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**Interviewee:** Mary Nancarrow

**Interviewer:** Ann Van Dyke

**Date of Interview:** Oct. 9, 2013

**Location of Interview:** Mary Nancarrow's home in Harrisburg, PA

**Transcriber:** Katie McCauley

**Proofreader:** Lillian Sweeney

**Abstract:**

Born in 1951, Mary Nancarrow grew up in the Harrisburg area, and from a young age, she has been involved in the movements for LGBT and women's rights, especially for Central Pennsylvania. She has worked extensively with NOW, serving as the president for Pennsylvania NOW in 1984 and 1985. As part of this involvement, she helped to plan the first march on Washington for LGBT rights, which was eventually held in 1987. Additionally, she was one of the founders of the Pennsylvania Rural Gay Caucus, and she was also very involved in the drafting and passing of the Harrisburg Human Relations Ordinance, ensuring that the legislation provided protection against discrimination for LGBT people. She recently retired from the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission after over 20 years. In this interview, she discusses what it was like to be gay in the '70s, '80s, and '90s, particularly in the Central Pennsylvania area, recalling discrimination she and others faced during that time period, her struggles with coming out to her parents, notable events of the era and her personal reaction to them, and her dedication to LGBT and women's rights and its role in her life.

[The first two and a half minutes of the video are the people involved figuring out the camera and the audio.]

**AVD:** It's October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2013. We are at the home of Mary Nancarrow in Harrisburg. [Full address removed.] Bob Kegriss is the cameraman. My name is Ann Van Dyke, and I'll be doing the interview. So, please give us your whole name.

**MN:** My name is Mary Nancarrow—that's spelled N-A-N-C-A-R-R-O-W.

**AVD:** Y—your birthdate and place?

**MN:** It really was the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1951, in Harrisburg.

**AVD:** And what are your parents' names?

**MN:** My—my dad's name is Bill—was William T. Nancarrow, and my mom is Hope Dunmeyer(ph) Nancarrow.

**AVD:** Do you have siblings?

**MN:** Yes, I have a twin brother, Jim, and a sister, Ruth, who is about four and a half years older than I.

**AVD:** And what were your parents' occupations?

**MN:** Well, my mom was a fiscal assistant or clerk for the Department of Labor and Industry for many years, and before I came along, she worked at the Na—Navy Depot. She retired in 1980. My dad was a hairdresser, and before that, he was—he worked as a mechanic on the Pennsy Railroad [Pennsylvania Railroad] and was in World War II and saw action in the Pacific.

**AVD:** How long have you lived in Harrisburg?

**MN:** Well, I grew up in Penbrook, which is a little town that's just, actually, like, the first suburb of Harrisburg, and went to Central Dauphin East High School, and I left to go to Shippensburg—State College at that time—University and returned to the Harrisburg area for my career in the '70s.

**AVD:** And how many years of schooling?

**MN:** Well, I graduated from Shippensburg. Took me a long time to do it. [both laugh] But I did.

**AVD:** And your degree?

**MN:** Is a B.S.

**AVD:** In?

**MN:** In Psychology.

**AVD:** Okay. Okay.

**MN:** And with a minor in English, History, whatever. All that stuff.

**AVD:** Are you a member of any religious group?

**MN:** I was raised a Catholic, and I went to St. Margaret Mary for my grade school, and then—I had parents who said, especially my mom, “I don't care where you go, as long as you go somewhere,” so soon after my Confirmation in the Catholic faith, I became a Protestant. [chuckles] Okay. And through my teen years, I experimented with—I went to my dad's church, where his second wife went, to Memorial Lutheran; I was involved with Youth for Christ for a while; and I also, as a young adult, attended Friends Meeting; and also, I dated a guy who was into the Baha'i faith. But I ended up not participating or joining any of those. I—I think that at this time, I am basically Christian, with agnostic moments.

**AVD:** Freelance. [laughs]

**MN:** Yes.

**AVD:** Have you ever been married?

**MN:** No.

**AVD:** Okay. And your occupation?

**MN:** Well, I—I was a—I just retired a couple months ago as a supervisor for the Pennsylvania Human—Human Relations Commission. I was a supervisor for about 20 years, and before that, an investigator, and—at the Harrisburg regional office—and before that, I worked in Community Energy, and in conservation projects and alternative energies, like solar and so forth, for low-income folks.

**AVD:** And would you say a little about what the Human Relations Commission does?

**MN:** Well, Human Relations Commission is the state's anti-discrimination agency, and it forces the non—the anti-discrimination laws for Pennsylvania. You know, when I first went to the commission, Ronald Reagan had just been elected, and he hadn't taken office yet, but he had promised to do away with the Department of Energy, the Department of Labor, and—Education. So I wanted to go somewhere where it was true to me that was not going to be in danger of being eliminated, because in the Department of Community Affairs, we depended on federal funds from all three of those departments. So I interviewed with the Pennsylvania State—or the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission—Homer Floyd, who was the executive director, and Thelma Griffith-Johnson, who was the regional director. And this was in the fall of 1980. And it was my very first out interview. I was asked by Mr. Floyd, "What would you do if you have investigated a complaint and found no cause, or not enough evidence to prove discrimination?" And I explained that, by virtue of working in the field of lesbian and gay rights for the last decade, that I knew all too well what it was like not to have any redress, and because I worked with people and knew people who had been discriminated against, but there was nothing that could be done, so I was unfortunately in a position frequently of explaining that there was not legal help or redress—nothing that could be done further for them. And I still consider non-discrimination, or—and working against discrimination to be my life's work.

