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Title: LGBT Oral History: Amy Skillman

Date: May 5, 2016

Location: LGBT Oral History –Skillman, Amy - 108

Contact:

Archives & Special Collections
Waidner-Spahr Library
Dickinson College
P.O. Box 1773
Carlisle, PA 17013

717-245-1399

archives@dickinson.edu

Interviewee: Amy Skillman

Interviewer: Marge Forrester

Date of Interview: May 5, 2016

Location of Interview: LGBT Center of Central PA

Transcriber: VJ Kopacki

Proofreader: Amanda Donoghue

Abstract:

Amy Skillman talks about her childhood growing up in Michigan in a large Episcopalian family and the influence of spirituality in her life, both as a teenager and an adult. Amy went to an all-girls school where rumors circulated about certain boarders and a book they were reading. Amy believes that this was likely her earliest introduction to LGBT alternatives to heterosexuality. Even before coming out and joining the LGBT community, Amy had frequented gay bars as a young woman and lost many friends to AIDS. However, it would be many years before she herself would come to terms with her own identity. Amy discusses falling in love with a woman for the first time at the age of forty. She describes coming out to her parents and siblings as both a challenge and a relief. Amy also discusses her activism and her interest in folklore, which is rooted in witnessing inequities as a child in the African American community in Detroit. While a graduate student at UCLA, Amy raised money for AIDS charities and for the people of Nicaragua. Amy also talks about the play she helped produce about and starring LGBT youth. Currently, she is the Director of Goucher College's Masters Program in Cultural Sustainability.

MF: Alright, well I'm Marge Forrester.

BB: I'm Barbara Biancone [ph]

MF: And we're interviewing Amy Skillman today on May 5th, 2016 and Amy tell us a little bit about yourself, starting where you grew up and your family et cetera.

AS: Okay, well thank you I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this project. And I don't know if I have a lot to share but, but I'll tell you at least a little bit about my own experience. Just personal background, I grew up in Michigan in a family with four brothers and two very romantic, very active, very adventurous parents. Which was a blessing, because I think it gave me the freedom to be adventurous myself, so we grew up on a small lake so I spent most of my time outside we were an outdoor family, pretty much and both of my parents are passed on now, my brothers are all still alive and all...all happily married and so now I have I think I have each of them has two children so, I have a number of nieces and nephews and a couple of soon—a couple of grand-nieces, grand-niece—yeah a couple of grandnieces, one grandnephew. Yeah, wow that's kind of—

MF: Any of them close enough to get to quickly?

AS: No, so my—most of my brothers still live in Michigan. One lives in California, I actually ended up going to graduate school in California at UCLA [University of California Los Angeles]. So that sort of opened the door for y’know, a parade of my brothers to kind of come visiting me and one brother lived out there for a number of years and then moved and then the other brother moved out there and lived for a couple of years and moved back and then we all left California and then the youngest one now lives in California. So, so it’s great for me because I get an opportunity to continue to go back to L.A. [Los Angeles] but everybody else lives in Michigan. Except for a nephew who lives in Minnesota with his family. So I grew up in Michigan, yeah.

MF: And so you’ve described your parents as “romantic”, tell me a little bit about that.

AS: Yeah they were very romantic. They, well—my dad was always coming up behind my mom when she was working in the kitchen and just squeezing her and kissing her and they threw parties they threw a lot of parties we lived on a lake and there were a number of families on the lake that were all best friends, including the kids in my generation but the parents and they would do in the summertime they would do these progressive dinner parties which was really fun. One house would have h’orderves and cocktails and another house would have dinner and a third house would have dessert and then the fourth house would have the after dinner late-night whatever, and so they’d all get in their boats and go to each other’s houses and that was always really fun it was, they were very playful and I remember one time we were hosting one part of one of these progressive tours and I was, y’know, we were encouraged to be around when our parents were having their parties and they were all out on the porch and I put on my mom’s name was Sally and I put on the song “Long Tall Sally” and my dad heard it and he was so funny he just jumped up and grabbed my mom and started dancing with her and singing along, my dad was actually a drummer in a jazz band before I was born. So we also grew up playing with his drum set, which we weren’t allowed to do but we did, we snuck it because it was a great drum set and you know kids love pounding on things right so... So yeah so they danced a lot, you know, and they were married 53 years until my father died and you know even at their 50th wedding anniversary they were still just very romantic and they had rough spots, y’know. They definitely had rough spots like all relationships all marriages but.

