



**Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory
Of
Moni Usasz**

An Interview
Conducted by
Brianna Suslovic
5/25/2022

Collection: The Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project

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LEOHP Interview

Interviewee: Moni Usasz

Interviewer: Brianna Suslovic

Date: 05/25/2022

Brianna Suslovic 00:03

Good afternoon. Today is May 25th, 2022. We're recording an oral history this afternoon with me, Brianna Suslovic, talking with Moni Usasz about her life history. This is a Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project interview, which is a project with the Lesbian Herstory Archives. I'm recording from Illinois and Moni is recording from Nebraska. So to get us started, could you let us know where and when you were born?

Moni Usasz 00:31

I was born in Nebraska, raised on a farm, November 5, 1951.

Brianna Suslovic 00:40

And could you tell me a little bit about what it was like growing up in Nebraska?

Moni Usasz 00:46

Well okay, as a lesbian— I didn't even know the word. So I didn't know I was a lesbian until later. Growing up in Nebraska was pretty good. High school was terrible.

Brianna Suslovic 01:00

Aww.

Moni Usasz 01:00

But before then, we were outside. You had siblings, you played, you have animals to take care of and play with them.

Brianna Suslovic 01:11

Mhm.

Moni Usasz 01:14

In terms of lesbian, I mean, I never had any same-sex crushes. Never, you know, not until college. I ran into "Sisterhood is Powerful" the end of my first year, just happened on it in the library at college. It sort of gave me new words and new ways of looking at things. Lesbian sisterhood. My first political action was collecting signatures for the ERA in the dorm cafeteria.

Brianna Suslovic 01:42

Wow. I'm curious too, in terms of that experience in college, how that gave you access to maybe other lesbian spaces?

Moni Usasz 01:54

Well, I married after my second year of college, and then I finally had that crush and fell in love and told her. It was totally unrequited but it was quite a ride. I guess I wasn't on campus during all of my young lesbian life, but it seemed like campus was the place where stuff was happening. Some of that was some professors that had come to town who were lesbians. So the Women's Resource Center on campus was a great place to meet women and to just hang out. They sponsored events, they sponsored a lesbian rap group for I think a number of years. I remember the year that probably both semesters we just told coming out stories, you know, and it was kind of a rotating group, rotating number of women who would come but a lot of times it was 15 at least so you know, lots of stuff.

Brianna Suslovic 02:52

That's so interesting. Yeah, I think the physical space you're describing is so interesting to sort of imagine back to—

Moni Usasz 03:00

Then feminist circles meant— were getting more lesbian. I mean, I was involved a little bit with NOW, and Nebraska Coalition for Women. Then Deidre McCalla is a singer, and she played at the Zoo Bar, among other places. She was lovers with Sarah Hoagland who was a professor at the University. So through them, I ended up at a Midwest feminist conference near Omaha. That's sort of where I kind of pulled it all together, and came out, left my husband. Then I had— my first lover was in Omaha, and we went to Orielle, O-R-I-E-L-L-E, I think. It was a women's space and a group of women who brought in performers, and well, brought in lesbian performers. That's where I heard Adrienne Rich read poetry.

Brianna Suslovic 03:56

Wow. Yeah, that's so exciting. Yeah, I think just hearing about the sort of creative nature of the spaces that you were entering during this time period is so exciting as someone who feels personally very connected to the arts as well. I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about any connection you have to the Lesbian Herstory Archives specifically?

Moni Usasz 04:23

Well, I remember I've been reading *Lesbian Connection* for 30 years at this point, if not longer, forty years maybe. And I remember when she first was getting it started, and there'd be little blurbs in the magazine, and how she had boxes under a bed in her apartment. I've already talked with the Archive about donating the originals for the Lincoln Legion of Lesbians. The interesting

thing, it made me feel at home because when I asked if they had an archivist on staff, she— the woman I talked to on the phone— said, "We're all archivists" and that was so totally a feminist perspective. It was like, okay great.

Brianna Suslovic 05:10

That's awesome—

Moni Usasz 05:11

I got a friend who—

Brianna Suslovic 05:11

That's great.