**AVD:** And would you talk a little about the limited protected classes at the Human Relations Commission?

**MN:** Well, in the Human Relations Commission, in their law, they cover sex, race, age over 40, disability, support animals, ai—and—and—a lot, a number of protected classes—ancestry—but not sexual orientation or gender identity, and that was true 30 years ago—33 years ago, when I applied, and it's still true today. A lot of the work that we did in the early lesbian/gay rights movement in Pennsylvania was to try to address that situation and include us in the law.

**AVD:** When and where did you have your first job?

**MN:** Well, I think my first job was in labor and industry—that was the first real job, I guess. I had an—some employment interviewing jobs within the department, and I—as I said—worked in the Department of Community Affairs for about three years in the '70s, but I've worked all my life, you know, even if it was shoveling snow, mowing grass, and cleaning houses—put myself through school through the library, at—when I was in college, and I also—also worked in

the canneries—Heinz Company in Chambersburg, for goodness sake, and I have lots of funny stories about—about that. But—

**AVD:** Did you—

**MN:** [interrupts] I was a card-carrying teamster at one time. [both laugh]

**AVD:** Did you ever serve in the military?

**MN:** No. The rest of my family did.

**AVD:** Okay. How about memberships in community organizations or professional organizations? Community groups?

**MN:** Well, I—I am now part of the Center—I mean, I attend a lot of the programs for the LGBT Community Center, and—was part of the board that—or committee that was part of establishing the groundwork before the—the community center ever came into—into being. I was certainly a part of NOW, the National Organization for Women, throughout the ‘70s and ‘80s and into the—a little bit into the ‘90s, and more recently have rejoined, but you can’t look at our community and the struggle for our civil rights without acknowledging the role of the women’s movement and the civil rights movement—the anti-war movement, and so many organizations that helped along the way. I was—you know, there—I’ll talk a little bit about the local LGBT organizations that I was a part of in the s—in the ‘70s, like the Switchboard and the statewide organizations that I was helping to lead, like the Rural Gay Caucus, and I was very active in the Justice Campaign that followed it. I—I was also—because I was involved with the National Organization for Women throughout that period of time, I was elected state president for Pennsylvania, now.

**AVD:** And what years?

**MN:** Those were 1984 and ‘85—two full years. And that was the period of time that we were trying to get Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro elected as president and vice president. And that would have really meant a big turnaround for women in this state as well as LGBT folks. The—the impetus for all those organizations was to achieve a greater degree of freedom to be who you really were. And I was used to being different and used to being a rebel, okay, used to trying to make a difference throughout my young adulthood and—and after that.

**AVD:** When did you first realize that you were a lesbian, and—and, you know, what—what—when was that?

**MN:** Well, like I said, I always felt a little different. I was a tomboy growing up, and I took some ribbing for that, but I was very proud of being the second fastest girl in my high school. I was very—I was thrilled about playing field hockey. I was glad to—to be a part of things. And I started dating guys, did not feel particularly at ease. I was actually engaged at one point to a great guy who was a few years older than I and a graduate student at Shippensburg, but it—during those college years, I was coming to learn a lot more about myself and feeling drawn to

both women and men. And the most interesting people were the gay people. And I also knew that I needed to be a part of the women's movement because I just sensed and knew that I would need to be in charge of my—of supporting myself, okay? And there were only three careers that a woman could go into at that time: teacher, nurse, clerk. And I didn't want to be steered into any of those very worthy professions, okay? I wanted to chart my own path. I also wanted to be paid equally. But—I—I think that I knew that my relationship with Alan (ph) was not working out when he s—when I explained that, “Gee, I needed to—“ I wanted to drop a certain course. He said, “Well, I don't know if I want the mother of my children to be dropping courses,” and— or going into a different major, or whatever, and that just got me to thinking, you know, “Gosh, I don't want a guy telling me how to—to live my life, and gee, I'm not really thrilled about having children.” [chuckles] You know? So it was at a time of upheaval in my own life, and it kind of took over my whole life—about, you know, figuring out who I really was, what my identity was, and I—I determined that I was so much more comfortable with women and attracted to women, and despite everything that my counselor at Shippensburg was telling me at the time, you know, I knew how my heart was, and I knew who I was falling in love with, really, and I just said, “Well, this is the way I need to go, however uncharted.” It was a very difficult time to be gay, in the early '70s and thereafter. I—when anything—whenever anything is a big problem, in my mind, I read a lot, and so I was trying—I'm trying to read everything I could get my hands on. And at the same time, in '74, I met my first lover—we didn't have the word 'partner' in the lexicon at that time. She was my lover, and she was about three years younger than I, and we kind of fell head over heels in love and explored this new world together. The—the comfort and the joy of being in that relationship was really quite special, and it led me for the first time to learn a little bit about being in a relationship. We went to Chambersburg to try to buy rings. We didn't have a concept of marriage. We didn't—we kind of pooh-poohed conventional marriage, and—but we knew that we were committed to each other. And so we went into the jewelry store in Chambersburg, and we were looking for rings, okay? Well, they had—we called them 'friendship rings,' and—or we tried on some rings, and I still have my ring, even though we've long parted, but the—the jewelry counter clerk—she said, “Well, I don't know about you, but where we come from, these are wedding rings.” [laughs] Oh, it was—it was—it was funny and a little scary, but we bought our rings, and we—we thought we would be growing old together. So. But Char (ph) and I actually explored the—the burgeoning women's movement and the gay rights movement together, and found people, like our friend Lynn(ph), who was setting up the first lesbian/gay rights organization on campus, the Alliance.

