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Interviewee: Melinda Eash

Interviewers: Marge Forester, Barbara Biancome

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Abstract:

Melinda Eash, child psychologist and LBGT rights ally, discusses her upbringing near the New York Metropolitan Area and the influence of the church. As a young adult she attended Susquehanna University, where she made friends with a gay student whom she helped sequester in the girl's dorm in secret as he was unsafe in the men's dorm. After college, Eash worked with developmentally disabled adults, going on to get her Master's degree and open her own practice working with youth as a certified psychologist. After encountering a gay patient, Eash realized she was under-educated in this area, and began teaching herself how to help LGBT youth. At this point she contacted and began going to a local LGBT youth group, becoming an integral ally and leader of Bi-GLYAH. The organization, later renamed Common Roads, expanded greatly in the following twenty years. In this interview, Eash describes the changes she's seen in the realities for LGBT youth, the changes in the organization, and the work done by current and former members of the group.

MF: This- oh, are you starting?

BB: Okay, talk.

MF: Test, test.

BB: Good, okay.

MF: Alright. Today we are talking to Melinda Eash. Today is May 15th, 2017. I'm Marge Forester.

BB: Barbara Biancome.

MF: And we are just talking to you about your involvement with the LGBT community but we're going to start with you and your own history.

ME: Okay.

MF: A little bit about your—where you grew up, your own parents, siblings. Just...paint your childhood for us, Melinda.

ME: I grew up in Long Branch, New Jersey on the shore. I have a brother who is a year younger than me and two sisters, one is six years younger, one is ten years younger. My parents are probably—well, they're very intelligent, but they're probably pretty progressive. I was always raised to treat people the way they behaved and who they were and not to judge people based on skin color, those things. My grandfather—my mother's father, was a chauffeur and my grandmother was a cook and seamstress and they both worked for wealthy people back ... you know, they go back to Colonel Vanderbilt. I think at least my grandfather worked for Colonel Vanderbilt in New York. So they were used to serving people all the time but they also, as the years went by they—they you know, worked with a lot of other help who tended to be African American and the people they worked for—the last people they worked for had a summer home—or a winter home, sorry, excuse me, the opposite. A winter home in Miami Beach and so my grandfather, every winter, would transport all of his staff down there, many of whom were African American and my mother would, you know, spend X amount of months out of the school year in Miami Beach doing school down there and do school back in New Jersey.

MF: Interesting.

ME: But because she would get so tanned there would be times when they discriminated against my mother because they assumed she was African American because she was travelling with ... and so my grandparents and my parents, you know, really saw firsthand how people were treated and weren't really okay with that, and so they raised us that way. So I thought that was interesting, so. And I grew up in the New York Metropolitan Area, I went to a very diverse high school. There was only one high school in town and so I had friends who were Latino and friends who were African American, friends who were Jewish, and even though we didn't talk about it in those days, friends who were gay. We just didn't talk about it. It wasn't really on our radar. So—so that was kind of my whole experience growing up and so that was my sort of backdrop and then I came to Pennsylvania and went to Susquehanna University, which is a Lutheran Church-related school [laughs]. But again, I picked that school because I liked the community on campus, I liked the environment. Turns out that they had—they now have an Allies group on that campus [laughs] and there was, there was a lot of interesting things that happened when I was there because again I was there in the seventies and we didn't talk about gay anything [laughs]. But I had a professor who was gay and I had—he *died* and so, you know, his partner was always on campus and you know, I was always kind of like—I was more heterosexist in the sense that you know: I was okay with you—I didn't care who you were but I didn't really get what your experience was, you know? So, you know, the fact that I had a professor who had a partner who was gay—hey, that's fine with me.

MF: So, at the time you were aware of it?

ME: Yeah, but it was like it didn't register like this was a good or a bad thing, you know?

MF: Yeah.

ME: But then, *then* I had a friend, a very good friend, who lived in the freshman dorm and he was getting harassed and bullied and it turned out later he identified as gay but they assumed he was gay because he was somewhat effeminate, so we literally housed this guy in our all-female freshman dorm all year and hid the fact that he was there. Although—or if the RA knew, she looked the other way because we did it to protect him.

MF: So your advocacy started very early.

ME: Yeah, but it never occurred to me that maybe I should go talk to the administration, you know [laughs]. Like years later I'm like, "Where was my head?" You know? So—but that's what happened in the seventies, you know, you just ... and so then later on when I got ... after I moved to Harrisburg and got into private practice then things started to change for me and I started to develop this awareness of, "Oh, this isn't as simple as I thought." So, you know, I began to understand that I come from a place of privilege and—and I—I hadn't really appreciated that until later on when I started to get into my professional life and started encountering different people and started to understand, really empathize with what their situation is and that, you know, I really ... often when I go places I am one of the most privileged people in the room because I'm a—you know, I come from a middle-class white background and, you know, I'm straight [laughs]. So ...