MF: Did they have creative type careers as well?

AS: My father, well, my mother was incredibly creative...creative, but her primary career was raising five children and we had dogs and cats and any stray animal that any one of us would bring in and she’d let us help nurture it back to good health and let it go and that sort of thing so we were always having things like that happening, but my dad was a...he was in the navy in World War II and then when he came back he went to University of Michigan and got a degree in engineering, did engineering work for a company that made y’know, Michigan, so they made, I don’t even know what, but it was they made things that were for the auto industry. You know, little things that were going to putting engines together and stuff.

MF: [unintelligible] Is that what they called it?

AS: Yeah, so they did that for a while and then later he became a...like a consultant he would... people would hire him to rejuvenate their company if their company was nearing bankruptcy or something like that. They would hire, my dad would get a contract to rejuvenate the company and bring and he did that—but so they would hire him as the president, he would be there for three or four years until it got stable again and he'd move on to something else.

MF: That's an interesting switch...

AS: Yeah, yeah. Well, and interestingly enough my youngest brother, that's what he does. That's his job and my two middle brothers are engineers, one in the defense industry and one in the automotive industry. And then the oldest brother was the kind of the black sheep other than me in that he just wanted to play rock and roll, he went off to college and started playing music and even play—I remember dancing to his band when I was a kid when they would practice in the basement. But, but he went off to college and would rather play music than study so after a couple of years of being at college he just dropped out and started playing music and actually played in rock n' roll bands for a while, and won all kinds of competitions and things like that. And then he eventually moved back to Michigan and worked in a—what did he do—he was managing—manager of a hardware store for a while and now he's retired, he plays music still, he plays—he plays in two bands one for the church and one just out on Saturday nights with friends so.

MF: And the church figured into your lives in a big way?

AS: Yes, actually my mother was very spiritual my grandparents on my mom's side were very spiritual my dad hardly went to church but he supported all of us going to church he would go on the C&E holidays, the important ones. I grew up in an Episcopal church and I was very involved in the choir and y'know, I also—my brothers were all in the boys choir and I was in the regular choir and so I worked for, y'know, take care of—like if the boys choir had rehearsals on Wednesday nights I was there to help out with food or drinks or whatever that kind of thing. So I was really involved with the church until probably until my mid-teens when I started feeling like there as a—an insincerity I think in I felt like they really were going to church—I mean this is so funny—I felt like they were really just like going to church for the social aspect of church, y'know. The reception hour afterwards was almost was as important as the service itself and actually for a while that really bothered me and it felt really insincere and it felt like it wasn't really about belief. The irony is, that of course now as an adult, looking back, of course community is what church is all about, right? I mean, cuz you can be spiritual which I have been spiritual all my life, totally on my own, walking through the woods or what or praying or meditating or whatever—you can totally do that—but church is where you create community and so that's it's ironic that in my adult professional life that I often that which is, as a folklorist, very interested in culture and community and what creates and sense of belonging and so of course church creates a sense of belonging so. But yeah, I rejected that for a while and just sort of followed my own spiritual path, which is probably more Buddhist than y'know. But I'm still a C&E Christian, I guess, y'know. I have those values the Episcopal values, I guess, yeah.

MF: And at what point in your childhood, or young adulthood, when did your identity become clear to you?