Moni Usasz 05:12

Yeah, [note: she and I were members] of LLL [Lincoln Legion of Lesbians]. She's hopefully writing a herstorical piece on it.

Brianna Suslovic 05:20

Great. I'm wondering if we can talk a little bit more about LLL. I'm like fascinated by it and I love the abbreviation [laughs]— so could you tell me a little more about your experience with them?

Moni Usasz 05:31

Well, I think it started just with hanging out with a bunch of lesbians. People were, women were saying "We need a group focused on lesbians, not, you know, feminist stuff, something just ours." It must have been the '76, '77, I'm not really sure. I don't have the papers anymore. And we just got to talking and came up with the name, and we loved it because it was outrageous, and, you know, if it made people worry then that was okay. I have a list of names. Do you want me to read those?

Brianna Suslovic 06:06

Yeah, if you'd like to, that would be great.

Moni Usasz 06:09

It's in no particular order. But the collective was Barbara Bradford, Debbie Alicen, Cheryl Long, Bobby Lacey. She's now known as Morgan Gray. Liz Beu, Cindy McGowan, Julia Stanley, sometimes known as Julia Penelope, and me. So that's kind of how it started. And I remember spending, oh god, a month writing bylaws. I don't know that we ever used them. But we have a copy of them. I guess— oh, go ahead.

Brianna Suslovic 06:45

Yeah, no, I'm thinking about that too, just in terms of how groups form now and the preoccupation or lack of preoccupation with rules that comes along with that formation. So it's interesting now to look back and have that copy but to know that you poured a lot of time into it at the beginning. Yeah. Could you talk a little bit more about, you know, some of the folks you've mentioned, and what the sort of dynamics were in the group?

Moni Usasz 07:11

Well, one of the things that I think— it was a time of— there was just lots going on. It was like discovering the world. It kind of felt like when I figured out I was a lesbian, when I figured out I was a feminist, the world opened up, you know, and it seemed like there were so many things that were possible. So you were running around meeting new women, and trying new things, and doing stuff you'd never thought you were going to do. You know?

Brianna Suslovic 07:41

Yeah, I think I'm also curious about sort of the principles and attitudes that sort of governed the group, maybe related to bylaws, or just related to the attitudes that emerged as you were doing this sort of exploration?

Moni Usasz 07:56

Well, we were feminist, we were wimmin centered, we were feminist. We were women-only for events. But we were open to all women. I mean, and I think, and I know the rationale was that women had been put down too long, and that they needed a space apart from men to kind of truly realize who we were. So that was where that came from. Some of the women were separatist, most of us I would say were not. But we were fine with a womyn only space. Then we also had an educational piece, which was to talk to groups and organizations in the community and present what it was like to be lesbian. It was sort of like being a professional lesbian, you know, walking around and talking.

Brianna Suslovic 08:43

I love that phrase [laughs]— yeah. I'm curious about what those interactions looked like or felt like?

Moni Usasz 08:49

Well, I mean, they felt okay but a lot of that had to do with the folks who asked us to come into a class or the folks that asked us to come. I know we went and we talked to a group at the health department, like social services. We were asked by people who were— people who were supportive. So that helped set up a positive dynamic, you know, so it wasn't like we were going to the Catholic Church and having a conversation. It was more folks that were predisposed, at

least the people who invited us, not necessarily all participants. And a lot of times it was just the really basic questions. The "How did you know you were lesbian?," "What's it like living right now?," you know, "What's your life like?" Just some of those really— it seemed kind of silly at the time, but it was kind of where people were at because a lot of folks in the late seventies, early eighties hadn't met a lesbian, or hadn't met a gay man. That they knew of.

Brianna Suslovic 09:55

Right.

Moni Usasz 09:55

They had, but they just didn't know.

Brianna Suslovic 09:58

Yeah, I think that kind of public education function is like so critical, it seems. Even when I think about now, there's obvious differences, but to do that kind of intervention in Lincoln I think is really like such a powerful thing to have done.