MF: You mentioned that the college you went to was a Lutheran-based school. Do you have a religious affiliation or did you as ... a child?

ME: Well, that's kind of another journey I took [laughs].

MF: Okay, well ...

ME: I was raised in the Episcopal Church and I had a problem with the ... my parents didn't go to church by the way. My godfather dropped us off at church every Sunday, my parents picked us up and I had a problem with the priest because number one he told us who to vote for in a local election one day from the pulpit. I had a real problem ... now I was only in seventh grade, mind you, but I had a problem with that. Then I had him for confirmation class and I said, "You know, I'm really not sure I believe in this whole confession thing where you go confess your sins to—to the priest. You know, why can't I just confess my sins to God?" Well, he told me I was stupid. That was not a real good answer to give me, so I finally went back to my dad and I said, "Look, you know, it's not that I don't believe in God and it's not that I have a problem going to church but I'm starting to have a problem with this church and here's why." And then I had a missionary who took over our confirmation class for part of the year who came with a whole totally different perspective. I actually kind of wished he was staying and the other guy was going. So I went to my dad and said, "Look, I can't go to this church anymore. I'm not going to, you know, do that." And my dad- I had good arguments. You know, they were intelligent well-reasoned arguments, he said "Okay." So I then went to the Baptist Church, which was kind of a [laughs] "let's go the other extreme." After a while I decided that wasn't really the best fit for me

but my godmother had—was Lutheran. She always took me to church; she acted like a godmother in the true sense of the word that the Lutheran church expected, and so then I went to this Lutheran church-related school so that became theologically a much better fit for me and—and continues to be a really good fit for me. I go to a church who's very welcoming. Our choir director and his partner [laughs], you know, are there. You know, we've welcomed other people. We called our pastor with the intention that if you're not okay with us accepting LGBT people in our congregation, you know, you're not the guy for us. So—so I, you know, I belong to a really open congregation even though technically we're not a "reconciled in Christ congregation" yet, we act like it, if that makes sense. So that's how I got there religiously so, you know, it just—what—where I believe and what I do, you know, fits really well with my values and—and my interaction with people. Because now I've been volunteering here for so long [laughs], I mean, I know everybody.

MF: Could you just briefly ... I know we're aware of what you do occupationally but could you just summarize briefly what your journey was with your career?

ME: Yeah, I—I started out at ... well, I—I, I—my first job out of college was at an early intervention center in Philadelphia and my husband and I lived—got married, went to Philadelphia. We lived in Philadelphia like a couple years and we decided we didn't like living in Philadelphia anymore. It was a nice place to visit. We like eating there, you know [laughs], we didn't really want to live there. So we, one May, quit our jobs and moved up to Harrisburg and he got a job right away at Dauphin County at the drug and alcohol program task program. And once I got up here I got a job in a group home with CPARC [The Arc of Perry and Cumberland Counties] and I worked there for about a year, year and a half, and they realized that I really ... because I had worked early intervention I really knew a lot about behavioral programming. I was working with people with intellectual disabilities. They really started to recognize that I knew a whole lot so I ended up being the first behavior specialist that CPARC ever had and I was kind of working in the group home half-time and a behavior specialist half-time as sort of this experimental pilot project. And it worked out really well so then I became a full-time behavior specialist and then Dauphin county put this ad in the paper; they were advertising for a CLA [Clinical Lab Assistant] staff trainer for the group homes in Dauphin county and so I, I, you know, I was like "I haven't applied for a job in a while, you know, I ought to go apply for this just to see what happens."

And so I went and applied and the interview went really well and then they called me back for a second interview which was, "What can we do to get you to take this job?" And I was like, "Okay, can you give me tuition benefits?" They were like, "Oh, yeah, no problem." So I went to Dauphin county, I started running CLA staff training program and then I—they found out I could do these behavioral things really well. So I ended up getting a promotion again and I ended up doing all the behavioral programming with a psych-consulting psychologist for Dauphin county, and we hired somebody else to do the training, and I ended up running that whole department. And while I'm working on my Master's degree at Millersville in Clinical Psychology ... and

then they—I was getting—we were getting too big for the county office so they helped us leave and become our own agency. So then, you know, I'm like I don't know, twenty-seven, twenty-eight years old and I'm like now the director of an agency and so I learned all about 501(c)(3)'s and accounting and stuff I never even want to know. So I did that for a couple of years but the longer I was there the more administrative stuff I had to do. And while I was good at administration, I really didn't want to do it then. I wanted—I missed clinical and doing clinical stuff. So by this point I'm almost done with my Master's degree in clinical psych at Millersville and I had done my practicum or internship at—at a private practice here in town. So they hired me with a Bachelor's degree and I went and worked and started working in private practice.