AS: Well, y’know, that’s really interesting. I think, I, went to a girls high school an all-girls high schools that my mother had also gone to and my father went to the boys version of the same school which is how they met. They dated in high school and then I think she rejected him for a little while and then they got back together in college but so I went to an all-girls school, I didn’t really know anything about gay or lesbian communities or people, y’know that was completely alien to me. I do remember a distinct moment, and my school was boarding school although I didn’t board, so we had day schoolers and boarders. And I can remember, I don’t even remember the details of it but I do remember a moment probably in eleventh grade when a lightbulb kind of went off in my head that there was something other than a heterosexual dating opportunity and I remember it was quite it was very hush hush and it had to do with stories going around about some of the girls that were boarding together, that were boarding. But, and I didn’t know, and it was somehow connected to a book that was I don’t even know what book it was, but a book was circulating among the among the boarders and it may very well have been a book written by a lesbian and was sort of getting everybody excited about that and what those possibilities were. And looking back, when, now I’ve started going back to my high school reunions and when I think about the couple of people one in particular, that was sort of associated with that discovery, she’s definitely a lesbian. And in fact, the president of my class, is Kathryn Kolbert who is the woman who was the attorney for the Roe v. Wade case—and she’s a lesbian, she’s an out lesbian, she’s been in a relationship for a long they have children, y’know, so y’know—it was definitely the seeds could well have been planted then but y’know, so, for me, I was definitely all about dating boys, y’know. That was what was expected of me, that’s what I did and in college, I think that my awareness became a little bit more in tuned. In graduate school I went to graduate school at UCLA I was still, dating men at that point. But I remember that I had some very good friends that were gay and one of my best friends and I when we wanted to just go out and go dancing we would go to the gay bars we’d go to the male gay bars because we had friends that y’know, we could go hang out with, but we could hang out together and not worry about getting harassed by men. And when the two of us just wanted to go out and have a good time we went to the gay bars y’know, we weren’t in a relationship at all and we weren’t even exploring that although I think many years later we had a conversation that came very close, to that, but she’s, but nothing ever came of it and she’s married, has a daughter. I don’t know if she ever explored anything beyond a heterosexual relationship. But I do remember hat I felt very safe in that environment at the same time than those people, those men became the men who started dying of AIDS. So, so long before I became a member of the LGBT community, I was very deeply impacted by y’know, people, who I lost, friends that I lost as a result of AIDS in both in LA and in San Francisco because some of them moved up to San Francisco so, so I was very aware of that and I think that that started some of my activism although I think my activist genes started much earlier when I was growing in Detroit and experiencing the Civil Rights Movement of the 60’s and the Vietnam war, both of those really cemented a lot of my activism and my passivism. But, so yeah in terms of my own identity, I was forty. And it was that I fell in love with a soul. I fell in love with a person, a woman, and it was so easy. Y’know, it just was easy. And y’know the fact that she was a woman obviously

was significant but not not the, primary motivating factor, it was her person—it was her soul. The beauty of her soul that I fell in love with. And, so I was forty. So y’know, and that was here that was here in central Pennsylvania I moved here in 1988. So I think I was 30...that would make me...36 when I moved her. I was born in 1952, so, is that right? So I was 35, 36 when I moved here. And still dated men when I lived here. But began to meet people that were in the LGBT community here and yeah, so.

MF: So was there a point that your family became aware?

AS: Yeah, so the coming out story right? So this is Bobby Carmitchell that I dated for twelve years and I fell in love with her, I still love her dearly. And so she and I, I wrote a letter to my parents and when my mom got the letter, she didn’t open it because she had already heard me talking about Bobby a lot, like I’d probably, this was probably a year after Bobby and I started spending a lot of time together. So I think my mom knew what the letter and was gonna be about and so she didn’t open it. She didn’t wanna open it she didn’t wanna read it. She didn’t wanna know. I think my dad finally opened it and my dad wrote me back, a really beautiful letter, and my mom wrote me back a very angry letter. And I had written to them to say, that I really wanted to bring her home for Christmas. So that they could meet her and I didn’t take her, they didn’t want her to come I think that’s right. You know, that’s interesting. But they were, yeah she didn’t go with me that time. Oh wow, that’s really interesting. That I can’t remember if she actually went. That’s funny. So long ago at this point, it’s what like, twenty, twenty some years?

MF: Also it’s probably somewhat painful if she they couldn’t take her?

AS: Yeah, yeah, true. So we certainly do have, selective, selective memories don’t we? But I do I do remember that my I remember after, I’m sorry I keep hitting the microphone I remember after writing the letter. Feeling like a huge weight had been lifted, and feeling that I could finally be myself for the first time in a very long time and that wasn’t just about coming out as a lesbian, it was also about I mean, my mom and I in particular had battled over my identity anyway. Not my sexual identity, but the way that I identified. Y’know, that I was, far less conservative than she. Pursuing different, well I had lived with a boyfriend for eight years and she didn’t approve of that, y’know, even though she eventually came out and visited with us and that kind of thing. The thing that I will say about my mom and this actually makes me cry, is that she’s incredibly gracious. And that even though she wrote me a letter expressing her anger and her sadness, I think, when I did come home and when I did bring Bobby home she was very gracious and very, the perfect host. The perfect treating us as perfect, as great, as guest. Especially treating, just being really kind to Bobby. And eventually they were great together. I think my mom really grew to love Bobby, what’s not to love about Bobby right? But...