Moni Usasz 10:17

We had a video, "Women Loving Women," and I don't— there were a couple of different ones that I'm not sure which one this one was. But I remember Bobby and Liz took the show on the road, and they went to Kearney and talked in some kind of a women's group. They talked to a class at the University there and then they went all the way out to Scottsbluff and talked to a group of people with folks out there, you know, so that was probably the most traveled we got. Usually it was talking around Lincoln.

Brianna Suslovic 10:54

Yeah, yeah. I think apart from the public education aspect of the work that was happening, it sounds like there was also a real value placed on sort of community building.

Moni Usasz 11:06

One other thing, we also kind of— I guess having the model of Orielle in Omaha, we brought in a lot of entertainers, musicians, speakers, poets, writers [note: into Lincoln]. And this was all done in the day where you called people on the phone. There was a small business, I want to say maybe it was Hot Wire, I don't remember. But through them, you could get hooked up with some of the performers that were coming around. And it was in a sense nowadays, I'm not sure. I don't remember how much money changed hands. I know a lot of times women stayed at one of our houses, you know, that kind of a thing. So it was pretty short. We did a lot of that kind of stuff. We organized three Midwest lesbian feminist conferences.

Brianna Suslovic 12:08

Wow.

Moni Usasz 12:08

One of them was canceled when they figured out we were lesbians. We had to have— we did some security at one because of some publicity.

Brianna Suslovic 12:18

Wow.

Moni Usasz 12:19

Now that just was lesbians staying up late walking around and keeping track and there was nothing that ever happened bad. So wasn't a big deal, but could have been.

Brianna Suslovic 12:29

Yeah.

Moni Usasz 12:30

We were lucky in that we had a little bit of a some steady stream of money coming in [note: regularly]. Tee Corinne, T-E-E C-O-R-I-N-N-E, was a photographer and really focused a lot on lesbian sexuality, she had the "Cunt Coloring Book." And she did a lot—

Brianna Suslovic 12:50

I have a copy of that [laughs]—

Moni Usasz 12:53

Great! She had erotic lesbian photographs and she gave us permission to sell the *Sinister Wisdom* cover, which was a photo of two women, one cradled in the others' arms and they were making love. It's black and white but it's more technical than that in terms of the black and white, I don't know. But *Sinister Wisdom* had been in Lincoln for a couple of years. And so Tee knew Catherine and Harriet. Then she also knew Julia [Stanley] from the University. So I think that was the connection there. But we got letters from women all over the country wanting [note: to buy] that poster.

Brianna Suslovic 13:32

Wow.

Moni Usasz 13:33

So it gave us a little bit of steady cash which I think most new organizations didn't have. That was in—

Brianna Suslovic 13:41

Yeah.

Moni Usasz 13:41

So that—

Brianna Suslovic 13:43

Yeah, that kind of sustainability, I think.

Moni Usasz 13:45

Yeah. And then we, the group probably lasted 10 years. I was really only involved with it for the first three or so. It kind of dwindled down because even as we were looking through the last boxes [note: of saved LLL stuff], there were ones from towards— there were letters from the end from wimmin wanting the poster, and nobody ever filled an order.

Brianna Suslovic 14:08

Mm.

Moni Usasz 14:10

But too late now.

Brianna Suslovic 14:12

Right. Yeah, I think the capacity issues in terms of sustaining a group like that are things that are on the mind of certainly me and groups that I'm in now. But yeah, I think I am really curious about these conferences that were organized too in terms of like, what the content was, or who the speakers were, or what some of the sessions might have been if you can recall.

Moni Usasz 14:41

Too bad, I put every— I don't have anything here. It's either with Morgan getting ready to be written about, or it's down at our Nebraska History Museum. But we didn't have huge name speakers come in. It was more, lots of workshops. So I remember Sidney Spinster came and talked about— why am I thinking of this one? I don't where that came from. But came and talked about using, if you come from money, using your wealth wisely, which was interesting. Not something that was generally talked about in that circle. Pelican Lee came from the Southwest, she was working on uranium mining. And then Pat Dean [note: local] did one on knowing your bodies, you know, and she had speculums to use. One on being a lesbian and being into sports, I mean, it was just kind of a little bit of everything, we usually had some kind of entertainment, some lesbian group, or one woman who came and performed. Usually music but— and it was

almost more, you know, it was still in that teach each other mode as opposed to bring in the experts. So we did some of that too.