**AVD:** So that—and the next question is, what was your first contact with the LGBT community in Central PA, so that was it?

**MN:** Yes, and it was through friends at school, at college, who were also going through a lot of questioning, or who had just said themselves, “Look, I know I've been—I'm gay, okay, so I'll just have to deal with everything in my life in order to be gay.” But at that time, Stonewall had happened, of course, but there was rampant discrimination, and Char and I rented a small apartment, a farmhouse outside of Shippensburg. We were both going to school there. And our first experience with this discrimination is that the landlord came to the—pounded on the door one day and said, “I need you to leave.” Okay? And I had a thought—I had a feeling that—that it was because of our relationship, but I needed to make—I forced him to tell us. Keep—keep asking, “So why? What's the reason? We're paying our rent, we're—you know—we're not

wild, crazy people. We take care of your place.” And he finally stammered, “Well, it’s your relationship.”

**AVD:** How do you think he knew?

**MN:** “I can’t have”—I don’t know, other than, you know, we were certainly not open. Everybody was in the closet then.

**AVD:** Sure.

**MN:** It was—being in the closet was simply the way things were. You couldn’t think of even trading a glance of affection, much less hold hands, or you would be—you could be assaulted, and you certainly wouldn’t be allowed to—to live peacefully, not in a rural community like Shippensburg. We—we got together with other folks to form the Rural Gay Caucus. These were folks from all over the Central Pennsylvania area—I mean, everywhere but Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, although we took some guidance from the folks in Philadelphia, who were already organized under the able leadership of Rita Adessa—the Philadelphia Gay Task Force. But we had real problems in rural Pennsylvania and small city Pennsylvania, because, you know, one of the guys, he had been in the Navy, and he lived around Lewistown, Sunbury, Williamsport area, I believe—well, he had been really—he had been jumped on his carrier, and he had his head thrust down the latrine, okay? And—and he almost drowned. He was beaten just because people thought he was gay, not because he ever acted [sighs] on those desires or his being. Betty [?], and—Easton, Joe [Burns] from Lehigh Valley, Allentown—they were involved in Le-Hi-Ho, which is an organization that started up there. Dan [?] from Williamsport. Sam [?] from Sunbury—his partner taught in schools, and they had to be very, very closeted. There were—and people from Lancaster, from Harrisburg, from Shippensburg, from State College, even from a little bit further west. We all got together, and I’m not even sure I recall now where, how, but we got together once a month. Sometimes we met at the Railroad House on the third floor in Marietta. We sent out our meeting notices and our newsletter by mimeograph machine. We tried to organize to create some positive awareness of lesbian and gay people, and to try to have a place where we could gather information about people who had been discriminated against. Again, Philadelphia had started to catalog—or to gather information about discrimination—trying to be as, you know, a part of the foundation for changing the Human Relations Act.

**AVD:** Now, at that time, did you ever socialize in bars?

**MN:** Sure. We—there were a number of bars here in Harrisburg—the D-Gem was a women’s bar. There were a number of bars that had more men. We—we would travel—there was an underground knowledge and gay guides of where to go, and when I was on business trips, I would consult my little guide and see where the local gay bar was, or sometimes it was only gay for a night a week, or [laughs] or—so it was—that was a good way of meeting people or establishing a community. There were potluck dinners. There were—

**AVD:** Where were the potlucks?

**MN:** I think they were in Harrisburg and in Lancaster—I didn't really get involved with that, but mostly I hung out with—when we moved to Harrisburg area, or Mechanicsburg, we hung out with NOW folks. And because they were a huge bunch of folks who were committed to lesbian rights and gay-friendly. In addition, the male leadership of these organizations that I was involved with—we talked into, “Hey, we are taking a lot of help and education on how to organize from NOW, so you've gotta be a NOW member,” and they did, for many years. We also established parity within these organizations for female and male leaders—co-leaders, okay? Presidents or chairpeople. For the Rural Gay Caucus, Justice Campaign that followed, and so forth. We were really—we organized because of several really seminal events that moved us, okay—I talked about the guy in the Navy who was looking at a lifetime of harassment. I—I joined because of a young man who was a high school student, 17 years old, who killed himself in Lewistown, because he didn't have anywhere to call or to go to, thought he was abnormal—this was even as, or right after, or before the American Psychological Association had removed being gay from their list of illnesses—mental illnesses.