Now, at that time, they could still bill services for me under a psychologist's supervision. This was before managed care really took hold. So as soon as I could though I went and, you know, I got my Master's and then—then I went and got my license. So I'm one of the last people in Pennsylvania to be licensed as a psychologist with a Master's degree. You—so you can't do that anymore in the state and it's getting really, really hard to hire people. So I've been doing that; since 1989 I was in practice. So I work mostly with kids and teens and at one point I started running groups and I have a client I'm working with who's afraid to talk to me and he comes into group and he's panic-stricken and you know, I kept saying, "What's wrong?" "Well, no, everything's fine." So finally one day after group I pulled him aside and said, "Look, here's the thing. I know you keep telling me you're fine, and I can't make you talk to me, but you know, when I look at you, you don't look like you're fine." And so you know I went and I really tried to make it okay for him to talk during. So he—he goes away, comes back a week later and says to me, "You know, you're right." And so he tells me after group, and he goes, "Well, there's two things I need to tell you, and I don't know that you're going to be too happy with this." And one was, you know, "I've been experimenting with drugs." And the second is, you know, "I'm pretty sure I'm gay." And I said, "Well ..." And of course they didn't cover this in grad school at all, so I said, "Well, you're right about the drugs. I am a little disappointed about that, but, you know, we can deal with that." And I said, "And as far as you being gay I understand why that's really hard to talk to you—talk about because you know, you're afraid of how are people going to react." So I had enough sense to say that and I said, "But it sounds like we need to talk about this more, so how about we schedule an individual appointment and you can come in and we'll really talk about that." And so I made it okay for him to come and talk to me. Now I go home and I'm panic-stricken because like, "Okay. My graduate program did nothing to cover this."

So I'm a reader and I'm ... you know, if I don't know something I'm going to read about it. So I go to the library and I become the inter-library loan queen because of course all the materials in the library have either been stolen or lost or they never had them. I'm inter-library loaning for things as far away as Massachusetts and California. I ended up having to mail order and buy my own materials because I couldn't get them any way else. So I started building actually my own library because that was the only way I could get, at that time, anything that was research-based or state-of-the-art or whatever. So I did that and in about a month's time I did like this crash-

course in LGBT—whatever-101, and what I learned is that what youth really need are support groups. They need mentors, they need mentors, they need role models, you know, and ... and they were doing that in Indianapolis and Chicago and York and so I'm like, "Wow, this is, you know, this is what this kid needs." So, of course I think—I don't "think" ... "it's Harrisburg"—we wouldn't have that. I go, "That's what I need. I got to find that." So, I go to my pastor's wife who's a licensed social worker who happened at the time to be working for SCAAN [South Central AIDS Assistance Network]. I'm like "Okay, well Molly at least knows where the gay community is. They know some things, you know, a few things." So, I go and I talk to her and I say, "Here's what I need." And she goes, "Oh, yeah, you want to talk to Sharon Potter." So I said, "Oh, cool, who's Sharon Potter?" So she gets me all her contact information, I call Sharon Potter. I tell her, you know, what I need and, "Yeah, oh yeah, this group, it's been running, you know"—maybe about a year then, it hadn't been running too long, and I'm like, "Okay, well I got this 15 year-old kid and can I bring him to group?" And you know ... and all that, so it turned out I couldn't bring this kid into group right away because he wasn't out to his parents yet, which became another whole story, so—but in the meantime, I'm talking to this kid about group, I'm interacting with them, you know, trying to put everything in place. I'm working with this kid as best I can based on everything I've learned now in my reading. So finally he gets really mad at his mom one week, and justifiably so, and I get—I'm out at the mall somewhere and I get this phone call on a Saturday from this kid saying, "You know, I got really, really mad at my mom and I screamed at her, 'I'm bi!'" And I said, "Oh." So I'm talking to him and everything, finally he goes, "You think I shouldn't have done that?" And I said, "Well, I'm not sure that was the best way to come out, but, you know, we'll deal with it."

So, I ended up then talking to parents and answering every stereotypical question ever known about gay anything and I—so then I was allowed to take this kid to the support group because I had the father's support. I never really got mom's support but I—he had a really good dad who I think was like, "I don't get this, I don't understand it but it's my son and I love him so I'm going to, you know, do whatever I got to do." And so I think there were things that he inherently knew, whereas his mom had other issues. And so she almost took this personally that—that her son was gay, if that makes any sense. So I ended up coming to the youth group because it was the only way this kid could get to group was if I took him and I took him home. So I started showing up to the group meetings and because I was a licensed psychologist and I work with kids—I was in and out of the schools a lot and ... and I got a lot of referrals from the school so I kind of understood how schools worked and the environment, and I was really interested in what they had to say about their experiences in school because they certainly weren't my experiences. So-so they were like, "Wow, can you keep coming back? You know a lot about school." So I was like, "Well, okay." You know, kind of got to be here because I got to bring him. So I kind of came and never left, if that makes sense? So that's how I got here. So I've been involved with the youth group by that. In the beginning it was called Bi-GLYAH which is a mouthful, which stood for the Bisexual, Gay, and Lesbian Youth Association of Harrisburg, and so I've been here ever since.