MF: But she sings.

AS: Right [laughs]. Well, she’s funny, she’s witty, she’s smart, she’s creative, she’s a problem solver, I mean, y’know, she’s just a beautiful soul y’know. So she’s a good, a really good person. And so my mom saw that and it was interesting, my sister-in-law said to me, later that if they had met her first if they had met Bobby first, it would have been easier for them all. So I

have four brothers, once I wrote my parents and got their letters I called all my brothers, which I probably should have called my parents but I was too chicken [clears throat]. And, so I called all my brothers and my one brother whose closest to me in age was so sweet, he said “y’know, I’ve just, I’ve been worried about you because you’ve been alone for a while and I, I’m just happy that you’re with somebody that you have somebody in your life.” Y’know, so, that was really important and my youngest brother was the one that made the snitty quip about staying away from his children, which I think he was joking, but it still hurt, it was, just the fact that it even occurred to him to say it, was very painful. But y’know, I think he’s the one that had had the hardest time accepting it. And then my other two brothers they really couldn’t care less. They hardly had any comment at all and so then they all eventually met Bobby and loved her and she loves them and y’know, they yeah, so, so Bobby and I aren’t together anymore but they still, well, they were pretty mad at her when we broke up, but they like her. They love her.

MF: So you still see her?

AS: Yeah.

MF: Friendship?

AS: Yeah, we split up for a while and that was very painful for me. Very painful for me. And took me a long time to get through that and I think that that yeah, it’s had a long term impact on me. So, but yeah now we’re, we’re really good friends and we do a lot together. In fact, I was talking to her on the way up here today. In fact, I just saw her I had to stop and give her some speaker wires ‘cuz she just moved, last weekend, I moved six months ago, and so our houses are really different and so I have things that she can now use so she has, she gave me things, and yeah so [mic begins to break up].

MF: Has there been another relationship of significance since then?

AS: No, there is, there was a woman that I spent some time with who was very interested in being in a relationship with me and it was too soon for me, I couldn’t do it. I tried, I really yeah, cared a lot about her, she’s now passed on. So there wasn’t even really an opportunity to eventually see if anything would even work there. It was too hard for me, I think, to see myself with anybody else. Except, my relationship with Bobby is the longest relationship I’d ever been in, except for that with my family, so.

MF: You said it was twelve years?

AS: Yeah, mhm.

BB: How were your parents when the relationship ended?

AS: You know, I think that’s a really interesting question about how my parents responded. They, well my father, had passed on. So it was my mom, by then that she was very, she was very hurt that I was hurt. But it was interesting, I think that, I think that was still one of the challenges of, I don’t know if this is true or not, but I think this is one of the challenges of gay and lesbian relationships is without marriage, not that I am an advocate of marriage, but without that kind of legal relationship, y’know, divorce impacts families. It impacts very significantly, it

doesn't just impact the two people involved. And in heterosexual relationships it's a little more frequent that I've seen that the family will step in and try to see if there's anything that can be done or could be worked out. And I know for Bobby's sister, when her, when she divorced, her parents got in touch with the guy, and tried to figure out how to help them make it work and that sort of thing. And my family didn't do that. That felt a little bit like a, like a loss for me that they were very, very sad that I was hurt but, but they weren't immediately calling her up and saying, y'know what's going on, and y'know, how can we? And maybe part of that is that we lived here in Pennsylvania, and they're all in Michigan so it wasn't a kind of every weekend, in your face sort of relationship for them, y'know. So I don't know. That kind of—it's an interesting question to me. I did think about that. Like, y'know, is there a role for my family to play here in trying to see if we could try to work this out. And neither her family nor my family did that so. So, yeah.

MF: Your activism. Did that happen before or after you met the love of your life?

