not by blood, but you know, to me, Mabel was like a grandma, a lesbian grandma. It was great to know that there were women, the age of my, you know, she was halfway between my mother and my grandmother.

I think that's one of the reasons why I became so interested in this project because, not that my experience is so special, but I think women who are not of my generation should hear about what it was like to live in New York City in the eighties. It was— one of the things that I'd really like to share is that it was dangerous to be out. It wasn't, it didn't feel as dangerous to be out in California, but New York City, it was physically— there was danger of being physically assaulted because of my sexuality. And so wanting to somehow visually signal to lesbians that I'm lesbian but not to bring on that violence. I hope women are not experiencing today, it was an everyday experience at that time. And I learned, I'm rather petite, you know I was 5'2 at my tallest and I developed a walk like I was the biggest MF motherfucking, you know, I don't know, badass person. Just to keep people— men who wanted to like show me what they could do for me— keep them away from me. I didn't want to be, I was always— not that I'm as attractive or sexy that it would cling to that, I don't think it was men catcalling "give me a smile", or I don't think that's because a woman is pretty, it's because the guy's saying, I can make you feel awkward and I'm going to do it. That's not just for lesbians, it's any woman. But if a man kind of smells that I might be a lesbian it was "Here baby, let me show you, you'll never want to go do it with a woman again." And it's a violence, it was a violence.

So in California there was— I think Pat Califia came up with a kerchief code. This color kerchief meant one interest, that color kerchief met another interest. It wasn't quite as simple as that, but somehow having short hair, wearing more gender fluid clothing might announce in a subtle enough way to a lesbian, but not set off alarm bells to men who would try to "correct me" into what they wanted me to be. But the danger also created— I mean the silver lining to that, as unpleasant as it was to be on alert and always looking behind me, and we would travel in packs for self protection. If anyone became known to me as lesbian, she was part of my tribe and I felt part of her tribe. I felt an incredible feeling of connectedness and belonging that I don't feel as much today when I travel in lesbian communities. I use the word tribal, did I say, it was like being in a tribe I love. I love that experience. It was perhaps self protection, us against them, which overall I'm not in favor of having an us against them approach to life, but there was a part of it that felt good to me.

Hannah Leffingwell 27:39

And is that how you felt at the Lesbian Herstory Archives? I mean, what was the feeling of that specific community?

Diane Wormser 27:47

I could be anybody. I can present as any kind of a lesbian and it didn't matter. We were all together, and different, for a common purpose: to save and memorialize things that normally

were just sent to the trash, that the lives of regular women would be something that could be saved. That it wasn't just about the famous lesbians, that every day lesbians lives— I learned about working class women of the fifties and the way, the struggle to survive and the difficulties. It made my existence in the eighties of New York City seem like a cakewalk compared to the dangers, not only a physical violence but of economic disadvantage because if you're a butch and dressing like a man it's really hard to find a decent way to make a living. It's much more unacceptable than it is today. It's not completely acceptable but it seems more. People are talking about gender fluidity today in a way that we were not in the eighties. In fact, my generation, my peers, were so enraptured with the feminist vision that we were quite harsh towards women who enjoyed or lived butch-femme styles of living. I think, I hope it's more accepted and embraced today. I actually think a lot about people who are transgender or gender fluid today because the way they're treated by us today is how I felt I was treated in the eighties so I object to treating them badly. I think we should treat them as part of our own because anything being different is rejected in this society. We really need to make room and push hard to enjoy and appreciate the diversity. Just because somebody lives differently than I do or feels differently about their body than I do is not in my or their benefit to judge and say you're wrong or exclude them, you know. So I wish for more inclusion. There seems to be more inclusion for lesbians and gay men in the broader society— in some places, in New Jersey, maybe in New York, not in Alabama, or Mississippi, or some of the more conservative areas elsewhere, Utah comes to mind. But I think we need to be the standard bearers and the example of being, not we need to, I wish. I wish we were the role models for being inclusive.