**AVD:** When you said you joined because of his death, what was it that you joined?

**MN:** Well, because—

**AVD:** What—what did you join?

**MN:** Well, I got active, okay—

**AVD:** Oh, oh.

**MN:** —Whether it was in the Shippensburg Alliance—Students' Alliance or starting out with the Rural Gay Caucus—

**AVD:** Okay.

**MN:** —Or getting together with other folks. And, you know, because... You know, I—we all didn't know what freedom would look like, okay. But we all were trying to make sure that we did not have to spend our entire lives in the closet. I couldn't—you know, you couldn't come out. One of the things that happened in '72 and '73, '74, is Joe Acanfora at Penn State. He helped to find—found—HOPS, Homophiles of Penn State, as a student. Now, he had a GPA of, like, 3.4, okay. He was a student teacher. He passed his student teaching, but because of his being gay and his fighting to establish HOPS at Penn State—he was openly gay—the university refused to allow him to be credited as a student teacher, and even years late—a couple years later, after he—Joe won in court, and they had to certify him—they refused to allow him—actually, I don't think he was ever certified. I think that as the story goes—as the timeline goes, they refused to certify him as a student teacher even though he passed his student teaching with flying colors, because of the good moral character clause, okay? And Joe fought that in the courts and lost, okay? He finally—he never was able to teach in Pennsylvania, all right? He got hired in Montgomery County, Maryland, okay, but Montgomery County School District revoked his employment contract over the controversy of his being gay, and when Penn State refused to

certify him. As having passed the student teacher—this was a fight that, then, Joe took all the way up to the Supreme Court and lost at every turn, okay?

**AVD:** Do you remember what year it was that he lost?

**MN:** '74 was his final appeal that he lost, okay?

**AVD:** Oh, okay.

**MN:** So we knew that—well, first of all, the Rural Gay Caucus was trying to fight all this anti-gay legislation—legislation that was introduced year after year, session after session, to prohibit gay people from being nurses, from working in daycare, from teaching at any level, from, you know, a myriad of occupations and professions that all of us were training to do. And it was all to try to keep us in the closet. And so our very livelihoods—future livelihoods relied upon whether we could organize and fight back. We had a lot of anti-gay fundamentalist preachers, who were always on the stomp against us throughout the '70s.

**AVD:** More then than now?

**MN:** Much more than now. Much more than now. And in the later '70s, you had people like Anita Bryant, who were—who was the—long-ago beauty queen-turned-gospel singer—I won't say a particularly good singer, but she had the ear, literally, of a vast majority of Americans. Well, she was the spokesperson for the Florida Orange Growers' Association, and this was in the mid-'70s, and she came out against gay people. This was even before Jerry Falwell and all the other right-wing preachers, tele-preachers, were getting on the bandwagon against gay people. Anita Bryant came to the Bloomsburg Fair in the mid- to late '70s, and we joined up with Pennsylvania NOW members and a number of people from all over the Northern Tier at Williamsport and over to Allentown, Bethlehem, Easton, and Harrisburg—we all—we all got a permit to demonstrate against her appearance at the Bloomsburg Fair. Well, I don't know if you know anything about the Bloomsburg Fair. It is the social event in the Northern Tier, and the day that we went there, we went with a banner for lesbian/gay rights, and I'd say there were about 30, 35 of us, maybe. We had the Pennsylvania State Police at the beginning, but as we walked—or marched around the oval, which, I don't know, is a quarter of a mile long, in the stadium, we were surrounded by 10,000, easily 10,000, very hostile people. And we were chanting about gay rights, and I have never felt so frightened in my life.

**AVD:** The State Police didn't stay with you?

**MN:** Oh, no. They disappeared after about the first ten steps, okay? So there was no protection there. We fortunately made it all the way around, but a lot of the heckling and the cat-calls and the hate in those people's faces and voices and—them coming very, very close to us, into our personal space, as if they were going to hit us—that was very telling about the deep-seated hatred toward lesbians and gay people. And that—images that I'll never forget. [pauses, then shrugs]

**AVD:** Okay. What impact—was there any impact on your coming out on your work life?

**MN:** Well, most lesbians and gay men who grew up during my era will tell you that we were in and out of the closet. Very few of us felt comfortable about being out at work.

**AVD:** Did it ever have an impact on your work life?

**MN:** Yes. I knew that I was going to work for the Commonwealth, because, thanks to Governor Milton Shapp, in the '80s, there was an executive order that said that sexual orientation could not be used to discriminate. It made me feel that I had to choose a place where I was less likely to be discriminated against, but if I were, then I could have some redress, okay? As a—as a state employee, for example. And—other kudos to Governor Shapp—he established the Governor's Council for Sexual Minorities, which I also was pleased to serve on.