Brianna Suslovic 16:18

Yeah, I really love that philosophy. I think, yeah, it's come up a couple of times in our conversation, but this sort of feminist orientation toward decentering expertise is really powerful. I know that we had also briefly spoken about your work with the Nebraska Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Civil Rights and so I'm wondering if you have insights about your work with them.

Moni Usasz 16:46

That was probably around 1982 and it kind of started with an LLL member who had experienced discrimination, either— I don't remember whether it was on the job or in applying for a job. And she talked to the [note: Lincoln] Human Rights Commission. Then at some point some of us put together a handout of examples of discrimination that we'd just come up with in terms of talking to folks. And somehow we ended up before the 1982 city council, and they just passed the issue on to the voters. So all of a sudden, we're like left scrambling, we got to do something, you know. So the coalition was formed. There were co-leaders, a gay man and a lesbian. We called in the [note: allies]— I felt like I'd worked in the peace movement, I'd worked in the women's movement. And I felt like we were calling in our support from them, instead of vice versa, for a change. They came through. Talked to churches, organized testimony at the city council, we canvassed precincts. I remember one gay guy coming back to bring the flyers back to our house after he'd been out canvassing and said that the lady opened the door, and there was literally dueling [note: canvassers], because he was there and somebody from the opposition was there, and they were talking to each other. And she's going— she probably got a lot more, maybe too much information.

Yeah. So I mean, it was a lot of basic organizing. I don't remember, I wasn't doing the fundraising. I don't remember spending a lot of money other than we probably did some ads in the paper and buying the materials to hand out flyers for canvassing. For some reason, I somehow knew I should. I started a book of clippings from that year and it's archived at Nebraska History Museum. So there's just lots of, all the letters to the editor, all the coverage, and the major opposition person was Paul Cameron. He was a faux psychologist. And he pushed the gay men molesting boys in the bathrooms and there was even some kind of a rumor started that something like that had happened, you know, at a mall here.

Brianna Suslovic 19:33

Wow.

Moni Usasz 19:37

I think the difference between then and now is the other side wasn't really organized, you know. But the watch party that we had the night of the voting, or vote tallying, was attended— we were really surprised, we hadn't expected this— was attended by a reporter from a gay rag out of Minneapolis.

Brianna Suslovic 20:00

Wow.

Moni Usasz 20:07

So we were one of the first to actually do this, I think. And Cheryl, Tim and I were on the front cover. We lost by 78% of vote and we'd have lost a lot worse if it had been a few years later probably, during the AIDS crisis.

Brianna Suslovic 20:17

Mhm.

Moni Usasz 20:18

But, and I know, for some folks, that loss was really hard. I know Terry doesn't talk kindly about it at all, my partner, you know, it was a hard thing—

Brianna Suslovic 20:29

Mhm.

Moni Usasz 20:30

I guess I never expected to win. It was just about visibility— and getting out there. And I felt like we ran a good campaign. There was a lot. I mean, people couldn't say they didn't know a lesbian or gay man at that point—

Brianna Suslovic 20:35

Yeah. Right.

Moni Usasz 20:45

There was a guy, I would get postcards during the, when I was on the coalition, from the "Honky Taxpayer—"

Brianna Suslovic 20:58

Whoa.

Moni Usasz 20:59

And he'd just, you know, say— he never threatened, it was just kind of “right” drivel. And one day I came home, and we lived in an upstairs apartment, and there was no lock on the front door. You just came in and went upstairs. And I met him on the stairs. I met this old man on the stairs. Anyway—

Brianna Suslovic 21:21

Oh gosh.