Hannah Leffingwell 31:04

And when you say "we" are you saying "as lesbians"?

Diane Wormser 31:07

We lesbians. We lesbians and gay men.

Hannah Leffingwell 31:11

Is there something that you felt like you were carrying the torch of in the eighties as lesbians? And is there something you feel like you could have carried better? Do you know what I'm asking? Like in that moment, for the community that you were in, in New York City, for your social circle, and the political community you were in, do you feel like there's something that you really did well? And do you feel like there's something that you look back on, and you're like, "Man, I wish we had done better with that thing?"

Diane Wormser 31:41

So I cannot claim to have been a part of it, but when— so in the early eighties, AIDS was blossoming, and we didn't call it AIDS. It was called in derogatory terms, like "the gay plague,"

"the gay cancer" and I give other lesbians and gay men who fought so hard to put research on how to treat the illness, identify who's getting it and how to get it, how they get it, how to treat it, and not bury it. At the time Ronald Reagan was the President and he never said the word AIDS. He did not put any funding into exploring what is this and how do we address it, and out of that movement came the expression "Silence = Death." And I think that was— I can't claim that I was part of it but I admire that that was something that really was done well. Because it's true, if we are not present and accounted for then it's so easy to just wipe us off the map of the earth. That was very powerful. It was sometimes done violently, it was sometimes done creatively. So the creative expression of this was the AIDS quilt. So artists, not just not just professional artists, but people with their own passion of grief, of losing somebody created something beautiful. It was put together in the power of seeing all these pieces put together to see how many lives, interesting lives, were lost, really was so powerful. As an artist, I was an artist, but I also felt myself to be a lesbian artist. I didn't always use specifically lesbian themes, I joined a women's collective gallery and we put on shows. We helped each other. I don't think my art really contributed much, but it was— trying to think what I might have done better, what I did wrong, what I did not do well.

Hannah Leffingwell 34:24

Just as a reflection on the moment you were living in, right, like the world in which you were swimming at that moment. Well, I guess that a better way of asking is like what was the challenge you faced in the community?

Diane Wormser 34:39

Within the lesbian community?

Hannah Leffingwell 34:40

Yeah, what was the challenge with community at that time, with belonging, and with kind of caring for each other?

Diane Wormser 34:39

Well there was not enough inclusiveness and I struggled with that. Because again, there was still some leftover feeling of we should do women only, we should keep men out, and very few lesbians of the time were thinking about conceiving children. I knew women who had children from a heterosexual marriage. If I said to my— I didn't feel free to say to my partner "I'd really like to have a baby" and I thought to myself, I just was so bereft that the woman that I loved— my first relationship was in New York City for four years— I loved her and I felt like, damn, just because we're women, I can't marry, I hungered for that. I don't know, that was not something that was spoken much about. I wonder, you know, with the feeling of let's make women only spaces, that must have been a conflict for women who had sons, I know that that occurred on the land for Michigan Womyn's Festival. There wasn't much talk about women who were extremely

butchie, maybe some of those women were more gender fluid. Now we have a word, "gender fluid". Trans, transexual was a much dirtier word back then so I think we were politically and socially immature at that time. We didn't talk about those issues. Yeah, I love women. But what about do I really love how I express myself as a gender? It was, I mean, guess we were part of a process. I was part of a process exploring women only functions. Certainly the Michigan Womyn's Festival gave me a huge insight into how much I do without even realizing it, to be self protective in a mixed gender environment. It was lovely to feel free to go naked and not worry about was I "asking for it" and I also learned the value of not getting sunburned on my breasts, that hurts like hell. So put your sunscreen on. [Laughs]— go ahead, show those beauties, but you know, take good care of 'em.

