

# **LGBT History Project of the LGBT Center of Central PA**

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**Title:** LGBT Oral History: Marie DiFava

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Interviewee: Marie DiFava  
Interviewer: Marjorie Forster  
Videographer: Barbara Anne Kohn [ph]  
Date of Interview: January 14, 2020  
Location of Interview: Harrisburg, PA (Central PA LGBT Center)  
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**Abstract:**

Marie DiFava was born in Lebanon County in 1953 and grew up in a troubled Italian home. She graduated from high school and attended nursing school, but after burning out from her job and schooling, she dropped out, married, and had three children with her husband. During her marriage and after her divorce, Marie volunteered as an EMT and worked for the United States Postal Service as a mail carrier. In this interview, she discusses going to a doctor and being referred to therapy which gave her the tools to live a healthy life despite the violence and instability of her childhood. Her therapist pushed her to come out so she told her children. After her youngest daughter informed the entire neighborhood of her sexuality though, Marie looked for gay organizations to join. She travelled to groups across Central Pennsylvania, but she grew frustrated with the lack of community in Lebanon, so she started her own group, Lebanon County Lesbians. The group met in her home for five or six years and ended when Marie started to let transwomen join and other members disagreed. Finally, she discusses the challenges facing her and other older LGBT people, the love her children gave her, and her pride in being able to donate the newsletters and activities letters from her organization to the History Project.

**Marjorie Forster:** My name is Marge Forster and I'm here with Barbara Anne Kohn [ph] who is our videography and we are here on behalf of the LGBT Center of Central Pennsylvania History Project. Today's date is January 14, 2020 and we are here for an oral history interview with Marie DiFava. This interview is taking place at the LGBT Center of Central Pennsylvania. Marie, do we have your permission to record this interview today?

**Marie DiFava:** Yes.

**MF:** We will have a consent form for you to read over and sign at the end of the interview. Please say and spell your full name.

**MD:** Marie Arlene DiFava. M-A-R-I-E, Arlene A-R-L-E-N-E, DiFava D-I-capital F-A-V-A

**MF:** Thank you. What is your date of birth and where were you born?

**MD:** October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1953. I was born in Lebanon County

**MF:** Okay. So, to get us started, tell us about your family and early childhood, schooling and how were you brought up?

**MD:** I've lived—I was born in Lebanon County and have lived in Lebanon County my whole life. I am half-Italian and half-German. The German half mainly being from Bavaria. My father was the Italian, both of my grandparents are from Italy, I'm third generation here. So I was raised mainly Italian. I have—I'm the oldest of three girls and I was raised on a farm, a dairy farm, starting out as a small dairy farm and then we bought a 100-acre dairy farm which I worked on until basically my late teens when I got married.

**MF:** Okay, and--

**MD:** I forget what all you asked me.

**MF:** You—and what kind of religious background did your family have?

**MD:** I was raised Lutheran rather than Catholic, almost my whole family is Catholic. Even the German part—many of them were Catholic and of course the whole Italian family was Catholic. Everyone converted to Catholic because they were mainly sons, but my father had been married before and so, since he could no longer take Mass, we were then raised Catholic. Because of that my Italian family never really considered my grandparents being legally married and we were, as children, were all consider illegitimate. [laughter] So, the Italian way.

**MF:** So you didn't participate with church?

**MD:** We went—we belonged to a Lutheran church which my grandparents already had joined. Holy Trinity Lutheran in Lebanon, which still exists—very, very large, gorgeous church. I have to admit from, probably my early teens, I was very conflicted by the religion, the Bible, the teachings, I just had a lot of questions. So—

**MF:** Were you allowed to ask those questions?

**MD:** I was not allowed to ask any questions. That's forbidden in an Italian home. You're ruled by someone who basically considers themselves the Godfather. So you are—if it's not in the encyclopedia or the dictionary you're out of luck. In—I raised my children in Lutheran faith, I was very involved in my Lutheran Church. I was a cross bearer and a torch bearer. My children, involved in the choir, the youth group, but I came and went constantly. I would go, get angry, leave, come back, and I mean that's the way it went the whole—until I was into my forties. When my youngest daughter sang in a music group which sang in churches in five different counties. And all the sudden I had the opportunity to get in all types of faiths, all over and became very aware of all my options. And—so we started every Sunday that we did not have a responsibility, we went to a different church and a different faith. And that went on for about a year until I was told about the Unitarian Church and I picked one—they—they were all about—I think there were about five within an hour drive of my home. I picked one and we went down, and we fell in love with it. An old—a very old church like my Lutheran church, just—nowhere

near as large, we were just very comfortable. We had finally stumbled upon hundreds of people who believed the same thing we believed.

**MF:** Wonderful. And this is your husband and your children?

**MD:** No. Nope. By now I was already divorced.

**MF:** Ah, okay.

**MD:** My husband really didn't practice any faith. He had never even really ever been in a church until he met me. He then did come to the Lutheran Church right till basically our divorce. He probably has not gone back to any church. He basically went because I went with the children thinking my children need to be raised in a faith.