AS: I have, so well I have chosen a career for myself that is a career that is engaged in activism. My graduate degree is in folklore and but my, motivation for that has been when I was a child and a teenager, seeing inequities, especially played out in the African American community in the community where I grew up and y'know, outside Detroit and in Detroit and being very aware of that and so even as a teenager, I marched in Civil Rights movements and parades, demonstrations and things like that. And as a kid I did a lot of volunteer work in organizations, that's part of the Episcopalian raising, I think, to do volunteer work and to try to do—do good in your community and try to make a difference in your community and so I think, my mom was like that, my grandmother was like that, my grandfather was like that. I grew up with that, as a value, as y'know, a way of being—but then, but it channels itself right? So, I—I mean I had this experience in Los Angeles of losing friends to AIDS and so I, y'know, whenever I could I would try to participate in any kind of demonstrations of advocacy to help bring attention and awareness to that—I did some y'know, I was involved in a concert at UCLA that was to raise awareness and money for well for AIDS victims but then another concert that I did in particular was to raise awareness of injustices in Nicaragua. I remember working, Jackson Brown came to UCLA's campus and I got to do the sound with his equipment, cause he used his equipment, he donated his equipment to the concert, and then he came and performed at the concert and we had other Nueva Concion [ph] groups coming to speak at the concert so I think my activism is definitely it tends to get shaped by y'know, I did a lot of anti-war activism as well but then getting involved with Bobby and y'know, being more and more involved in the LGBT community here in Harrisburg, I mean several things. I worked for many years with an organization called the Institute for Cultural Partnerships, we were a non-profit organization created out of the dismantling of a state agency and our, our mission was to facilitate opportunities for understanding between and among diverse cultural groups and we included in that, the LGBT community so we were doing y'know, I think, we were actually really involved with one of our staff members in particular was involved in establishing BI-GLY-AH, which was the youth organization before Common Roads and then we worked very closely with common roads in its very early stages both in, we meet in ICP, both in y'know, strategic planning, board development, that sort of thing but also probably one of my most, I know that there's a, a

question in this protocol of questions about key moments in our life. And one of them for me, was actually working with Common Roads we got a grant from the Princess Diana foundation. The Princess Diana funded the Guil [sp] Foundation to create a theatre production around daily life and youth, working with LGBT youth. So I had a staff person at ICP [Institute for Cultural Partnerships] who is a folklorist like I am, but also with a lot of experience in theatre and we contracted Bobby to come and work with us as well to work with the youth of Common Roads to create a theatre production. The theatre production was called "One Day" and actually if there's no evidence of that in this archive, I should get you a copy of the video and a copy of the script. But so that experience was probably one of the most powerful experiences for me to start to go on Friday nights to the Common Roads meetings to hear the kids talk about their experiences to hear them talk about daily, daily pressures in school, y'know, daily harassment in school. That sort of thing and then to work with them to, to create a script that would create, that would result in a one hour play that they acted in and Bobby and Sally Vanderwater worked really closely with them I was more kind of the executive producer kind of person on the outside, y'know, because I didn't get to go, I didn't get to work with them all the time. But every possible chance that I could, I just wanted to be with those children. With those young people I just wanted to I just wanted to be with them and I'm not really sure if it was, it was I think partly it was about those times that they were together on those Friday nights, and I know they still do this, were safe. And were all about love and I think it was that love that drew me into those moments and just that if we could just love each other, y'know, and on those nights, we did. We just loved each other. And it didn't matter what your racial background was, it didn't matter what your economic background was, it didn't matter what your religious background was, y'know, there's, I mean in folklore we study group affiliation, right? We study what we call folk group, where, where you, where you find commonality with people where you have a shared set of experiences and sometimes those and but we're all part of several groups. The three of us are women, right? So we're part of that group y'know, people that, so that all of those affiliations you're part of several different groups right? You're part of a religious group, you're part of an economic group, you're part of a, whether it's urban or rural or suburban or whatever y'know, you're part of all these different folk groups where you share these commonalities but sometimes the sum of one will take a higher precedent will take a higher significance and that could happen at any point in your life it could change y'know, from week to week, right? But so in those moments when we were working on that play that shared commonality of being the "other" and fighting the battle against those who hate you those who think you're disgusting all of those things, fighting that battle and knowing the goodness and the love in those children those youth was incredibly powerful for me, yeah, and yeah so

MF: I'm sure it was a great help to them. Was the play put on at a major theatre?