Hannah Leffingwell 37:54

So you mentioned your first partner, kind of as you're talking about this, this larger question, but maybe we can just focus in a little bit on what your romantic life was like during this time in New York City. It sounds like your first major relationship with a woman—

Diane Wormser 38:08

Yeah, my first long term relationship. We met at a women's festival, we were both volunteering. And she was just the cutest thing, beautiful. And I was a poor, starving artist, and she liked the fact that I was an artist, and we just had a lovely blossoming relationship. I did the U-Haul thing and lived with her soon after we met, and we explored being lesbians together. She was out already but I don't think she'd had many long relationships. So it was our first major relationship for both of us and it was a lovely experience. It turned out not to be the right relationship for both of us. After four years, we broke up. But we as a couple really enjoyed the social whirlwind of lesbian culture at that time, and the tribe and there just seemed to be dozens of women we would run into at different events and became friends with easily. You know, it was a very exciting time.

Hannah Leffingwell 39:29

So we're in New York City. You're with her for four years in New York City. Did you have any other relationships while you were in the city?

Diane Wormser 39:38

No, no. After we broke up, it was her apartment and I had to leave. And, you know, 1985-86 was a tough, tough year real estate wise. So after moving, I don't know, after moving six times in less than a year, I just got tired of New York City and I moved to New Jersey. And while I was in New Jersey, I met the next woman who I had my next relationship with. This was a woman who was Latina. She had had a child from a heterosexual marriage and it was the first time that I lived with a woman with a child. And these bubbling feelings of wanting a forever relationship, wanting to have a home and to nest, just, you know, another portion of that just blossomed for

me. I think we had just started living together and her daughter, who at the time was 11 years old, she was like a long legged pony. You know, this beautiful child, she sat on my lap, and I'm holding her and she put her head on my shoulder, and I was rocking her like a baby. It just, in that moment I realized I would like to be a mom, I'd like to be a parent. I enjoyed it immensely, living with a young person. I was not a parent to my lover's daughter, I was definitely a significant adult. But she would have none of it that I would be, you know, be a parent. And that relationship ended with domestic abuse. It became a psychologically abusive relationship pretty soon into the relationship and I probably stayed more to protect and kind of buffer her daughter. Which was silly, because she had been learning how to protect herself way before I came along and I really couldn't stop some of the things but I tried to influence.

That was another thing, actually, that was never discussed at that time in the lesbian community, is domestic violence, domestic abuse, abusive relationships. That's much better discussed today. It was shocking to me to be in this, to realize that I was being abused. I didn't have the words for it, nobody else seemed to be experiencing it, I didn't know how to talk about it. I knew there were weird things, like she's insisting that I'm too coddled and too attached to my family. She wanted me to distance from my family. Then she wanted me to distance from my dear friends, then she would taunt me with how many people find her so attractive, and I'm lucky that she's with me because I'm so fat, lazy and stupid. And I don't really think I was any of those. But I might— so the piece where I could hook into an abusive relationship is that I had a terrible feeling of, I didn't have a good self esteem. So it hooked into my fear of, wow, she must be right. You know, I am lucky, I should take whatever little crumbs I have here. It must be easier for any woman to enter into an abusive relationship because I think so many women have that lack of self esteem. I don't know why some have an abusive relationship and some don't, or maybe some have it and they don't realize it, and they don't speak it.

But these are things that are much easier to talk about today. There's many more things in the media affirming that this is something that's worth addressing, that it is a bad thing, that it's not just oh, you know, you got to keep your man happy. But this wasn't a man, this was a woman. I was so woman-centric, it never occurred to me that this could happen in a lesbian relationship. That shocked me down to my soul. I mean, it took one incident, one incident of physical violence and I just was done, cause I realized I at least had enough self confidence to say, I deserve to be treated as good as a dog and a dog shouldn't be harmed that way. Because I did not have— my perception was there may have been places I could have gone. But I didn't have— I was so frightened and I was so broken down by the abuse, I was afraid to go to the police because I felt if I pissed her off, I knew that she had an illegal gun. I felt literally that I could be threatened with my life. I thought domestic abuse organizations, as far as my perception, they seem to only address heterosexual women who are being abused by men. I'm sure there are instances where women are abusing men but there was no indication that I would be served. There's a book now, there's actually a book about a woman who talked about her abusive relationship. I have it. I