**MF:** Did your children then stay with the Unitarian Church?

**MD:** No one has stayed with the Unitarian Church. My oldest—my two oldest children were raised in a Lutheran faith which they definitely don't agree in. They—my children are all Unitarian-Universalists in their faith.

**MF:** Okay.

**MD:** My youngest daughter was raised in the Unitarian-Universalist Church, but none of my children attend the UU church anymore. My granddaughter has dabbled in the UU faith, but also no one attends.

**MF:** Okay, well just to back up a little bit to your childhood. What was your sexual identity like then? I mean when did you—how did you identify?

**MD:** I've always known I was gay. I'd say by fifth grade I definitely knew I was different from my friends. If I wanna really trace it back, it probably goes all the way back to Sally Starr when I was six or seven years old. And I'm not the only one of my age, Sally Starr was a beautiful woman back then.

**MF:** Was she a magazine character?

**MD:** No, she actually was the—there was a cartoon thing on TV with Popeye and she was the host of the cartoon thing with Popeye on. And it happened—that would come on actually right about milking time—afternoon milking time. So if you lied and said you had to go to the bathroom, you know you could sneak 10 or 15 minutes in the house and quick turn on the TV and watch Sally Starr quick. And back then cartoons were only really a few minutes long. If you go back into the 50's, cartoons really only averaged between two and ten minutes if you look at

the old black and white. So you could actually say you were going to the bathroom and watch a ten-minute Popeye cartoon and see Sally – Sally Starr, in black and white of course.

**MF:** So Sally Starr was someone that people of your age grew—what did she mean to you in terms of enlightenment?

**MD:** Well I thought she was beautiful. I was very attracted to her.

**MF:** Okay.

**MD:** She was probably the first woman, but I just always knew I was drawn to women. I was terrified of men. But I never really put it all together. There was no one to ask. I didn't know any gay people. There were, now that I'm older, there were some gay women in my community, but that—they were very closeted so that was not discussed. All through high school I—any guy I was attracted to was more of a friendship, it was nothing sexual and I didn't put that all together until later in my life. I had no real interest even in pursuing guys other than in friendship really. Or trying to be part of what my friends felt, trying to be included. And I was pursued by a man, not long after graduation actually. He was a nice guy and I did what I was supposed to do and I got married and had three children. I have a son and two daughters and a granddaughter. I was married for 19 years. I do not regret one moment of the 19 years. He was my best friend all those years. We liked the same things, wanted the same things. We were—we were fairly decent parents. We liked our kids, we loved our kids, we enjoyed being together. And I was the love of his life and physically also and I was not attracted to him physically. And as the time goes on you—everything that you've built: the land, the home you've built, your three children, all the volunteer work, your jobs, your friends, your family, nothing can fill a hole that's deep inside, sexually, which there is—there is no way. You—you—you have no desire to have a physical relationship at all with that person and both people become very sad. And it's bad enough you feel sad for yourself, but it's really horrible when somebody you do care about—he's your best friend and you can't make them happy. And not only that you don't want to. You don't want to, and you are causing their sadness.

**MF:** And at the time you separated were your parents still living?

**MD:** My mother was still alive. I would have never gotten divorced with my father alive. My father, basically he ran our family. There was a love-hate relationship with him. None—neither I nor my sisters made any move, we did the right—we did what society wanted up until his death. Within a few years of his death everyone got divorced. My mother was very accepting. In fact my mother suspected. I mean I knew, but I had shoved that so deep inside. But she—she had made a comment when my father was still alive. My father had had three heart attacks and his second heart attack at the hospital was the start of AIDS in the community. And people were dying left and right. And she made the comment that God came up with AIDS to get rid of the gays. I walked away from that and we never discussed that, but years later after my father passed away and the...I'm thinking ballerina. What's the guy? Nureyev?

**MF:** [Mikhail] Baryshnikov.

**MD:** Yes.

**MF:** Nureyev

**MD:** Yes, [Rudolf] Nureyev passed away. I had no idea my mother even followed those things. She was devastated and had seen an article in a magazine where so much of the art world had passed away from AIDS and she came to me and said, “Marie, if somebody doesn’t figure out why, what’s causing this AIDS. There will be no more art in the world. They’re all dying.” That’s when she told me, “Look if you’re gay,” she said, “I’m okay with it. And I’m sorry for what I said years ago.”

**MF:** Oh. Wow.

**MD:** But I still was not ready to come out. I basically had just gotten divorced and I was not coming out willingly. I only came out a couple years later when—for many years I had suspected there was incest within my family. Because my parents were both incest victims, but I had suspected within my own family, I have, to this day, a lot of blank spaces in my puzzle. A lot of pieces missing. Luckily my one sister has remembered everything, and she has put some of the pieces into place, but I think a lot of them will simply be lost forever. A lot of things don’t make any sense to me whatsoever. But my brother-in-law, at the time, acknowledged he—the incest of what my sister had told him. That acknowledgment devastated me.