MF: So you started leading the groups, or—or just...

ME: I started helping Sharon lead the groups, yeah. So, Sharon—I ended up being one of the volunteers who would come in with Sharon and we would lead the groups and then we'd get speakers and at the time we were meeting in that basement of Planned Parenthood. We had thirty to fifty kids showing up and we only met ... Initially we started meeting once a month, then we went to every other week—every other Friday. And then the youth kept coming in and, and this is before we had Allies groups in schools and all that, and we had mostly older kids, you know, we—we—you weren't seeing the young kids that we're seeing in here now, you're seeing kids 17, 18 and older. You know, 15, 16 was probably the youngest we were seeing. So, what happened is the kids came to us, or the youth and said, "You know, this is the only safe space we've got." You know, this was still at a time when I could count the number of parents I knew on one hand. Most of these kids were not out to their parents, if they were they were in danger of being kicked out of their house. You know, it was not safe for them to come out to family in many cases, let alone school or anywhere else. So they were like, "You know, we really need—we want to meet every week because we just, you know, we need this space." So then we, we started moving to every week. Eventually we took on a couple, two, three more volunteers. It got to be too much for Sharon to do every week, so Sharon kind of dropped out after a while and ... because she had other things that she needed to do. And so we ended up meeting there every week and then we had to leave Planned Parenthood because of security reasons. Because the kids were setting off the security system and that got ... you know, they started complaining about that and that was ...

MF: You mean on purpose they were doing it, or justv...?

ME: No, it was by accident. It was always by accident.

MF: Oh, okay.

ME: But they were very security conscious at Planned Parenthood because, again, of all the abortion rights stuff, so it was, you know, it wasn't us, per se. So then we went looking for another space and we went to St. Michael's Lutheran Church out on State Street because the pastor there, even though technically he wasn't out to the bishop, we knew he was gay and he had a partner. So, we were welcomed into that church and we started meeting there on Friday nights on a regular basis, and that congregation is very interesting because half the congregation are people who are gay from the neighborhood—the nearby neighborhood, and the other people in the church were families that have, Lutheran families who have lived here in Harrisburg forever, okay, so you—you go in there for an event and you're dealing ... like the kitchen was a fun thing. I love the kitchen, because the kitchen was run by the little old Lutheran church ladies and Guy Lindsey who happened to be gay and you didn't mess with either of them when it came to that kitchen. So whenever we used that kitchen the kids were like, "Why are you all over us?"

“Because we’re leaving this kitchen better than we found it. Because we’re going to be, you know, good stewards of this space.” They’re like, “Okay, whatever.” But they cleaned.

So it was a real interesting experience and then the pastor that was there left and they had to call a new pastor and so they called Russ Mueller, who had been involved with the AIDS community as well, and so he started coming to our meetings wearing his collar and while I’m okay with that, because I know a lot about pastors, I was a little worried like, “Oh, how are the kids going to see this, you know?” Because at the time, most of these kids did not feel welcomed in their churches. It was not a welcoming place, so—but what started to happen is he was very welcoming and they felt welcomed with him and the next thing I know, they’re emailing this pastor all their spiritual questions that they couldn’t ask their own pastors because they weren’t really welcome there.

MF: Interesting.

ME: So, so—that, that’s a very interesting congregation and they, he—they intentionally brought Russ in because ... they called him as the pastor there because he was comfortable with everybody and he was going to minister to the older people in the, in the congregation and in the community, as well as the people who were LGBT. So, and--and he, you know, we were very, very well-supported there, so we were there until we had the wherewithal and enough money to get a 501(c)(3) and form our own organization. So...

MF: And then is that when you moved to the Episcopal Church on Front Street, or no?

ME: No, we didn’t go there first. [laughs]

MF: Oh, okay.

ME: No, we had another little adventure before that.

MF: Okay.

ME: What happened is we—we incorporated, and Dan Miller actually helped us with that. So we’ve had a lot of friends in the community. Mara Kiesling who happened to still be in Harrisburg who hadn’t been out as trans very long, she worked for a PR firm so she helped the kids come up with a new name for the group or the agency so the youth group changed the name to Common Roads and the youth came up with that name. Her, Steve Glassman, and a bunch of people were involved in helping us form a board, so we formed a board, we got a 501(c)(3), we hired our first executive director, who was Carol Reisinger, and then we had to go look for space, which is a whole ‘nother experience, especially in Harrisburg. So we found space in the basement next door at the—it’s not it ... when the Midtown Scholar expanded next door here, in the basement it was—used to be a Daycare center, and the Daycare center moved out and so we moved in. And then the Gay and Lesbian Switchboard moved in with us and so they rented a small space from us downstairs and then eventually SPARC, who is the Statewide Pennsylvania

Equal Rights Coalition they had a desk there so they could have some—because when they had people come to Harrisburg then they had a place to put somebody there and they could work out of ... if you're doing advocacy it makes sense to have your person in Harrisburg, near the Capital. So they had a space there as well.