started reading the first 12 pages, I'm going to have to take it in steps because it's still tricky for me to digest this. It was so troubling at the time that I actually said, forget it. I may love women, but I'm off them, forget it. And I, you know, I started dating a man and eventually married him, and had children with him. So I got my dream, I have children. That relationship also became— it's funny, because back to back, that relationship also became abusive. What I mistook for— so let me back up— the previous two major relationships with women, both of them, both women left me for another woman. And I'm very monogamous. I just, you know, I just want one. And so okay, it can't happen with women, and I got abused by a woman, I'll try a man. Well, what I did not pick up early on, was behavior that was, now when I look back on it, was obsessive. To me at the time, I was so vulnerable, and so wanting forever, that I interpreted his behavior as devoted. It's a lovely thing, to think I have somebody who's so devoted to me, but it was really obsessive. And the other side of the coin of obsession is control.

But I didn't see that until years into the relationship. So I found myself in an abusive relationship again. I went into a major depression, and when my kids were very, very young, went for treatment, was determined not to become a danger to myself, or my children. And in that process, not only taking medication, but also my doctor was very wise and said, "Okay, there are drugs, but you also have to do therapy. You can't do just one, drugs are not going to solve it." And I did go into therapy. It was not the first time but I was lucky to be with a therapist who challenged me to look into what part of my way of being and my expectations was part of that unhealthy dynamic. And I appreciate it because it must take a lot of guts for therapists to say, okay, yeah, this person's doing this bad [unclear] but what are you doing? How are you feeding into this cycle? So that was a real revelation. And I began trying to heal and change those negative things that I do in a relationship. And I'll tell you right now, the things that come to mind is, I looked for somebody else to affirm that I'm beautiful. I looked outside of myself to feel loved, lovable. I judged my success based on whether others approved of me. I mean these are all setups, and I don't know that abusers, I don't know that my abusers did it consciously. They were just running their own, automatic and unchallenged shtick. I got off topic, didn't I? [Crosstalk]—

Hannah Leffingwell 47:24

No this is exactly on topic, it's just making me think, how did you experience sharing this with people? I mean, both with the woman you were with before your ex husband, but also your ex husband? Were you sharing it with your friends? I mean, to what extent were you aware that what was happening was wrong? And then how were you sharing it with people? And did that change in the second relationship?

Diane Wormser 50:26

Well, with the relationship with the abusing woman, I didn't share a lot. I didn't talk to people a lot because I didn't really know that it was wrong or that it was bad, or that I didn't belong in a

situation like that. After the attack, she tried to strangle me. Luckily I was stronger than her and held her off, and when I got— I mean, I fled once as soon as I could. That was such a shocking experience and such a traumatic experience that I did share with intimate friends. The two friends that I'm thinking of just showed up so beautifully to help me and help me regain my equilibrium and affirm that it was wrong. Not only that, but everything that led up to, you know, all the unhealthy things that were wrong. But I didn't have any larger acknowledgement or assistance. So there probably— so that attack occurred in '89, by the time things got very heated.

Well first of all, with the man that I married, my best friend who had been through this whole thing with the woman said— when I was engaged— I don't see it, but I guess if you want to be married to him, okay. So from the very beginning there were signals that other people were picking up that I didn't. But I was just going to go ahead with this. I was more vocal when it happened with my husband. Not so much because he was a man. I think because I had been through this before. I just, no, I just wasn't going to live the rest of my life under that spell, that just was not going to happen. When a particularly threatening experience happened, I knew that the relationship, the marriage was going to end.