**MF:** So is it involve one of your siblings?

**MD:** Correct.

**MF:** Okay.

**MD:** And my whole world fell apart and—because I had—I had been the oldest, I had always been the protector in my family. There’d been a lot of violence, drinking. We were always afraid, we had suitcases packed already when we were five, six years old. I still don’t remember—I don’t know why, I don’t know why – why we had a suitcase packed—why we always had an escape plan. Even my sister, some of that, she does not remember.

**MF:** Who initiated the planning?

**MD:** I don’t know. I know what was in the suitcase and when we moved, when I was in seventh grade, we—eighth grade, eighth grade we bought a larger farm. And I remember us unpacking the suitcase and then repacking it again after we moved. And coming up with a new escape plan

on our new farm. I have no idea why. Three years of therapy has not drug that out of the black hole. [Laughs]

**MF:** But each of your siblings have a remembrance of some component?

**MD:** Our youngest sister acknowledges almost nothing. It has only been in the past year that she has actually acknowledged that there was a problem in our family. And my—my father, you know, probably wasn't so nice. And that just, like I said, came about last year when I told her what something my partner had said to me. And that—that was the final...can't deal with this anymore—the final cruelty and her acknowledgement of that was that—yes you do understand.

**MF:** So regarding your mother then, you never—was she still living when you did come out?

**MD:** Oh yes, my mother was very living. Well, yeah, very living, sure she was living. And years later I did meet someone, I had a 15-year partnership, and my mother was very supportive of—we had a holy union in our backyard. My mother was very supportive, she was there, supportive until the day she died. In fact, she and my partner's mother, my partner's mother was also still alive, they became real buddies until their death. Both of them. Both of their ashes are spread on my land. [Laughs] Together.

**MF:** So your relationship with your partner died—resulted from her death? The end of it.

[Ringtone rings]

**MF:** Sorry.

**MD:** It's okay.

**MF:** I'll just grab that.

**MD:** [Starts singing along while chuckling]

**MF:** I thought it was mine.

[Ringtone cuts out]

**MF:** Sorry.

**MD:** It's okay. Sorry this is not flowing quite as well as the last time and I was afraid of this.

**MF:** No, you're doing fine.

**MD:** Okay. It's good you're asking questions.

**MF:** They can edit. They can edit. They'll edit.

**MD:** Okay, yeah I know, but the last time I simply talked and you didn't have to ask me anything. I just like—

**MF:** Wel that's okay. I have to work.

**MD:** And I just knew this was going to happen today.

**MF:** I have to work a little.

**MD:** Have to work a little, earn your keep. [Laughter] So we were at the—

**MF:** So we were at the loss of your partner.

**MD:** No—she—my partner and I—my partner left.

**MF:** Oh it was your mother [who] died.

**MD:** My mother died—

**MF:** The ashes

**MD:** And my partner's—my partner's mother passed away and then my mother passed away a few years later and a couple years later my partner—when I retired. And she had—and she had told me that—she would—may leave when I retire. Oh they probably don't want all on tape, this is my crappy--

**MF:** It's up to you.

**MD:** Okay, yeah, I don't need that on tape. My partner—my partner and I have—have split and I am now single again.

**MF:** And how long have you been—

**MD:** After 15 years yes.

**MF:** And how long have you been single.

**MD:** Two years.

**MF:** Alright, and so after high school you were employed, or you were farming?



**MD:** I always wanted to be a nurse. One of the women who was—I know—I’ve met quite of few people who someone, whether it was a teacher or someone in their church or a neighbor or family that someone took them under their wing. That never happened to me. But there was a neighbor lady who would—who was a nurse and I thought an awful lot of her. And growing up on farm you’ve already seen it all, where animals are concerned. I was—and my mother admitted for many, many years, I was not only a mother to my younger sisters, I was a mother to my mother. It’s, I don’t know, just part of my personality, part of an interest, but in high school when it came time to pick courses. And like I said I was the oldest in the family, my father took my paper and he said that I would not be—I was picking courses, my courses which, until I got that piece of paper I didn’t even know people did that. But he took me paper and told me that I would not be taking academic because girls don’t need an education. I would not take FFA ‘cause I already lived on a farm and I’m not taking general because that’s for stupid people. He said he had talked to my mother and she took business and that’s what I will take. It was good enough for her, it would be good enough for me. So I spent four years bored out of my mind. I could not take a language. I could not take sciences and maths which—which I was fascinated with. And I was stuck with just things that bored me to death. So I spent a lot of time skipping school. My father always had girlfriends, lots of girlfriends and as—by the time I was into my teens he wasn’t quite so quiet about it all. And by the time I was, I think 15, I had discovered all of his girlfriends and what was going on. And he moved in and out a lot. We had a hired hands house on our farm and he often stayed in there or motels or his girlfriend’s. I don’t—I don’t know, but. I ended up having to get up at 3:30 in the morning to milk 36 cattle on our farm before I could go to school. So he had written me a note to go to school one hour late. Which was an advantage actually, because my first class was gym and I always thought it was kind of stupid that a farm kid was in a gym class. Really? I had already worked off a day’s worth of calories by the time I got there. But anyway because I was allowed to come to school an hour late, I was always on the excuse list. So I would walk in the back door and go to the—straight to the office, get a little piece of paper that said I was there. And then I would take my little piece of paper and walk right back out the door and get in my car and go off on my excursions.