**AVD:** Was there any impact of your coming out on your family life?

**MN:** Well, yes. You know—well—just getting back to the work life, during the '70s, I only came out at work one time, and that was to kind of point to my ring to a guy who was hitting on me, so I said, “No, I'm...thank you, but I am—I—I—have a lover, and she would be very upset if I—“ [both laugh] But—or words to that effect. But even at the Commission, I think it was the '80s—it was the late '80s until I—was well-known that I was a lesbian, or perhaps a few years after. Well, a few years after I was working with the Commission, I started working with the— the Harrisburg Ordinance, but that's another story. A later story. So I guess everybody knew, even though I wasn't talking about it a lot. I—one of our green thumb workers, Sidi(ph)—she was making a comment in the mid-'80s about one of these tele-preachers who was caught prominently being bisexual or—or in an adulterous affair, and she had made a pejorative remark, probably 'faggot' or something like that, and one of my co-workers, Mike(ph)—he said, and I wasn't there for this—he said, “You know, Sidi, Mary is gay, and Mary's your friend, and you get together with Mary.” This was an older black woman. Well, she came to me and she apologized, and she said, “I need to—I want to have you and your mother over to dinner,” which was a really big deal, and we talked about her life and her kids and our lives, and I learned so much from Sidi about her life and—and the African-Americans who were around me. But—in my family life, you know, I came out in May of '74 to my parents, each one—because they had divorced when I was six, I went to each one separately. My mother was very upset—angry—and cried. I had already talked to my sister—I said, “One of these days, I'm going to be coming out to Mom, and you—she confides in you, so you're—please stick up for me.” [laughs] Okay, so—or, “Be prepared for her—for her consternation.” My dad just cried. He was upset because—I learned later that they had visions of—and dreams for me as an adult, and this didn't fit in with their plans, but he was much more supportive, and, as it turned out, well—I had to come out because I was part of a press conference that NOW and some other groups had called to call attention to the fact that the state Human Relations Act did not prohibit discrimination. This was 1974. And—Rachel McLaughlin(ph), from NOW—she was still in her teens. She was a firebrand who was very vocal at this press conference, and Char and I were on camera as gay students, so I knew that I had only 24 hours [laughs] before it was broadcast, to come out, and... My brother, who was working for the Commonwealth at that time, or for another—I guess he was working for a bank, he said—when I told him, he said, “Well, there goes my promotion.” I said— [slaps own cheek, laughs] “Okay, I'm not sure what that meant!” But anyway, I—my—

my folks, particularly my mother, had a hard time getting used to Char in my life, my first lover, and so I said, “Well, why don’t you come to PFLAG with me?”—Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays—that I had already checked out. And, you know, “You can learn a few things and I won’t stick around—you know, this is for parents to talk,” and she said, “Well, is your father going?” And I said, “Yes!” And so I called my dad and I said, “Why don’t you come with me to PFLAG?” [laughs] He said, “Is your mother going?” And I said, “Yes!” [laughs] And so we all went together—

**AVD:** You know, we’re recording this... [both laugh]

**MN:** Of course! And this—so this was in the mid-six—‘70s, rather, and that was—Jackie Schulze, who was one of the movers and shakers with PFLAG, and the pastor who had Tressler Lutheran, now Diakon Services, was very good with PFLAG in those years. So I exited that first meeting after about 15 minutes and said, “We’ll meet for pie later.” They didn’t actually know that I was going to leave, but here they were, but they—they did well, and they both went for a couple years. My mother—my dad didn’t need to go anymore, he thought, which was fine. My mother ended up being secretary, and she actually was—went to universities and—to talk on behalf of PFLAG, and—with Jackie, and she also was broadcast on one of the local TV stations, on their talk shows, but just as lesbians and gay men have to come out, so do parents, and she was only willing to have them show her hands during that first interview. Later on, she would get—become more—more active.

**AVD:** How long did it take before your brother came around?

**MN:** A few years, I think. He really—really enjoyed my second long-term partner, much more than—probably me. [both laugh]

**AVD:** And—and your sister?

**MN:** Oh yeah, she was always cool.

**AVD:** Okay.

**MN:** Okay. And—you know, but—this was a very conservative family, and I grew up as kind of the black sheep, because I was involved with the—in the anti-war movement when my bro—when my sister and then my brother were in Vietnam. My mother had been the American Legion Auxiliary president, and I think they took it as just another—initially, probably, as something that I might grow out of. But they came to become much more...on board. And—because I think that both my mother and my dad saw other parents struggling, and they would tell them, “Look, I want a relationship with my son, or with my daughter, so I need to understand. I don’t want to shut the door on them just because they are different than what I imagined for them.”

**AVD:** Is there anything else you want to say about the impact of coming out on your civil and political life?

**MN:** Well, it—it led me, I mean—this lambda [indicates necklace] is the sign that we had for gay rights in the '70s. It stands for struggle. And—long before there was a rainbow. We knew that we were in for it. Okay? It was going to be a long struggle, and something we were going to need to work at. So obviously it meant that I would be putting my energies into organizations and groups that held these same values and that, politically, I was only going to be supporting people who would support us as people, and who were going to—who were willing to work to show the truth about lesbian and gay people. They—that we're just leading regular lives out here—boring, in many respects. One of the things—one of the reasons why I can—why I was involved and active was because I learned about a couple, you know, who were together for 40 years—they were so frightened of being out and losing their jobs that—which was very real—that they never even took pictures of one another. Never had, in their home, a picture of the other. And the only pictures that would signify how much they meant to one another was when the one partner died and they had a picture of the gravestone. So, you know, we—we tried to make sure that there—maybe by the end of our lives—we could be free and be who we were. There were many different kinds of people involved. You know, there were men who wore hot pants, short shorts, and men who were, you know, suit and tie kinda guys. There were women who were very butch and women who were, you know, who could put Mary Kay to shame, you know.