I knew I was going— I was sorting through. I had asked for separations a couple of times before. He'd delay me and say, "Give me a month, I'll show you how different I am." Of course he was never. He could keep up the good behavior for a week or two but a month? By the end of the 30 days, I'd say well, it's not different enough. So I moved out of the bedroom into another bedroom in the house. And one night he, middle of the night, I woke up and he's on top of me and I'm just frozen in fear, like is he gonna rape me? What's he going to do? And I just said, "You have to leave. You have to, you know, get off of me. You have to go. Please go," and he did eventually. But soon after that he was so angry and upset— actually, that happened second. The first thing that happened is the first night that I moved out into another bedroom, he was not hurt and crying, he was angry. He kept me up all night long, challenging me, asking me, you know, pushing, face into my face. And I thought to myself— excuse me— if I call the police, he'll rip the phone cause this was a landline. This is 1990. No, 2001 or 2002. Sorry, early 2003. So, many years over a decade later from the first abusive relationship, and I was afraid that if I tried call 911, he would rip the phone out of the out of the wall and I wouldn't be able to say where we're from, where's the call, please come help me, I'm at this address. I was going to walk out, I had my car keys, he blocked me.

I didn't know at the time that it was considered domestic violence, preventing someone from leaving. I was just literally up all night and in fact the younger son, I have two sons, the younger son came down and said, "Mommy, Daddy, you have to stop fighting, I can't sleep." So the kids were aware of this. So next morning, I brought them to pre-K and brought them to school, and I went to the police department and said, "If you get a 911 call but you don't hear anything, like what do you do? Do you know where to go?" And the dispatcher, thank goodness, recognized

what the hell I was asking. And she said, "You know, wait a minute, I think you should talk to the sergeant." The Sergeant brought me into a room alone, and said, "Tell me why you're asking this." I burst into tears, and told him what had happened that night before. And this officer— so he, you know, we'd come a long way, baby, from 1986 to 2003. This suburban police department must have been trained about identifying domestic abuse, and supporting and helping. I mean, he heard this as a— I'm sorry— so he asked me if I wanted to file charges. I said no. I was afraid; I didn't know what that meant. So he said, "Well, let me make—" I don't know what the technical term is, "a report." A report was filed. He gave me the report number. And actually, I didn't know it at the time but that was, it was a— I did not have a lawyer at the time, I had not filed for divorce. That was a very important thing that happened for later. Once I filed for divorce, this man became, he just escalated. And I was, by the time I filed, I did have a lawyer. I was informed that it would be best if I stayed in the house, even if it was uncomfortable, because if I left the house, it would affect my chances of getting custody of the kids and possibly getting the house. So we were in the house together for nine months. And it exponentially escalated over those nine months to ridiculous, ridiculous.

We were both counseled by a court ordered mediator that we should not be fighting in front of the children, that we should keep it out of their lives. He was constantly instigating conflict in front of them, constantly. It was very difficult. I finally, towards the end, learned the discipline of just going stone face and saying, "Have your lawyer talk to my lawyer." And he'd try again, I'd say, "I have nothing to say, have your lawyer talk to my lawyer." It took a lot of learning to get to that point. But it was very difficult. He would— I had to document everything. So by email we made an agreement about doing vacations. I had filed for divorce, he knew that this was going to court, we had not been granted the divorce yet, and I, in writing, in email, documented that he said, okay, I could take the children for this week in the summer. And I went out of state, he knew where we were going, I participated in making sure that if I had the children with me, no matter where I was, the children got to talk to him twice a day cause I felt that the problem was between me and him. The problem was not between him and the kids. Although, there were some unhealthy things going on there too, but I did not feel like it was my place to stop my children from having a relationship with their father, as long as he wasn't harming them. So I gave him access, I always had their father have access to the children by telephone twice a day. And during this week-long vacation, he basically said, halfway through, "You better come back. I expect you to come back with children." I'm like no, I have the whole week. And he started threatening me and I was really chilled to the bone by it. I was frightened. So the rest of that vacation I spent— when the kids were in bed, I think both of them were asleep by eight o'clock— I spent the rest of the evenings on the phone to domestic violence hotlines, what do I do? How do I deal with this? And by the end of the week, I had a plan. I came back a day early, earlier than expected. With the agreement of my parents I dropped the kids off an hour away from the marital home and just said— I mean, they knew there was conflict in the family, I just said, you know how sometimes two kids fight and the teacher has to mediate— I didn't use the