**MF:** And the teachers never questioned where you were?

**MD:** Oh yeah.

**MF:** Oh okay.

**MD:** But I would always come back for tests. My grades were fine. And they had trouble proving I wasn’t there. I outsmarted them and that went on right up until my graduation when the principal, I think I had just pushed him to the limit. He called me into the office, and he said the seniors got out like a week early back then, before the other kids. And he said I would have to come the whole week and be with him. So everyday I had to go in and he would give me some topic that I would have to go to the library and research and write so many words on this topic. And he said this is what I needed to do in order to get my diploma. Because he knew I had

already been accepted at nursing school and he knew I wasn't there, but he couldn't prove it. So that's what I did for five days in order that I could get my diploma. Those last months of high school I—well the last four years I was part of what is today called a health careers club. And I was the president the last year, I had kind of worked my way up over the years and the last year I was president. We visited a lot of hospitals and nursing schools, none of which I could afford financially. And also I did not have the Latin or the sciences or maths in order to qualify. But the last year of schooling they opened a Votech school [vocational technology school] in my county and a practical nursing school started there and I did not need Latin and algebra and those things in order to go and I could afford it. If I got a job I could pay couple months at a time and it was local, I could live at home. I worked it out, I took the test, I was immediately accepted and my father was very angry that I had defied him, but at this point I—I was a very angry teenager at this point and so...

**MF:** So how did that go, your coursework?

**MD:** I did extremely well in school, I absolutely loved it. I also held down a job every night plus 13 hours on a Saturday. I basically—I had almost no free time. In the process of all of this I went dancing one night, we discovered a place in Pottsville and that's where I met my husband who pursued me. I had no time for him, but he just didn't go away, he kept coming back. I did very well in school, I had all A's and B's. I absolutely loved it. Right up until a few weeks after capping I got the flu and I lost a whole week of school and a whole week of rotation at the hospital. And even when I came back I was basically burned out. Burning the candle at both ends. I hardly slept for months between the job and schooling and working at the hospital. And my grades started to fall, the next thing I know I was getting C's and then I got a D and at the hospital the nurses who aren't good nurses, they whisper about them. And I did not want to be one of those nurses. And so right before graduation I left. Several years later I—my father was very angry that I left. Several years later they were teaching a local first aid—a first aid class at the fire company so I took the first aid class. Then I took a CPR class and next thing I know I was approached by my local fire company that they were trying to start up a life squad. And they asked—they were trying to get a woman. They had 16 guys and they asked if I wanted 16 brothers. I jumped on the opportunity. I have 16 brothers to this day.

**MF:** Wow, that's great.

**MD:** I became a CPR instructor for the county. I became a first aid instructor. I then went to EMT school—emergency medical technician, which I also then tested EMTs. I was an EMT for 12 years with the Onal [ph] Life Squad and also the Jonestown ambulance. And for 6 months I worked for Penn National racecourse, just part time. I had gotten into the US Postal Service, I'm a retired mail carrier. And you start part-time and, in the beginning, I was just looking to make a little extra money and Penn National Racecourse was paying the most because I was a volunteer EMT all those years, I didn't make any money. And any money I did – did make, I and others, we handed it right back into our Life Squad because back then the insurance company did not

pay for the equipment and the bandages and we needed to pay for ourselves. So any money we made, we turned right back into.

**MF:** So this is while you were married, you were doing these jobs?

**MD:** Correct. Correct, correct. I was an EMT through my marriage and—and after I got divorced, I was still an EMT. I only gave up being an EMT, like I said, 12 years—12 years in, which is actually a very long time for an EMT. I—it get old after awhile and I had several bad calls in a row. It seemed like every time I went out, I lost someone and then I had the call that nobody ever wants to respond to. And back then we didn't have counselling for EMTs. And...I hung it up. I had to hang it up because I didn't want to go anymore.

**MF:** Was that the last job you had then? As an EMT?

**MD:** I was always a volunteer as an EMT, other than six-month part-time with Penn National Race course.

**MF:** Yeah, but did you work at anything else after you walked away from being an EMT?

**MD:** As a volunteer? You mean as a volunteer? Or--?

**MF:** That—that situation where you said you had to walk away because there were so many bad calls.

[End Tape 1. Begin Tape 2]

**MF:** Did you continue in some capacity?

**MD:** In—in—in?

**MF:** In any type of job as an EMT?

**MD:** Well I was still a mail-carrier.

**MF:** Okay.

**MD:** That was my job.

**MF:** Okay.

**MD:** This was all volunteer.

**MF:** Oh, I was thinking they were strung together.

**MD:** I've been a volunteer my whole life. I—I've always been a volunteer. I was—I've coached, I've refereed. I started a little league softball team so my daughter could play. I was a booster because another one of my daughters was a massive athlete. My son was involved in Scouting, so I taught first aid to [Boy] Scouts. I've taught first aid and CPR to the Game Commission, to the [Pennsylvania] Hunting and Game Commission classes. At this time I'm a volunteer for my local hospital twice a week. I've been a volunteer for my—both my churches for years. I've—I've spent my whole life as a volunteer in—in many capacities.