**AVD:** [chuckles]

**MN:** There were women and men from all walks of life. I—I say that I'm kind of like the Forrest Gump of the movement in Pennsylvania because, as in the movie *Forrest Gump*, he gets to be a part of a lot of historical events, and meeting a number of people. After my NOW presidency, in '86 I was asked by NOW—national NOW to—help plan the first march on Washington for lesbian/gay rights and LGBT rights that actually happened in '87. In '86 we went to West Hollywood, California. We—and other locales to plan for that march, and I met Cleve Jones, who was the leader of the NAMES Project, the quilt for the—for every—for the folks who had died of AIDS. And just to see—to be a part of that march—I didn't have much to do with organizing the folks in Pennsylvania to attend—I would—I should have done much more, but to be there was so moving, because by that time we had lost so many people. Gary(ph), who was my co-chair for the Rural Gay Caucus. We had lost so many people all up and down each coast—to see everyone whose—whose loved ones left behind the quilt—whose—which grew by the thousands every year in the '80s and '90s—you know. There were rea—there were reasons why there were people there in clusters of the—of the quilt, dressed in white, with Kleenex, because we were all weeping and mourning everyone who had been lost...and knowing that the silence of the Reagan administration and the Bush administration led to their early deaths. Because no one cared if—if some faggots died.

**AVD:** Well, this...

**MN:** So, in all—the—the—oh, well. It's just...it just means so much to have been a part of these people's lives, and have done just a little bit in my inept—sometimes inept way? You know, we learned a lot—we learned a lot as we went along, but—and there's so many people that we had to thank for working together on these—on these goals.

**AVD:** Did your coming out have any impact on your spiritual life?

**MN:** Well, it sure made me want not to be a—a Fundamentalist. Okay?

**AVD:** [chuckles] Okay.

**MN:** And, you know, even for women's rights, I could not be a part of any religion who were bound and determined to dictate to women, or to—as to who to be, what to do with their lives or their bodies, or to even say that you could—could or could not have children, or to be against homosexuality. And I refuse to walk into any church or to support any religious institution in any way, even if it's attending a fundraiser, or a pancake breakfast, who does not agree to the freedom of all people or to the human rights of all people.

[Tape cuts. On next tape:]

**AVD:** This is tape two of the interview of Mary Nancarrow on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2013. So, what changes have you witnessed in—or participated in in this Harrisburg area?

**MN:** Well, I think because there was a—the Switchboard, and because there were organizations like Dignity, and social groups and gatherings outside the bars, and because of the movement of the country to be more open, I think that there are so many more resources for young people who had been feeling so isolated, and—and so frightened of their future, or of themselves. I think because there's Common Roads now, that that's been a big change, and because there are some alliances—Gay-Straight Alliances in schools, since the '90s and the—this—and the decade that we've just passed. There are so many more resources for kids. When I was coming to know myself and coming out to myself, there were no—there were very few books in libraries, okay? There were—you had to go to Philadelphia to Giovanni's Room, or to order anything about real lesbians or gay people, okay? There was no internet, and no cellphones or anything. It was trying to make connections with people. Some folks saw—there was a *Lesbian Connection*, which was a national publication that came out every so often, just to let people know who was around in that area, outside the cities in particular, for folks to connect with or to—to learn about. Because of the ordinance effort, we established in Harrisburg, in June of 1983, coverage for—at the Harrisburg Human Relations Commission, for sexual orientation and transgender. And it was my privilege to be in a group of eight activists in this area who worked with Michael Bowles at the Harrisburg Human Relations Commission—he was the director—and with City Council, and with a wonderful woman who was a member of City Council at that time, Jane Perkins, who went on to become leadership for Service Employees International Union, in California, later on. To—it was my privilege to help draft the legislation to make sure it was state of the art that included transsexual folks—as the term was then—pre- and post-operative, so you didn't have any questions raised about, “Where are you in your journey?” so that people could have access to public accommodations, to housing, and to fair employment in the—within the city limits of Harrisburg. It didn't go far enough. It didn't cover any of the state agencies, it didn't cover anything outside the city limits of Harrisburg, but it was redress. It was a legal cause of action, that one could file a complaint if you were discriminated against. And that was the most compelling time of my life, and the proudest moments. It was the best speech I ever gave in my life, in a room full of antis and preachers, right-wing preachers, both white and African-

American, who were denouncing gay people, and the City Council meetings, during the readings, the first and second readings of the bill, and during final passage, Jane Perkins, bless her heart, had talked with each City Council member. So had all of us, and so had members of our community. We had a pretty good feeling going into it. But it was a unanimous vote for our rights. It was scary, again, in terms of the antis, how vitriolic and—they were in the name of God. We also knew all of our f—had so many more friends come to support us—allies in the community. Some of the changes that I saw in the Harrisburg area were, you know, the Quakers—bless them—Friends Meetinghouse, they had opened up to all of us—the local gay organizations that had nowhere else to go. The YWCA occasionally enabled us to meet for gathering—larger gatherings, but it was the Friends Meetinghouse—the Friends, who for more than a decade, that enabled us to meet so that later on and now, there are many more welcoming churches: the United Church of Christ—United Church of Christ, the Unitarians, the—and some other minis—Share Ministry, here, and so many others that are—are actively partnering with our community. There are so many more allies that came forth after a—in the ‘90s, after Ellen DeGeneres came out on national television, after Matthew Shepard’s murder, who—many more straight allies who—are there for us on marriage equality, and for non-discrimination. So many changes I did not think I would see in my lifetime. I really didn’t.