word mediate, they didn't understand that— the teacher tries to help them? Well, we're gonna, daddy and I have some conflicts, and we need a Judge to help us sort out what to do about it. So I left the kids there and I went to the police department in my hometown and filed a complaint. Within hours he was, you know, removed from the house. He was instructed to "Pack a bag", and there was a temporary Restraining Order. So I did get a lot of support and assistance. As a heterosexually married woman, the agency that I worked with— is it okay if I name it?

Hannah Leffingwell 1:01:37

Yeah, I don't see why not, I mean if you're comfortable with it.

Diane Wormser 1:01:39

So I was helped by Rachel's Coalition. It's part of the Jewish Family Services in New Jersey of Metro West. Rachel's Coalition is specifically for domestic violence. I have supported them, I've given donations cause I felt that they not only helped me after this conflict, because I was afraid that he might come at work, which is something that happens in domestic violence. I was afraid that he was going to abscond with the children, and I just got a lot of really good advice, and information. They have recently affirmed to me that they absolutely serve and assist couples of any gender. So I'm thankful that that does exist. Maybe there were groups that existed before, but I had never heard of it. Wow, I have to say a lot of the friends that I had, when I was with the woman who abused me, were shocked and very uncomfortable with me dating a man. At that time, so this is in late eighties and early nineties, that was, I felt as if— nobody came out and said it quite that way, but it's as if I was a defector, as if I was a traitor to lesbians, and most of the friends dropped away. That was a really big loss, a really sad thing.

So when I did actually get divorced, first couple of years, I didn't identify as anything. I didn't want to have relationships, I just needed to heal and sort this out and really felt that I would rather not be in a relationship at all rather than to duplicate again, what I had done twice before. But when it did come time, and I did realize that really where I felt comfortable in a lesbian community and I would prefer being in a lesbian relationship, I had to start from scratch. It was here in New Jersey, and it was many years later, 13 years later, in 2005. And New Jersey's more spread out. New York City, there's so many people it's pretty easy to find groups within a very small geographic area to plug into. New Jersey that took a little bit more driving, but I was willing to do it. I didn't feel as a negative vibe when I said "I'm a lesbian and I have children from a marriage." I think there was a more negative vibe towards women that I knew who had children when I was out in New York City in the eighties. So by the early 2000s and mid-2000s, I think things had come along thankfully. And thankfully, was it 2013 that we got marriage equality?

Hannah Leffingwell 1:04:13

Yeah, 2015.

Diane Wormser 1:04:19
2015.

Hannah Leffingwell 1:04:25

How did that feel? I mean, cause you must have watched the process of people fighting for it, and then it finally getting passed, what was that like for you to see that?

Diane Wormser 1:04:19

Amazing. Amazing. This was, I mean dreams from 30 years earlier coming true. That we are on the map. Just that we are imprinted in the culture. It was wonderful, wonderful. In 2013, I was not in a long term relationship. At the time, I had a much more solid feeling about how to be healthy in a relationship and what I wanted in a healthy relationship, and I was lucky enough to find the love of my life in 2014. We didn't know immediately that we would get married, but by 2018 we got married. And it was just a pure joy. My father had passed away but we got married in my mother's presence, in my family's presence, and I just felt as embraced by society, or at least most of society then, as if I were heterosexual.

I just, that is something I'm frightened that it could be threatened as abortion is being threatened now. I am in favor of fighting for women's right to have abortion, because if they erode that, they will erode— they'll come for our marriage, they will erode everything that the— they meaning super conservative forces— that feel that we should not be on this planet. I think we should not be silent about this at all.

Hannah Leffingwell 1:07:13

Yeah, I think it's an interesting kind of intergenerational moment to live through because for your generation, you know, marriage was not even something you could really dream of when you were first in your relationships with women. You wanted it, right, but it wasn't really something you could talk about, or even political—

Diane Wormser 1:07:32

There was no way of even imagining that it could happen.