**MF:** Well—

**MD:** As a job I was a—I was a mail carrier. I started out in a grocery store working after nursing school and then I was in social work for awhile, but when President Reagan cut the funding for social work I lost my job, we were all given a six-month notice because everyone—all the girls—I worked for an organization which housed court-appointed teenage girls and that was all funded by the states and the counties and when the funding was cut, everything needed to close which is how then I eventually ended up in being a mail carrier. I applied because I had collected stamps since I was five years old and thought I'd get to see the stamps first. [Laughter] That had nothing to do with the job I found out.

**MF:** That's great. Well you've had a very varied career and volunteer history.

**MD:** Yes.

**MF:** I know that from what you've said that you are very—have been very active with the L—with the lesbian community, could you talk a little bit about that and how that started?

**MD:** As I said I was in my late thirties when I got divorced and probably, [wipes her eyes] shouldn't done that, but I need to. I'll start over again. I was in my late thirties when I got divorced and probably about a year later is when my brother-in-law acknowledged the incest in my family and my life basically fell apart. I was pretty much a walking zombie and what happened was we had a severe snowstorm and as a mail carrier—I was a rural mail carrier—I drove a car from the wrong side. I used the left leg to operate the pedals and my left arm to steer the wheel. I hit a hard chunk of snow and the wheel spun in my hand and I tore a ligament or a tendon in one of my fingers. It's the Postal Service, I had to go to the doctor and boy I got lucky. Moments of grace in my life. I met this woman Michelle, who I'm still in contact with, and my blood pressure was off the wall. And she asked me if I had gained or lost weight and I said, "No I weighed the same as I weighed in high school." "Do I eat a lot of salt?" and it was like, "No I eat the same thing." "Do I drink soda?" "No, I don't drink soda." And she said do you have—"Are you under a lot of stress?" and I went, "Bingo." And then I told her what happened. She immediately went out and I didn't know what she was doing, but she had called Philhaven to make an appointment for me to find a therapist. And a second day of grace, two moments of grace in a – in a row, they had no therapists available whatsoever, she wanted one immediately.

A couple about my age, who were from Virginia, had just recently moved to my area in Lebanon County and it was a husband and wife team who had become therapists at Philhaven. And because she had just started, and because before she did couple's therapy she was an individual therapist, her schedule was not full and she took me immediately. Her name was Judy, I stayed in contact with her for many, many years. She basically gave me the tools to save my life and I will forever be grateful. All the tools that in a healthy family, that your parents give you growing up, kids who come from dysfunctional homes, they don't have that. No one talks to them. They don't—they aren't allowed to talk to other people. What goes on in your home, stays in your home, it never leaves the wall. Even if there's severe fighting going on, when a car pulls in the driveway it immediately stops and everything goes to normal. And even if it has to go to normal for hours, but as that car is later pulling out of the driveway things pick up exactly where they left off. And that happens in many, many homes that are dysfunctional and violent. So all the things that, in healthy family, that you learn from your parents and your—your healthy family and your healthy friends, or the friends of your parents who hang around at your house. None of that existed for me and you don't know it. If you've never known it. Healthy people don't hang out with dysfunctional people. Dysfunctional people attract other dysfunctional people. So as a kid you don't have access to any healthy people. They're running. And if you're not allowed to ask questions, you are basically controlled in your environment. You're stuck, you're stuck. And you grow up not knowing you are that dysfunctional.

**MF:** And so this therapist helped you with your family history

**MD:** Put all of that--

**MF:** and helped you come out as—

**MD:** --together

**MF:** --with your identity.

**MD:** I did not come out—she tried for three years I darn—outright refused. In—then she left, her husband had decided to go back to being a minister. And they were moving to Tennessee. I was devastated because I had spent three years basically pulling my whole life apart and now I had all these puzzle pieces laying on the floor, but I had no one to help me put them back together. So we stayed in contact. Thank goodness because, like I said, I was just, things just were a mess. But I'd say within a year of her leaving she pushed me out of the closet. And I came out kicking and screaming, because people hate gays. I was concerned about—I always had a lot of friends. I was concerned about my family, my friends, my job. I was now a single income, all three of my children were living with me. I had no idea where to turn. And...But she was right, I was gay, I always knew I was gay. I just pushed that so far down, I wasn't about to acknowledge it. But I did know that I basically had been beating my head against the wall my whole life and nothing just fell. I had to work at everything. Basically, I was tired, I was forty years tired.