Moni Usasz 21:22

He looked embarrassed. He left and I went up and I had a "Honky Taxpayer" postcard under my door—

Brianna Suslovic 21:30

Wow.

Moni Usasz 21:32

It's like, okay, kind of scares me—

Brianna Suslovic 21:34

Yeah, [crosstalk]— yeah, certainly I think what you're talking about too, in terms of the opposition, organizing and mobilizing differently now versus then, I think that's really just a striking experience to have had, though. I think I'm curious too in terms of like, other challenges, while you were organizing, like what sorts of forces or people, more sort of hurdles in these efforts?

Moni Usasz 22:04

Well, this is not quite what you're asking but one of the things with LLL was, how do you come up with a mailing list?

Brianna Suslovic 22:14

Yeah.

Moni Usasz 22:14

Where do you find the lesbians? So we literally sat down the eight or ten of us, and put together a list of names and addresses [note: of wimmin we knew], using phone books and whatever. I mean, so it was like, just kind of created it out of thin air.

Brianna Suslovic 22:30

Right.

Moni Usasz 22:31

The issue of separatism came up sometimes, well, maybe not separatism so much as the women-only.

Brianna Suslovic 22:47

Mhm.

Moni Usasz 22:48

Women never, I mean, I never had a woman complain to me about it. I had men complain to me about it—

Brianna Suslovic 22:54

Right.

Moni Usasz 22:55

But it was like who cares.

Brianna Suslovic 22:57

Right.

Moni Usasz 22:58

But at least once, there was something that was publicized at the Unitarian Church. I think it was Deidre McCalla was playing. And some men were unhappy and we weren't sure what was going to happen. A couple of gay men friends came, and were there to kind of explain why they felt like it was okay. I don't remember there being much other than maybe a few guys who showed up and— Tim and Glen talked to them.

Brianna Suslovic 23:26

Interesting. Yeah.

Moni Usasz 23:34

I mean, I think one of the things is, I know now looking back at it, we tried to be inclusive in terms of race and working class women. I don't think— we weren't. It was a pretty white middle class, you know, milieu. I mean Nebraska at that point in time was pretty white. It's not—

Brianna Suslovic 23:55

Yeah.

Moni Usasz 23:55

It's definitely changed. But so that's something looking back at it, I know that, you know, we didn't do as good with.

Brianna Suslovic 24:06

Right.

Moni Usasz 24:17

I mean, I guess I don't— the challenges were all just things we just went and did. We didn't think, you didn't think "Oh, I shouldn't do that." Now, I grant ya, it seems— in some ways, life does seem scarier now. I mean, twenty-some people killed yesterday at an elementary school for pete's sakes. But I guess I compare the coalition and the Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights Amendment to what's happening now with the Fairness Ordinance, and the city council passed it. We have some weird, Lincoln has some weird thing where if you get 4000 votes, which is at x percent of the voting population, you can put something on the ballot.

Brianna Suslovic 25:15

Hmm.

Moni Usasz 25:15

So the churches basically got 18,000 votes to put the Fairness Ordinance on the ballot [note: because it included LFGBTQ folks]. I think there's also something on hair, not discriminating on the basis of how women, people wear their hair. There's even a piece on not discriminating against [note: active and ex] military. After it was in, after it was voted on and it was unanimous, then we had a trans man kill himself. He'd been pretty active so I mean obviously that was horrible. But there's now talk of rescinding [note: the Fairness Ordinance]. I don't really know where it's at. But right now we have three city council members who are gay or lesbian, two younger men and a lesbian, who is my age. [Redaction]. [Note: I hope she was able to be interviewed by you folks but I think I shouldn't tell her story.] But she's felt like almost like it's been— there's this generation difference in terms of what to do and at least one of the guys thinks that we should rescind it. What you hear is, what you hear people say is, "Well, we don't have enough money. We don't know if we'll win." You know, and looking at it from my perspective, there's been a lot of battles like that. You don't have enough money, and you don't know if you're gonna win, but you got to try.

Brianna Suslovic 25:36

Mhm.

Moni Usasz 26:24

Right.