Hannah Leffingwell 1:07:36

Right, right. For me, let's see, marriage was passed by the Supreme Court when I was a senior in college. Well, the end of my senior year of college. So I had grown up with the debate over gay marriage, which was really vitriolic and painful to live through. And then it passed right when I finished college. So for my generation, I think we kind of could enter our early adulthood with the knowledge that we could marry our partners and I legally married my partner last December. But what was interesting is we chose to do that, in part under the shadow of this fear that it would get taken away actually. There's a sad way in which I think right now the generations are

kind of merging on this feeling of, you know, you can't take these rights for granted. And I'm kind of in that middle where I remember how hard it was to pass marriage and I also have benefited from it, right? I think there's an even younger generation who doesn't remember the debates over gay marriage, right? They just remember it being legal. So it's crazy how quickly that changed.

Diane Wormser 1:08:47

Well thank goodness for Lesbian Herstory Archives. When I was young, I had the benefit of hearing about, at the knees of these older women, sitting on the floor and listening to how things were. I hope younger generations continue to share. I mean, I want to hear about what younger women are experiencing now. But I hope that they will also listen to how it was. So how lovely to grow up thinking, we can just take for granted that anybody— but the difference, you know, the thing that is sad, young people in high school now, in some high schools can come out as gay or lesbian but a young person comes out as trans or gender fluid, they are at risk. Their lives are at risk. And that's where we were, my generation was when I was in high school, our lives were at risk if we came out. So I think we need to take that seriously and embrace that struggle. When people are losing families over being true to who they are, that's exactly what we were saying in 1975, in 1977, in 1980. Yeah, I need to be true to myself, I might lose my family and it's tremendously painful.

Hannah Leffingwell 1:10:21

Well, it feels like we've come all the way full circle because we started with your family accepting you when you came out. We came all the way around to you marrying the love of your life and having your mother there. So it's kind of a lovely, hopeful note to end on.

Diane Wormser 1:10:37

Can I tell you a funny story to end on? So my sons are in their mid and early 20s and I just spoke to one of them an hour before we came on, and I asked him, "Can you tell me anything about what it was like growing up? You know, like in high school, having a gay mom, you know, is there anything that affected you or anything you'd like other people to know?" And he said, "Yeah, Mom, you shoulda let me stay up later." Basically, no, he felt no difference. Well, thank you so much for this opportunity to share, and I hope— you know, what, I would really love it if there was a reverse so I would interview you!

Hannah Leffingwell 1:11:27

Yeah, it'd be interesting, wouldn't it?

Diane Wormser 1:11:29

Yeah, that would be great. Yeah, I should listen.

Hannah Leffingwell 1:11:32

Yeah, I'll talk to them. That's the only problem, right, with an oral history is you always want, there's some part of you that wants that beautiful moment of lesbian conversation where you're both kind of telling these rich stories. But there's a reason why we're doing it this way, right, I think it's really important to be able to hear the whole of your story and it was very, very moving and emotional to listen to it. I'm really grateful that you were brave enough to, I mean, agree to do this project at all, and then brave enough to share all of the stories you shared today, which I think are so important. And as you said earlier, you know, the point of the Archives was and is to preserve all lesbian stories, right? Not just, you know, somebody who's considered famous for whatever reason. And I think your story is a really good example of why that's important because there's so many people out there who, including myself, who listen to this story and think, oh, this reminds me of the of this thing I went through, and I'm not the only one who went through it or, you know, oh maybe it'll be okay, that I lived through this thing because someone else lived through it too.

Diane Wormser 1:12:35

I hope so. I hope so.

Hannah Leffingwell 1:11:39

Is there anything else you want to share before we sign off?

Diane Wormser 1:12:42

No, thank you very much, Hannah, you've been great.

Hannah Leffingwell 1:12:45

Thanks so much.