**MF:** So when you came out kicking and screaming, describe that for me.

**MD:** It was short-lived. Five minutes of short-lived, five minutes of knowing I was exhausted. Knowing that she was right, this was true, it was time. It was time. And so I went downstairs, all three of my kids were there because that day was a Sunday. And we were having a three-foot snowstorm. We weren't going anywhere so my kids were all hanging out in the living room. There were no neighborhood kids there, just my kids and I pulled—took my son aside. My son would have been about 21, maybe 22, and I told him. And he said, "Hey Mom. You know me. Each to your own. I'll be there."

**MF:** Nice.

**MD:** So I then approached my oldest daughter who was about 19 or 20 at the time. And she said, "If this is what you need to do to be happy, then this is what you have to do. We'll be there." Because my children had been with me through the marriage, the divorce, which ended up being a very nasty divorce in the end. Through the struggle of trying to stay on my feet financially, support three kids. Through three years of therapy, my kids stayed by my side through it all. They are definitely my heroes in my life. My youngest daughter was only about, maybe, 12 at the time. I did not approach her. I did not—I needed to think about that for a while. And it was actually a whole month later when I approached her. I actually think it was on the way to church. At this time we were attending the Unitarian Universalist in Lancaster. And I think it was on the way to church when I told her. And she said, "Well, it's about time, because you told John and Nicole a month ago. She said "So when we get home can I take down the American flag and put up one of those gay flags." And I said, "No we will be not – not be doing that." She, in turn, told the whole neighborhood.

**MF:** How'd that go?

**MD:** [Laughs] She was very, very proud of me. [Laughs] Well for many, many months kids would show up my door —show up at my door with a lot of questions. Plus all the kids in the neighborhood who could walk to my house, who were also questioning their sexuality were all showing up at my home. I did everything I could to help them. At that time I was fairly ignorant myself. But I came—it was fascinating. Most of the discussions went on in my—sitting on the linoleum of my kitchen floor. Questions such as: you can't be gay because my sister said that gay people always have pink triangles on their car and you don't have any Marie. There's no rainbow flag flying at your house and there aren't any rainbows, Marie so you can't be gay. You were married and you have kids. You can't be gay! And so it went on and on. I then called—I didn't know who to call. I went through our local phonebook. The only thing listed under gay people was our [Gay and Lesbian] Switch Board. Which was connected at that time here in Harrisburg. I called the Switchboard and, asking for, things to do, organizations to join, groups to join. And when I told him I was from Lebanon County he said, well we don't have anything listed for Lebanon County. I was like, "Oh, okay." So then he starts to tell me all the churches and organization out of Reading, York, Allentown, Harrisburg, Lancaster, Carlisle...So that was the

start of my frustration. For about one year I travelled an hour to all of those pe—places, attending several churches, ladies' dinners, organizations, events, bars, all kinds of things. I got tired really quick. I had a full-time job, three kids. I was still involved in all my volunteer work and... and I was tired and I was frustrated. Out of my frustration I started my own group out of my own home. Because this is what I have always done when I get that frustrated. I just do something about it. Back then, this was before the computer age. And so I, on the computer, simply figured out how to make a rainbow on a piece of paper with my name and my phone number. And I came up with a name for the organization, calling it Lebanon County Lesbians. I ended up with women from about six counties. And I then figured out how to put two of them on one piece of paper and I simply went around tacking them up on some church bulletin boards that I knew were accepting. In some coffee houses, I even remember putting them in some laundromats. At some colleges, any place that I thought women like me could end up coming along. My papers would disappear very quickly so I soon learned how to make one of those papers where your name goes this way [gestures left to right, referencing a paper with small detachable slips at the bottom] so they can just slip off the thing because I couldn't – didn't have the time to keep running around replacing my—my papers all the time as I wised up. And the women began to come, one—one at a time, the word spread until there were probably about 40 women in the end. Probably, maybe, 80 to 100 were involved over the five and a half years.

**MF:** Was that how you met your partner through the group?

**MD:** No. I never met a single person that I really dated or was involved with through the group. I found out very quickly that everybody wants to date the leader of the group when the leader is single. It doesn't work that way. And they tell others because women chat a lot. Actually was hard for me to meet other women running the group and about a year after—also about a year after I started my own group, my minister at my church found out and she asked me to start a group out of my church. So basically for about five, six years I ran a group out of my home and also a group out of my church which was for gays, lesbians, bi, men, trans everyone, where the group in my home was simply for women. The group did very well. The second woman who came about a year into the group wanted to get very involved and about half of the women at this point did not have access to a computer and so she started a newsletter for us. It was incredible. And she would mail them monthly to everyone in the group. And then she became an activities director. So we not only had our monthly meeting, we also had at least one activity every month, if not more. We did many things from horse-back riding and white-water rafting to game nights at my home and movie nights at my home. We—I'd say almost, the biggest that I—I had gained the most, out of the group, I gained the most friends, the best friends. But I would have to be honest and say that almost everyone in the group found a friend, found support. It—we all enjoyed the fact that it was a very diverse group, from young people in their late teens to people who were in their seventies and eighties. From college kids who didn't even have a job or young people just starting out, to people who made six-figure incomes with degrees.