We were in that spa— I forget how long, and it was a decent space. We had a lot of room and we had space for the library and it was a decent space. There were problems though, with the landlord and we were getting ripped off on heating and we were getting ripped off on utility bills and then we had some really big rainstorm or whatever and then we ended up with floodwater in the basement and damage and so ... and then we started to outgrow that space and then there was the idea that we ... well, no, the community center came later. So we decided we had to get out of a basement and so we, again, tried to raise more money to get out of the basement, and so we found—I don't know who knew Saint Stephen. Somehow somebody connected with Saint Stephen's and they had office space available on the third floor and Saint Stephen's really liked the idea of us being there. You know, they—they wanted to be welcoming to the LGBT community and they wanted us to be there, and so they gave us a really good deal on office space. The only downside was that it was on the third floor and it wasn't handicap accessible. So that was always an issue that long – can we realistically stay here because we're really not accessible and I had a problem with that. I've worked with people with disabilities since I got out of college and so I, I really ... that was one I really wrestled with.

MF: And fundraising would have a problem with it, too. Certain funders.

ME: Yeah, and I kept going back to Sharon's husband who was an architect and saying, "Is there any grant money, is there anything I can do because this is a historical building and it's not physically—" You know, I was constantly trying to figure out a way to make that space physically accessible. So that was the bad news. But we were very welcome there. We had a good relationship with the church, when we needed to do a youth activity that involved a larger space they let us use space over in the school next door, so it was good. There was some issues with parking on Friday nights because of the bars, which I managed to develop a relationship with the local police officer and the security guy at the Vault so we managed to have an arrangement about what Malinda was going to do if people parked my kids in illegally, so we managed to resolve that problem.

MF: It was nice to see that when you drove by, that Common Roads was there. It was more visible being on Front Street.

ME: Oh, absolutely, yeah. It was great. But that then, then the whole community center thing started and that has a whole evolution that I was involved with because that started down at the Harrisburg Foundation. Well, it started before that. But the funding part of it started at the Harrisburg Foundation and so they started to bring people from the whole community gather in a way that had never happened before. Historically, before the center, if you go back to the '80s

and '90s, we had a lot of active people in the LGBT community, but they tended to be real territorial and not play together very well ... and not that I had anything against any individual person, but having been in organizations and groups—I would go to like PRIDE meetings that would start at 7 o'clock at night and go to 10 o'clock and we got nothing done. And, you know, one of my alumni youth who would be like, "Okay, I'm going to give back to the community." And they'd be sitting in the meeting and finally one night raised his hand and said, "Well, you know, I'm aware that its 9:30 and we're still on agenda item number two, you know? This is kind of a problem." You know, and they just, they just couldn't agree on stuff and couldn't work together and weren't good at collaborating and they were just—so they were doing their own thing very, very well and there were a lot of really, really good organizations in town, and what they did they did very well, but they didn't get the idea that you had to work together and as, as people in human services know, eventually what started to happen is funding gets tighter and tighter.

We're living in an age now where funding is very tight and if you're not willing to collaborate with other stakeholders in your community you're not getting funding. And the foundation knew that, but the foundation also knew that there were a number of us in the community that really wanted a community center that knew about the community center model. I've been going to—as soon as I started going to Creating Change and sat in on my first national community center meeting, I was like, "Wow, this is what we need in Harrisburg." You know, I always had these crazy ideas. So I would keep coming back and then I ... you know, we got to look at the community center thing, and then we started to get funding through the foundation to be able to do something in the community and they started bringing, you know, all the different stakeholders in the community together and so people started to get the id- understand that, "Yeah, if we work together, we we could put enough funding together but we can't do—we can't ... just one group by themselves isn't going to do that, we have to work together, we have to come up with matching money, you know, all this stuff. We have to build capacity." Some people didn't know what that was. So what happened is that the foundation got money from another organization but it had to go to LGBT services into ... in a community, so we had grant money available. I wrote my first grant ever, my only grant and we got it and they were like, "You never wrote a grant before?" I'm like, "No, it just made sense that you'd do it this way." So I got a grant for th- the youth group. And that allowed us to, you know, that was at the time where we were trying to incorporate in our ... so that allowed us to do the things that we needed to do and as time went on, they, the foundation, also used that to build other funding and capacity for the while LGBT community, and then people caught on to the whole centers thing.