**AVD:** And do you want to say something more about the increasing number of municipal ordinances?

**MN:** Well, sure. I think now—what are they now, 28, 33? 32? Ordinances, like Harrisburg’s. We were the second in the state. We even were before Pittsburgh. It was Philadelphia, then us, then Pittsburgh. And none of those other ordinances in the ‘80s had the widespread coverage that we did. And I also, you know, know that we’ve been—we’ve gone up and down. Some of the more heart-wrenching events that have happened in this area occurred—I think it was in 1987. It was either ‘87 or ‘89, where [coughs] a self-styled “mountain man” murdered a lesbian and nearly killed her lover on the Appalachian Trail, just south of here, near Gettysburg. Barb, a friend of mine who’s recently passed—she was working in domestic violence and—and in the community—our community, as well, during that time. She was helping Claudia, the survivor, at Hershey Medical Center, and her mother, who had come down from New York, and meeting with them, staying with Claudia in the hospital every day. She asked me to spell her. I met—I was with them for a whole day or two, out at Hershey Medical Center, where Claudia had been taken. This guy had encountered them on—while they were hiking on the Appalachian Trail. Susan had come up from Maryland, where she was going to graduate school, and they were hiking the trail, and he—he had encountered them on the trail, and it was clear that then he followed them, and observed them setting up camp and kissing when they thought they were alone in the early evening. And he shot and killed her lover, who died in her arms, and when she tried to—they took—they had taken cover when shots were ringing out, but when she tried to escape he shot her, too. She pretended to be dead until she couldn’t hear any more. She ran—she ran down the mountain to—in the darkness, by that time—to a road where she was able to hail a passerby. She was Life Lion-ed—helicopter—to Hershey Medical Center. She was shot in the n—in the neck, and the doctors said that if the bullet had gone a quarter of an inch closer to her spine, that she too would have been killed. She was terrified, and it was a terrorizing act for the entire community, but most specifically for lesbians. I went to the trial. The D.A. [defense attorney] in Gettysburg, at the Adams County D.A., would not take this first—he would

not take this case, try this case as first degree murder. He would only get the guy to plead guilty to a lesser charge, because the defense had argued that this guy felt spurned by the vision—the thought—the image of them kissing, and that he felt rejected as a man. [sighs] It was also the fact that he had been in prison and had witnessed rapes in prison before, which he attributed to gay people, okay? But he—his main defense was “They rejected me on the trail,” and the D.A. thought that the jury might actually buy this as a defense. So I—I sat as the defendant stipulated to his facts about what he had done, and I watched the father—Susan’s father, and—who had come up from Virginia—and it was clear that this man was made old and broken by his daughter’s—his only child’s death, and he was devastated. So that meant a couple things, that we couldn’t rely on the justice system, one thing, and that anybody could attack us with an expectation of getting off. After all, Harvey Milk had been killed in California in the ‘70s, and Dan White had gotten off on the Twinkie defense, you know, all those high-sugar snacks had led him to do it. And it also meant that there was no safety, even in numbers, when we were out on a trail or anywhere where we could, as women, be attacked, or as gay men. And then—and in fact, throughout the ‘80s and ‘90s there were countless gay-bashing incidents, here and everywhere, across the country. So acceptance of gays is by no means universal, and has come in fits and starts, when it has come, and—but there is greater tolerance.

**AVD:** And—so this question is—and you’ve already talked about this many ways, but can you boil down what most needs to be done now?

**MN:** Well, we need to get a strong provision in the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act prohibiting discrimination and getting the word out to every Pennsylvania citizen about that. Does it mean that folks won’t be discriminated against? No. But it will mean that people are on notice that it’s unlawful, and they oughtn’t to be doing it. And it also means that—that lesbian, gay, and bisexual, and transgender people are—have the full range of human rights that everyone else gets to enjoy. We—I feel some ways that we are much like African-Americans, who, here in the North and also in the South, were deprived of—of a livelihood, or steered into certain neighborhoods or certain professions, or stymied at every turn, and yet they were paying taxes to support the same system that was oppressing them, and to be a lesbian or a gay man in the ‘70s and ‘80s was oppressive. I don’t use that word lightly. I had—renounced the left-wing and the socialist view of oppressive—oppression and so forth, but when you look around and you see women earning 59 cents to every dollar that an equally qualified man is, and you look at birth control not being available in Shippensburg for anybody who wants it, okay—birth control, for god’s sake—and you look at right-wing preachers dictating what your life is going to be, okay—that’s oppressive. So we have got to go all out against discrimination, and—and for women’s rights as well.