**MF:** Now eventually that group ended.

**MD:** That group did end. At that time the transgender community was basically beginning to come out. They were always there. But-

**MF:** And about what year is this?

**MD:** Oh my gosh, we're going back about twenty years.

**MF:** Okay.

**MD:** About twenty years.

**MF:** Okay, year 2000, 2000.

**MD:** The transgender community was still very, very closeted, but some organizations had started up for the transgender community and so they had to become—had become more visible and they were looking, a lot of them, to melt into the other men and women groups. I did not know much about the transgender community, had made a few friends. And so I had to educate myself. And when I educated myself, my feeling was that any of the men who were going through the operation or had already gone through the operation, who had always felt as though they were women and they were sexually interested in women ought to basically be considered in my lesbian group and so I allowed them to come into the group. I never had more than one at a time. I had four over about a year ti—year's time. Some were accepted better than others and often that had to do with that person's personality. But there were women within my group who were not very accepting. It's amazing, the discrimination within the gay community itself. It is—It's horrible actually and it goes on to this day. We experience, almost every one of us, discrimination to begin with. And then to discriminate amongst our own even, when—when we have walked in those shoes I think is just one of the horrible things that still exists to this day. Some of the women in my group became very angry. I came home to nasty emails, nasty voicemails and women stopped—it seemed like over a couple of months time, less and less women were coming to the group and I reached a point where two Sundays in a row, no one came. And the one Sunday I was very frustrated because I had turned down an opportunity to do something awesome because that was my group day out of my home and it was my responsibility to—to be there. And I decided to hang it up—hang it up and no one—no one offered. I sent out a letter to everyone if anyone wanted to take over the group. Of maybe the forty letters I sent out, no one offered to take over the group. So any money we had in our kiddy [ph], I had offered to give it back, no one took it. We had our own library, we actually had several bookcases full of books and magazines and movies that the women had donated over the past several years. And so all of the—another letter was sent out and all of the money, the books, and the bookcases, the movies, the magazines, everything, all the papers, the stamps, everything from our newsletter, everything was then donated here to the LGBT Center in Harrisburg.

**MF:** How would you... What's your conclusion about why they weren't accepting of the persons who went through transition? They didn't feel their experience was the same and they were



uncomfortable sharing in front of them? Or did they – do you think it was just the human condition that we have elevate ourselves above someone else? Any thoughts?

**MD:** That is an awesome question and I have a lot of thoughts on that. The answer is many. It is the human condition to not be accepting of anybody who's a little bit different. We're not a very open-minded people, we think we are, but we're not really. We have to work at it. Some also felt that they had their own groups they ought to stick with 'em. They had a very different experience than us.

**MF:** Okay, thank you.

**MD:** And I think for some, they just needed to educate themselves a little bit better as—as I've said, the transgender community was just basically really beginning to come out. Today, when I bumped into some of these women, and we have discussed this. Today, 20 years later, today when we accept transgenders even more, when we now accept the bi community more as they have broken that down into all types. Today I think we are all a little more accepting than we were before because we have more knowledge. We've met more of them, they're more involved in our lives. And when you know people up front, it's easier to care about them when you – when you know a little bit. When you can look at them as a human being, and not a—

**MF:** Not their sexual identity or orientation.

**MD:** Not—correct. Or class of people. When you can look at every person as an individual.

**MF:** Okay, well as we start to sum up, is there anything you'd like to highlight as the turning point in your life. What one thing is stronger, was it the therapy or was it when you finally identified with the cartoon character?

**MD:** Probably the strongest point in my whole life, which changed probably everything in the way I look at everything... When you grow up in a dysfunctional family, you don't really know what love is. You think you know what love is, but you don't really know what love is and I loved my—I—I... I'm gonna say some things, I'm not sure I want this all. When you grow up in—it's okay. When you grow up in, I'll kind of start over—When you grow up in a dysfunctional family, you don't have a healthy, normal kind of love. So I grew up with a kind of a love-hate relationship and it—it wasn't that I didn't care about my parents, I cared about them. But you don't have an opportunity, or chance really, to love them and you don't really want to because the trust is never really there the.... You never know what's gonna happen next minute, from this minute. And so I felt a love for my—I – I cared very, very much about my sisters who were both younger than me. One is four years younger, one is ten years younger. And I cared very much about them and probably that's about as close to love as I knew my whole life because I just couldn't trust the people who were all around me. There was way too much violence, incest...