And then you know, Carol left and then we hired Michelle Simmons as our next Executive Director who did a bunch more stuff and then while Michelle was here, the, the community finally came together and said, "Look, what we should do ... " and this has been done in other communities, by the way, around the country because I would go to centers meetings and hear all about this; they decided that rather than diffuse all our administrative resources what we'll do is

we'll form a center and we'll put the youth group under the center and they'll merge and then we'll—because the money to staff people was at the cen- was at the youth group. If that made sense. We had the space, we had the staffing, and—but we needed that center, so that's ... then that merger happened. And then after the merger happened and that ... and you know, there's always growing pains and we had, you know, different people moving. We went through, we had a year or two where we went through Executive Directors like water, or it seemed like it. It probably wasn't that bad. Until we finally go Louis. So, once Louis was in place then things became, I don't know, sane again, or stable. Because Louis has a good head on his shoulders. Louis knows what he's doing even though he was young and he didn't have a lot of experience, Louis—if he didn't know something, he knew how to figure it out or knew who to talk to or whatever, and I, you know, I did a lot of things to coach him there, too. I mean, Louis any time he needed support I'm like, "Okay, I'm there for you. Especially if it's youth." You know...

MF: So now they're meeting here.

ME: Yeah. So what happened is then we outgrew that space and so we really needed a place that was our own space, the center. Not part of another organization's space. That became, you know ... that—that's ... and I kept saying to people, you know, "We need to be back in Midtown because as much as the space we had here in Midtown in the basement was not the ideal space, but location and, except for the bar over there, was really good." Midtown is, is close to the Scholar, which the kids love, but it's also close to where a lot of people in the community live. It's just a good: we have a movie theater, we have restaurants that are affordable because what was starting to happen is the restaurants downtown were outpricing what the kids could afford if they wanted to go out to eat before meeting, whatever. So this is—this has become a really good place to— to draw everybody in. And so I kept saying, "You know, we need to go back to Midtown." And then I think Stewart was on the board then, Stewart Landon and some other people, and Stewart's like, "Yeah, you know, I got some contacts down Midtown, they would need to really look at that." So—and I understand at this point ... I'm not here every week anymore because it's gotten too big for me and I'm still trying to figure out what my role is and then things got busy other places, and I couldn't ... and then they changed the meeting night of the group so I couldn't be here anymore to run the youth group or participate because I had to run a group at my, my—the practice where I work, so that became another issue. So my role in the organization has kind of evolved and shifted through all this. But then we found the space here and we've been here and this has been a good space. Good- good space, good location, so.

MF: So now you're kind of a jack-of-all-trades consultant?

ME: Well, I do a lot of things. So like if Louis needs somebody to go out and do trans- or "gay 101" somewhere like ... you know, go out to an agen- a human service agency or wherever and educate people about whatever topic—LGBT topic, and he has no one else, I'll go out and do it or if he needs me to do it with him I'll go do it. If the ... I don't know, sometime in this school year there was two or three outreach events that happened on the same day, "Could you go out to

Susquehanna township and do this outreach event for us because I can't be in two places at once, you know." I help out with PRIDE festival, which I've always done because I have a truck, I- I will come in and if-if ... now they have a full-time youth worker so that's been a big help, but if they're having issues with any of the youth and they need advice on that, I'll come in and consult with the people who are leading the youth group. Sometimes I'll come down and sit in on the youth group just to get a sense of what is really going on here, what are the dynamics in the group, you know, what—and then I'll come back and make suggestions to the group leaders, "Why don't you try this, why don't you try that." Or if we're having issues with a particular youth, they might call me in and say, "Hey, you know, what do you—what are your feelings about how we ought to deal with this youth, because here's what they're doing." And there have been times when we have the youth group running in Carlisle that was running on a night I didn't work so if Louis didn't have anybody else he'd call me and I'd go out to Carlisle and run that meeting for him. So I've done those kinds of things.

MF: What's the attendance like at Carlisle and—and here?

ME: Well, they're not that group in Carlisle anymore. That attendance ... we could never really get that group totally off the ground, I think for a variety of reasons. One is because Carlisle is a more rural area so if you're not right ... If you're in downtown Carlisle, and kids live in Carlisle like in the city of Carlisle, they can walk to you or, you know, there's some public transportation—not very much. When they were meeting out at the Unitarian Church, which is kind of on the way to Mechanicsburg—that's really out in like the middle of farmland, although that's not that far from Carlisle, but you know, it doesn't take much to be in the middle of farmland there—I think kids had a harder time getting there, but some kids were coming up from Mechanicsburg because if they had transportation that was closer. So, and then we had space that's not outside of town but wasn't in the middle of town and it was a nice space, but then we just weren't getting the attendance, so they decided not to run that group anymore. Over the years, I mean, for the last twenty, twenty-five years it's always been a challenge as to ... you know, those kids are out there in Gettysburg, New Oxford, you name it; they're out there, but getting to them or getting them to us has always been a challenge because, as you know, in central Pennsylvania, public transportation doesn't happen. You know?