**AVD:** Now, have we—

**MN:** [interrupts] And for, you know, and for marriage equality.

**AVD:** Sure.

**MN:** But there are going to be many more people who decide not to marry, who need a fair shake at a livelihood and equal chance than, you know, so I see—you know, gay bashing, and—

and—and our inclusion in hate crimes legislation to be very important, and non-discrimination and even more so than marriage equality, though I'll take whatever gains we got, okay? And whichever gains we can come by. I would like to feel that I can walk down the street holding my partner's hand and not be looking over my shoulder, and.

**AVD:** Sh...

**MN:** You know, I still feel, after a lifetime of living in and out of the closet simultaneously, you know, that I still won't kiss her in front of my window. I—I was so moved by my retirement from the Commission—there are many things that have moved me, you know. My retirement party was held at the Community Center, the LGBT Community Center. I felt like this was full-circle for me, starting out 33 years ago at the commission and now ending my career out in the open.

**AVD:** So if, as you look back, what would be the—the major events in your life?

**MN:** Well, in my life, there—there are many personal moments that—well, in '94 I—I was diagnosed with leukemia, and the way that my coworkers and friends rallied 'round me and did blood drives and wrote get well cards to me in Pittsburgh where I was having a bone marrow transplant—my sister was my donor, she was fantastic—my family, my—my partner, that—and my mother, who came to Pittsburgh to provide me with 'round the clock care after I—after my transplant, my bone marrow transplant, my sister was my donor—I had to live in Pittsburgh for—for three months afterward. I came back to Lancaster with my partner, who gave up so much and who left the closet. She worked in academia and had every reason to be concerned about—especially because she was the chair of the department, in a high-profile position. She had to decide what was most important at that time to—and I—so many strangers who were so giving, and so it was a real blessing to me, and I got to have almost a second birthday, which was—my transplant day. Wonderful doctors who were just terrific, and—so another one of my causes is to try to get everyone on the national bone marrow donor list—registry, and to, you know, beat back that disease and, you know, my coworkers and I, we—we formed a—Light the N—Light the Night Walks teams, for the Leukemia/Lymphoma Society after I returned to we—work a year later, and American Cancer Society Relay for Life teams, and—they're great. I guess that the whole two years that I was Pennsylvania NOW president, that was—it was hard work, it was 80 hours a week, and—but those were turning points in my life, and to work with the legislature and work with women from every background, and try to get just—protect basic things and to get some laws on the books, for example—to criminalize rape by a boyfriend or a husband, you know, the—and to protect women's right to choose—those were so important, and you know, the heroes in my life are those who—like Ellie Smeal, from Pittsburgh, who—and—who had been doing this for 45 years, all right. And I've had so many teachers, and there are many times in my life that I wanted to—after I would have this spurt of activism for a few years—gosh, I got burnt out, and I needed to retreat. But there are always people who say, “Okay, you need to come back now and do something else.” And so taking some responsibility is not—I struggle with, but we gotta do it.

**AVD:** Is there anything we've left out that you want to add?

**MN:** [pauses] Well—oh, yeah. We wouldn't be able to talk about central Pennsylvania if we didn't talk about Dan. Dan Miller. I was a client of his—he's a CPA [certified public accountant] in Camp Hill, early '90s, and he was—and the '80s—he was a big part of the justice campaign and the organizations coming after that—rallies to—to support LGBT rights, and his boss, who was very conservative, fired him. He was on track to become a partner in this CPA firm. Well, I and many other clients joined Dan at his new practice in Harrisburg, but the old boss doubly harmed Dan by suing him for non-compete clause, and he lost that case that went all the way up through the courts, both on the initial firing and in the non-compete clause, and he had to pay, I think, 100—100,000 dollars to the bastard.

**AVD:** Oh my...

**MN:** Okay? So that's one of the reasons why I'll never stop being a client of Dan Miller's—Miller and Associates, because there are so many people who have suffered and have been harmed because of their being outspoken or even open—openly for LGBT rights.

**AVD:** The last question: do you have books or music or an object that is particularly—that are particularly valuable to you in this journey?

**MN:** Well, sure, I—I still have a lot of my old books, you know, like Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin wrote a book about their life together in California. The women's music movement in the '70s and '80s and still to this day, yes, I—I th—that helped me to realize that—who I was. I have—I'm—I'm note-taker, so I have notes of all those Rural Gay Caucus meetings and so forth that are in my basement, so—I need to look through those, and—as we talk in story circles and so forth about that era, I also put in a plug for the Central Pennsylvania Women's Chorus, which I've had the pleasure of serving on the board for the last 10 years. It's a feminist chorus. It's a chorus that—whose mission statement, 19 years ago, is to promote positive image of lesbians and feminists, and they do that wonderfully, so I'm on their biggest fan, what can I say.

**AVD:** [chuckles] Okay, well, thank you so much. This was so valuable.

**MN:** Well, Ann, I would—I would be remiss if I didn't say that Harrisburg Area NOW was part of my formative years, and you were a part of that, and the Harrisburg Area Women's News, and all of your leadership and your being out there on the front lines all these years—

**AVD:** Aw, thank you.

**MN:** Love. Love and hugs.

**AVD:** Yes! And love back to you.

**MN:** [does a hugging motion]

**AVD:** Yes. Okay. We're done!

[tape ends]