**MF:** Secrecy, too.

**MD:** Secrecy. It was all there. And then I got married and I cared about that man very, very much. I loved him like a brother, just like I loved my sisters very, very much. And I got pregnant. And I had my son and the very first time you hold someone who's half of you. [Pats her chest] In an instant, someone I didn't know at all and had no idea what they were gonna look like, what they were gonna grow up to be like, what they were gonna look like, what their personality was gonna be. I didn't know anything about them until five seconds ago. [Voice is slightly choked up] I experienced a love I had never felt in my whole life and I've now had the privilege to see three more times, in two daughters and a grand-daughter. That is a moment of grace. A first moment. And that changes everything. Everything.

**MF:** That sounds like you have a very cohesive group of children and a granddaughter.

**MD:** Like I said, they're my heroes. They stick beside me no matter what. You have kids? [Wiping her eyes]

**MF:** [Directed to Barbara Kohn off-screen] Is there anything you'd like to add? Okay... You've seen a lot of changes. What challenges do you think remain—

**MD:** Oh my, many

**MF:** --for the LGBT community?

**MD:** I'm in a challenge right now. I'm 66 years old, part of the old senior community who is again very frustrated, but very happy today because a group just started. But older women struggle to find each other. Some, their health is not well so they need something that's handicap accessible. Some don't drive at night so nighttime activities. There are no more women bars, they no longer exist. There are hardly any women groups, women dinners, it has all—everything has gone digital, computerized. And the old people aren't always very savvy computer wise. And unlike the young com – community who, they just simply go online to all—

[End Tape 2. Begin Tape 3]

**MD:** their Twitters and things and having a granddaughter I'm more aware of all of this. They can add a thousand lesbian friends in a couple minutes. For the older people that just does not exist. And the younger people, they're out. They don't have any problem going to the gas station and going in to get a drink and holding hands in some strange gas station in some strange town. There is no way two old grey-haired women are going to do that in their local town, much less in a strange town. So we...because of our background, because of what we've experienced, we don't feel that freedom that the young people have. We envy it, wish we could do it, but that fear of being attacked is still inside, inside us. Inside us, and when you are older and you don't run as fast, you don't think as quick, you're not as savvy. So we still are struggling and – and also there

is still plenty of the older community—gay community who still struggles with accepting everyone which I do not see as much in—the young people are so much more accepting of everyone. And they're accepting of experimenting, they don't say, which you hear from old people, "Oh, but you were married. So how can you enjoy when – sex with women, how can you enjoy sex with men and women." The gay—the young people think nothing of that. Where the older community is still a little more closed-mind and not as accepting and I think that is partly because we don't have an opportunity to get out as much as we would like to, ought to, have the opportunity to—to expand our knowledge.

**MF:** Well you really identified some remaining challenges and I wish you well with your new group and I really thank you for being with us today.

**MD:** You are welcome.

**Barbara Anne Kohn:** I'm not turning it off.

**MD:** You're not turning it off?

**BK:** Just in case- Just in case there's anything else that comes to mind--

**MF:** Yeah, last time we turned it off-

**MD:** I received an incredible letter from Dickinson College just a few weeks ago. I ought to have brought it in. I didn't think to bring it.

**MF:** Well tell us about it! You've got a gift, a letter from Dickinson

**MD:** Well, apparently it's part of the—it's part of the library at Dickinson?

**MF:** The archive--

**MD:** Yes! The archive library--

**MF:** The history interview's there--

**MD:** A lady there—she, in early December, I all of the sudden got this letter from her saying they were now—see I came up the second time. We had all these newsletters which were what this—the History Project really wanted was all of our newsletters, our activity letters. I had all of that, but I needed to contact the – the women who were the editors of those letters. That was only right. And that took me awhile. I had a lot of trouble tracking down—it was only with the help of several other women and my granddaughter, we finally tracked down the major editor of the letters and the activity director. Who then came to my home and we went through all of those newsletters, blacking out names, addresses, telephone numbers, whole thing so- and then

preparing all of that stuff in order to donate it the second time. So there was probably a six-month difference between the first donation and the last donation. But apparently in November Dickinson College, they were showing a movie, and they began to document all of the things I had donated, which basically was like a foot or a foot and a half deep. And she made up posters using a lot of the things I donated and I had also, not only with the newsletters, but all the activities. I also had a folder of business cards. There were probably, I don't know, 30 or 40 business cards in this folder because I would give it to new people who came in who were looking for therapists, other groups, I mean other activities, churches, mean any place I got a business card at, they were gay accepting, gay friendly, I kept putting it in, and the women, it was there for everyone. And she was excited, I think she called it the – the fact that everything I gave her has given them veins to places, organizations that they had no knowledge ever even existed.

**MF:** Wow, what a gift!

**MD:** Yeah.

**MF:** Thank you.

**MD:** Yeah what a gift. Yeah, so it was an incredible thank you letter from, you know, Dickinson. So my kids—I'm very proud. My kids are very proud. They were very accepting of donating all of this and documenting my history. So, again, thank you for their support.

**MF:** Great.

**BK:** Okay, now I'll turn it off.

**MD:** Now you turn it off.

**BK:** I knew there was gonna be something else. [Laughs]

**MD:** Alright.

[End Tape 3]