MF: And the attendance here? An average would you say?

ME: Oh, God, I haven't been down here in a while. Last time I was here, thirty kids. I mean, it—it ...

MF: So do they use this space?

ME: Oh, yeah. They meet in this room. Now, they'll also use that other room there--

MF: Lounge.

ME: But, you know, you might have a night where maybe it's a low night for whatever reason and, you know, maybe we got ten kids show up but there's often nights where they have thirty kids here and they're seeing kids from 13, 14 years old up to 17, 18. Now, what they're trying to do is they started another young adults group on Sunday that runs from—the age is like 18, kind of that 18 to 24 age group and that group started out really slow and all of a sudden—I talked to Louis about a month ago—that is really taking off. That group is really growing and so you're seeing a lot more young people. They're not kind of moving out of that youth, but a lot of young people now that are showing up here on Sunday. So we're going to see probably more 18 year olds move over from the Wednesday night high school group because they—they're graduated; but they, they feel there's something there to move to where before when there wasn't a lot of people on Sunday night they were, kind of didn't want to transition.

MF: So what ... changes have you seen? You know, are you seeing more parental acceptance? What are the big changes you've seen and what might still need to happen? What do you want to still see happen?

ME: Well, parental acceptance with the gay, lesbian, bisexual youth has been a huge change. It went from—I knew maybe four or five parents—to now I know most of the parents or most of the parents will drop their kids off here. These kids are out to their parents; the parents bring them here, the parents pick them up, parents call-call us and say, “Can I bring my kid to group? Can I meet with you?” We've had, you know, if we ... we often have enough volunteers where if we have somebody sitting and talking to that parent and asking-answering their questions, while their kid's participating in the group. I mean, it's just been unbelievable over the last, you know, twenty years that the significant change in that. Kids are out at school more often, kids who are gay, lesbian, or bi are, in general. There are exceptions; they are safer at school in general. There is still times when, you know, we still have some name calling and bullying, but if they're willing to go to the office, a lot of the school districts in the area won't tolerate that and they'll—they'll take action. Now, there's always exceptions, but those kids [are] in general safer. I'm not hearing the stories of physical assault that I used to hear. I'm not hearing kids put in special education so that ... that was the school's idea of keeping them safe. You know, back in the day when I first started to hear ... We ... one of our youth had their car firebombed. And the ... and it was investigated and it was said, “Oh, it was spontaneous combustion.” You know, like, really? So—so that ... that whole thing's has really changed.

Now what—what's happening now is: the focus is on kids who are trans or genderqueer or so. The—often the school, the schools, are getting better, and—and again, it depends on where in the state you are and what school district. We have some school districts who have decent policies. If things are reported to them, they will take care of them appropriately. I have other schools who are doing for the trans youth what they did for the gay and lesbian youth, but they haven't figured out that this is a little different, and it's not enough. And so I've had a couple conversations with school people who are like, “Melinda, you know us, we're doing all the right ...” I'm like, “Well, yeah, the stuff you're doing is the right stuff but I have to tell you, you're

not doing enough yet, and here's why." Because they don't get the bathroom thing. There's a lot they don't understand about. Because there are ... we had youth here who were gay and lesbian who didn't understand the trans kids, so we had to explain it to them. Now, these kids are talking because we have more trans kids who are out and who aren't willing to be hidden anymore. Now there's a lot more dialogue going on with the youth, so the youth get it, but a lot of adults don't get it and so we—we really have to get that education up to speed. So I have kids who are getting treated pretty well in some of their school districts, I have kids who've elected to be cyber-schooled their senior and junior- junior and senior year of high school because it's like, "I'm not getting beaten up or anything, but I'm just tired of it, you know? I-I'm tired of the bathroom thing, I'm tired of people using the wrong pronouns, I'm tired that you get a sub in here and you can't call me by the right name, you know? So I'm out of here." So, and- and- and I've had one youth, love him, he took a year off, worked through a lot of stuff, got himself together and said, "I'm going back for my senior year and I'm going to take them on." And that school district—he made a lot of changes in a year and they were very responsive, I have to say that. They didn't move as fast as he wanted them to. I'd say, "Wait a minute. You don't understand, you've gotten more done than anybody thought you ever would have."

MF: Wow.