Brianna Suslovic 26:33

And to think about the outcomes you described too, of the advocacy before so much of it seemed to be about like, accomplishing visibility and like being present as out community members.

Moni Usasz 27:33

Mhm. Yeah. So, and I don't, I really am not close to what's going on at this point in time. I know the city council is kind of sitting on it because they can. They can choose to put it on the ballot whenever they want to or they can rescind it. I don't think there's the votes to rescind it at this point. So yeah, so it's just it's just kind of different. A different headset and trying to understand, and they're not talking about gay men molesting boys. Now they're talking about trans women in the women's bathroom, I mean, it's but it's still the same kind of crap.

Brianna Suslovic 28:08

Yeah, yeah. It's so interesting, the sort of like rhetorical parallels from the opposition. And like the ways in which the past advocacy around a very similar concern is getting re-litigated in this new Fairness Ordinance.

Moni Usasz 28:28

It's just, it's just sad.

Brianna Suslovic 28:31

Yeah. Go ahead.

Moni Usasz 28:36

Just sad, you know, it's hard to it's yeah, it's just hard to know what the next steps will be but—

Brianna Suslovic 28:47

Yeah.

Moni Usasz 28:50

Because in some ways it seems like we've come a long way, but in other ways, not so much.

Brianna Suslovic 28:55

Right. Yeah I think your observation about the opposition being really organized now is also striking. Relative to the man putting postcards under your door.

Moni Usasz 29:07

Oh, yeah. I mean, you know, now people get death threats. The online harassment is just huge, particularly for women. And probably gay men and trans, and you know—

Brianna Suslovic 29:19

Yeah.

Moni Usasz 29:20

So and the guns. I think I would, yeah. I also think that I was young and naive. I think Terry worried a lot more than I did because she had a gay man friend killed in front of a bar in the desert southwest. Can't remember if it was Phoenix or— he just didn't know to run when the high school kids came to roll queers, you know?

Brianna Suslovic 29:50

Right.

Moni Usasz 29:51

So she had more [note: bad experiences], and she spent more time in the bars so I think she had more of a sense of being, of there being folks who really wished us harm.

Brianna Suslovic 30:06

Right. Yeah, I think that that assessment too of like a past self who maybe just didn't have like the full perspective that you have now is interesting for me to think about even in my brief period of organizing and how the world has also changed around me in that period of time. I'm curious if there are any other experiences or relationships that are significant from both of these groups that we haven't touched on yet?

Moni Usasz 30:38

I think first off, whenever you're in a group, you meet some great folks, you know, and so there's women I still call friends from that time period. And the coalition was really the first time I worked very much with gay men and so that was eye opening and good experience. I think you learn a lot of life skills, you know, activist type skills just by doing it. I think with LLL we had this vision of a woman centered world, you know, which ain't going to happen. But, you know, it's definitely a vision to work towards—

Brianna Suslovic 31:14

Right.

Moni Usasz 31:15

And the coalition, we fought a good fight, and we lost with dignity and we created visibility—

Brianna Suslovic 31:23

Yeah.

Moni Usasz 31:24

So I feel good about that.

Brianna Suslovic 31:29

Absolutely. I'm curious too in terms of your experience now like what kind of either lesbian or broadly LGBTQ community have you found or sustained in Lincoln?

Moni Usasz 31:45

It looks very different. I mean, there's not women, damn, women's dances or events, or those kinds of things. It's— I mean, but on the other hand, potlucks, we were doing potlucks, way back then, too. But just kind of got a core group of ten, fifteen women that you hang out with for a variety of reasons. Book club versus poker playing, versus just a Friday night, go out to eat or get together potluck, kind of a thing. So it's more like that. And a lot of those women, you know, Terry and I've known for 30 years, if not more.

Brianna Suslovic 32:24

Mhm.

Moni Usasz 32:25

So I guess at this point in time, I've dipped my toe into some of the gay, lesbian or the LGBTQ groups, and I've not done much with it. You know, I sort of just feel like an old fogey [laughs]— so I don't even I don't even have the language. The first time my nephew— I have a gay nephew— he interviewed me for a Gender Studies class, which still ticks me off. But not him, but the fact that it's not Women's Studies, but—

Brianna Suslovic 33:01

Mhm.