ME: Because by the end of the year, I mean, we had—we had the allies group situated the way it needed to be because there were some issues with that. We had the attorneys and the school board researching and coming up with an appropriate policy that got voted on. I mean there's just like ... you know, I'm like, "You don't understand, these things take time. The fact that you could do this in a school year, you have no idea." But—but, so you have that going on and then I have a youth that I work with who's farther away from here, like an hour or two from here, and everything in that school is up to the principal, so that—that—that girl can't use the appropriate bathroom. She got detention for using the "wrong" bathroom. It's just one thing after another. It was at the principal's discretion. She wanted to run on the girl's track team. Hgot to decide whether she could do that or not. You know, because we don't have any laws in Pennsylvania that protect these youth. Our federal laws don't protect these youth. There is not clear position coming from the Department of Ed, so right now, in Pennsylvania, everything rests either with the school board or with the principal of the building. So, and that's why we have two lawsuits going on in public schools in two different places in this state. So...

MF: What about the current political climate with our new president? Are kids feeling more... ostracized, as if the new regime has given permission for that to be stepped up again?

ME: They're worried. There's a lot of anxiety and they're worried. They're trying not to worry too much. They're trying to wait. Like a lot of us are like: "Okay, maybe it's not that bad." Because we don't want to get panic-stricken, but at the same time, every time something new comes down the pipe, you know, we have reason to be worried. You know, I personally am calling my legislators and writing letters more times than I have ever done because I am that

worried. I mean I ... you know, I—I just ... every time I turn around, I—I’m ... and it’s not just on LGBT issues. It’s on ... you know, I’m a psychologist, so, you know, I’m getting stuff from APA [American Psychological Association] and PPA [Pennsylvania Psychological Association], you know, because like stuff that I shouldn’t have to like call a legislator about and say, “Are you kidding me?” So, I—you know, I’m—I’m really—I’m really worried from a lot of fronts but, but my sense is the youth are very educated nowadays, and they’re worried. But, I see more youth getting involved in advocacy.

MF: That’s great. Is there anything else you’d want to share that we haven’t covered?

ME: Oh, I don’t know. I have, I have, I have so much stuff. I have pictures, I—every time I find something in my house I bring it in here. I’ve brought in every t-shirt, I’ve brought in the old Bi-GLYAH business cards, I- I’m- I’ll still be finding stuff in my house and bringing it in here. I- just so many things. I mean, I remember when Candace Gingrich came to group. That was another thing, you know. And—and the response from the youth. Because, you know, here’s somebody who is related to one of the most conservative Republican people in the country, you know, and she grew up around here. And—and so she was great when she came here. Mara Keisling was great when she was involved with the youth. You know, we’ve had so ... and a lot of local people. We’ve had a lot of interesting things go on here over the years. And so I’ve seen a lot of changes and a lot of growth. I’ve seen the whole LGBT community—It’s not perfect yet, but they’ve really come together and, and are doing things in a way that is really transformative and making a difference. Yeah, I don’t know. I just ... there’s just so much stuff. I could probably sit here and, you know, you guys gave me what, like 45 minutes. I, I could probably sit here and talk for days because I, you know, I’ve been in the community for 20 years, you know, and I—it’s gotten to the point where people aren’t sure what my sexual orientation is. And I don’t tell them.

MF: [Laughs] Well, that’s a compliment.

ME: Yeah.

MF: That—that’s the way it should be.

ME: In fact, the youth have had a discussion one day. We were up at St. Stephen’s and they, they were ... somebody used that “breeder” word, you know, and they didn’t know anything about me. They were kind of relatively new kids so they started this “breeder” thing and the other kids are going, “No, you can’t say that. That’s not a good word.” “Well what—there’s, there’s no straight people here.” “And they’re going like, well, yeah, there is.” And so then they ... the youth are doing this whole thing back and forth and, and: “Well, Melinda’s not straight.” “Well, okay, well what is Melinda?” “Well, Melinda’s just Melinda.” I’m like, “Okay, that’s probably the best compliment that I ever got.” But yeah, that’s—that’s kind of how it, ... you know, I just go where ... and people say, “You just show up anywhere and fit right in and we don’t know how you do it, but ... [laughs.]”

MF: So, I guess to conclude, do you get to see these youth as adults too?

ME: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

MF: So you get to ...

ME: They're all over my Facebook page. They're all over town. I run into them. Sometimes they come up to me and I don't recognize them and they're like, "Remember me?" "Oh, yeah!" Yeah. They friend me on Facebook, there's—there's youth in Massachusetts that are on my—connect with me on Facebook. Some people in New Jersey. They're all over now. It's just amazing, you know, all the places. Some of them are—have leadership roles in the community now. It's really great to watch, you know, it's like, "Okay, maybe it's getting better because we kind of taught them a few things like this is how you advocate and this is how you be a leader and this is how you work with other people and, you know, and..."

MF: Yeah. Right.

ME: So, yeah, I think Sharon and I look around all the time and go, "Wow." You know?

MF: Well, I want to thank you for the interview and thank you for all your advocacy and involvement because I think it was very important to the youth and still continues to be, so.

ME: Yeah.

MF: Alright.

[Tape Ends]