Moni Usasz 33:02

But, you know, he asked what gender we identified with and we were like "What?" So yeah, it's different. I think I still have a lot to learn about trans, the feeling that makes you want to switch your gender.

Brianna Suslovic 33:29

Mhm.

Moni Usasz 33:30

I worry a little bit that folks jumped the gun. And I taught— the last two years I worked with a little girl, I guess third and fourth grade, it would have been fourth and fifth grade. Yeah. Who always, M always wore jeans, t-shirt, her hair just kind of in a bob, just about like that. When they do Nebraska history in fourth grade, they always go to the Heritage School and pretend to be in an old fashioned school. And she apparently talked to her mom a lot about "What should I wear? Should I wear a dress? Should I wear pants? Should I?" And she came in pants just like always. She came in overalls, she had a scarf, a little red scarf and a straw hat and was just perfectly fine, you know, but yet one of the straight teachers was talking about when she transitioned. And I was like, "She's too little. Give her a break, let her figure out what she wants to be first." But you know, I don't know.

Brianna Suslovic 34:35

Yeah.

Moni Usasz 34:36

I don't think she was talking like that. But again, I don't know, I don't know— [crosstalk]— high school, and she's had a couple of her strong lesbian students transition. And I think that's been hard for her to figure out. In fact, I've heard my friend say "What did I do wrong?"

Brianna Suslovic 34:41

Mhm.

Moni Usasz 34:58

Which I think means that she felt somehow, "I didn't show that it was okay to be a lesbian."

Brianna Suslovic 35:04

Mm, yeah, I think that's really an interesting observation in terms of like, this particular identity and like, what it means and where the boundaries are with it. And I think your observation about how language and ideas are shape shifting so quickly, maybe partially because of the internet. There's just like, constant streams of information that kind of move the current along really fast.

Moni Usasz 35:35

That could be, that could be what it is. I've got a friend I work with who, her granddaughter came out as a lesbian [note: last year], and she must be, she can't be more than 12— [crosstalk]— maybe she's older, I don't know, I lose track. And then now this year, they want to be called O. I mean, grandma's working real hard to try to get the pronouns right and support her—

Brianna Suslovic 36:09

Yeah.

Moni Usasz 36:09

But was pretty confused—

Brianna Suslovic 36:12

Right. [Crosstalk]— well, I think that sort of like leads into one of the other questions that I have, just in terms of like, you've touched on this already, but other sort of differences between organizing in the seventies and eighties, versus what organizing looks like or means in this space now.

Moni Usasz 36:34

Well, I mean, just the internet, email, social media. I mean, bulk mail and phone calls, you know, and in person meetings was what was happening back then, didn't matter what you were organizing around. I mean, in Citizens Climate Lobby [note: now]— I mean, if you didn't have Zoom calls to connect with folks all around the country, you know, a computer to do email. I don't know, it seems like how did we do that?

Brianna Suslovic 37:04

Right.

Moni Usasz 37:09

Yeah. I mean, I guess one thing, I feel like woman's space outside of the home and at parties is missing. You know, it's not like that something you hear about. No. But probably, I mean, I think the internet probably just, you know, internet and computers just changed lots of things.

Brianna Suslovic 37:33

Yeah, I'm still really struck by what you were describing in terms of making the mailing list. Because I think the parallel now would be like a Facebook group where people are self selecting in or like, you know, some community online where people are really just readily identifying themselves with this, instead of hunting for people, and not really even knowing where to look. And yeah, I think, just broadly, like what you've talked about, in terms of women's spaces outside of like, a home context is interesting, too. I know, you mentioned having women's dances or like bars as spaces where people are meeting. And it seems like LLL also did a lot to create that kind of opportunity to meet others. So I think that's a really striking difference as well. Maybe partially due to the pandemic, but also, I think you're describing that there's been a little bit of a shift, almost like a loss in that direction, even pre-pandemic.

Moni Usasz 38:34

It feels like that. I don't know. I mean, it's different though. I mean, I think a lot of us were coming to the realization we were a lesbian, or the realization that we could be openly lesbian in a way that isn't happening, didn't, hasn't, wasn't, isn't happening, like say 20 years ago, or now.

Because you just come out and in lots of ways, it's not a big deal. And it was a really big deal back then. You know, the only out of body experience I had was telling my mother I was a lesbian. Literally, just like oh, I'm talking and I can't even hear myself talk.

Brianna Suslovic 39:22

Right.

Moni Usasz 39:22

And she did not say, "Oh, that's great." But she handled it like she handles anything. She listened and she eventually accepted but—

Brianna Suslovic 39:34

Right.

Moni Usasz 39:35

But, and I've been lucky. I mean, my family's been pretty supportive.

Brianna Suslovic 39:45

Mhm.

Moni Usasz 39:45

So it's— but yeah, it's just, and I think things change, you know. I mean what used to be cutting edge or new changes, you know—

Brianna Suslovic 40:00

Right, right.

Moni Usasz 40:02

I just worry that the feminism piece hasn't, is getting left out a little bit.

Brianna Suslovic 40:15

Right. Yeah.

Moni Usasz 40:16

Because I think that we still aren't getting paid what men are getting paid. We're still being harassed in jobs, and in careers. There's, you know, as moms, don't get as good deal in work spaces. It's just, it's like, to just say, "We're all one big happy family" without kind of being aware of that piece is a problem but—

Brianna Suslovic 40:38

Yeah, attending to the sort of specific experience of being a woman and a lot of these like, I guess, challenges and debates and political things is like, yeah, something that is getting lost to a certain degree.

Moni Usasz 40:46

And it's not like— I mean, I've mostly worked in, I've not worked, I've still been active, but I've not worked in lesbian, gay lesbian spaces since the eighties. So you know, so I am in some ways doing the same thing, but I think I come at it a little differently, you know. And if, and I would say something, and actually probably a lot of the men would say something at this point, too, like, "You know we shouldn't just have the women in the kitchen, we shouldn't, you know"

Brianna Suslovic 41:33

Yeah.

Moni Usasz 41:34

When we worked with Nebraskans for Peace we'd have the annual meeting, and it was a women doing all the cooking and cleaning up and the whole nine yards—

Brianna Suslovic 41:41

Right.

Moni Usasz 41:42

And that's a pretty small thing in the scheme of difference—

Brianna Suslovic 41:45

Yeah.

Moni Usasz 41:42

Power differentials.

Brianna Suslovic 41:49

Yeah, I mean, I think we've talked about how I'm a student, and I was on a project recently with all men, and I was the de facto secretary for the project, you know, there are definitely moments like that, where it does feel important to like, acknowledge and attend to and respond to that power differential, like you said. And so I think my last question is just whether there's anything that you'd like to share that we haven't already covered. We've covered a lot of ground.

Moni Usasz 42:25

I actually prepared by taking notes, how's that for anal? I don't think so. I mean, I think— and if any people are listening to this don't believe necessarily what you read on Wikipedia about either

LLL or Lesbian-Gay Coalition [for Civil Rights]— and hopefully there'll be some shifts to that soon— and I will give the guy that did the writing up on Wikipedia with credit for wanting to give us visibility.

Brianna Suslovic 42:53

Excellent. I really appreciate that clarification.

Moni Usasz 43:06

Okay [laughs]—

Brianna Suslovic 43:07

I think the direct storytelling from you has been so valuable and I just want to thank you so much for participating in this oral history interview with me.

Moni Usasz 43:15

It's been fun. It's been fun.

Brianna Suslovic 43:17

Thank you

Moni Usasz 43:18

Just to get to talk to—

Brianna Suslovic 43:21

Excellent. Lesbians of another age, of another generation. Exactly [laughs]— I appreciate the connection. Thanks so much.

Moni Usasz 43:28

Yes, thank you.