AS: Yeah, so no actually. The play was produced, well let's see, where did we do the play? We did the play in, we wanted to do it in schools and they wouldn't let us, right? Because it was too controversial. So we did it in, we just identified places in the community and I'm drawing a blank on, I think we did one at Little Theatre of Mechanicsburg maybe? And we did one that we put in on several times and then eventually as Common Roads got stronger and stronger and started developing more of the gay-straight alliances in schools, there may, the play is about a

day in school and it follows the lives of the kids and they wrote a really great script and I remember actually that probably a pivotal moment was the discussion—they had written in that somebody dies, somebody gets killed, somebody gets beat up and killed. They had written that in and one of the most powerful moments was when, so the adults were saying “no, we can’t do that, we can’t put that in because it may diminish the opportunity for us to actually put this play on” y’know, and all the other things that you’re talking about in here, the slights that you’re getting, and the y’know, the guy that bullies you and that these kinds of things are all very powerful and if we put in there that somebody gets beat up and killed we may not be able to, they may veto it. It might just make it too controversial, that was the adults speaking right? But, this was fairly soon after Mathew Shepherd, y’know was killed, I think and so one of the most powerful moments was when, we told the student, okay, we’re gonna have a meeting on Thursday night or Friday night the next time we get together and y’know we want you to tell us why you think it’s important and oh my god. The stories and the rationale that they shared with us about why it was important to keep that scene in just it blew me away, it makes me cry even now. Y’know, it was so powerful and so we kept it in so that was really a [something drops]—oops! That was really amazing that, so that was one of those key, pivotal moments so I think in terms of activism—were you gonna ask another question?

MF: No.

AS: So I think the other activism that I did feel really proud about is Bobby and I started with Amy Shestak [sp] an organization called the Women’s Circle. Which was a—y’know, there’d been a couple of other lesbian organizations, I mean part of why I feel a little not appropriate and not like I feel like I’m so new to LGBT history and activism in the central Pennsylvania area and I don’t feel like I have that much to contribute but and y’know there’s HAWN [?] and there’s other things that lesbians were doing in the area, right? There was, there was Lavender Letter which was a newsletter but Bobby and I both love producing things whether it’s concerts, festivals, retreats, that sort of thing, so we created the Women’s Circle as a way to begin to create a consistent space for lesbians and allies to meet and to do things and so we started monthly gatherings I think we did for a while and we would have different thematic, y’know we had a guest speaker or something, similar to I think what they’re doing here now.

MF: They still do it, yeah.

AS: But we actually we created a non-profit, we got a bank account I mean we did the whole nine yards y’know, and we were really excited about this. So we did, y’know we would have guest speakers we would have cookies and tea and y’know just gathering some things like that but the biggest thing that we did was a yearly retreat and the retreat was always in the woods at Camp Shand in...is that Dauphin County maybe or maybe it’s just the northern end of Lancaster County? I can’t remember. But it’s east of here. But it’s a YWCA camp.

BB: [indecipherable]

AS: So it would be a three day event and every year was a different theme but, but the themes were really about empowering women and about providing safe spaces to express and explore who you are and y’know, we had so many transformational stories come out of those weekends.

Out of, y'know we would have art workshops and we would have...we did everything from bringing, one year I brought Ruth Simons who's an insurance broker to come and talk about saving, y'know how do you save money, especially if you're not allowed to have joint bank accounts or whatever, y'know so we kind of did that whole range of things and but it was really around I think creating a sense of belonging. Providing opportunity for women to feel a sense of belonging to find themselves in each other it was not a place to meet people and hook up it was, it was very retreat-like. Very, yeah, retreat like. It was an opportunity for deep reflection.

MF: Enrichment.

AS: Yeah, personal enrichment, reflection, sense of community. You know we always ended with a bonfire and music and y'know, one year we brought in, we brought in a climbing wall and a woman who could run the harnesses y'know, so that we could actually do climbing and we did all kinds of stuff like that that was just an opportunity and we always had probably 40 or 50 women that would come. I think 60 was the biggest and we liked that because we didn't want it to be too big we actually got a FAB achievement award for that one year. I think 2004. The only reason I know that is 'cuz I was concerned about dates for this interview and I looked at the, I still have the award and it said 2004 so we got an achievement award for that. I think for creating that opportunity and that space for women so yeah.

MF: You mentioned the kids at Common Roads talking about their experiences of bullying. Did you ever experience any harassment?

AS: And actually I think that's another. When I came out, by the time I came out I was 40. So y'know, the—have you read the book *Coming Into Our Fullness*? It's a really beautiful book, put together by I don't remember who put it together. But it's a collection of essays about and by, it's a collection of essays based on interviews with fairly well known women, mostly feminists who turned 40. So Barba Hoffman is in there, I think Judy Chicago is in there, y'know, these—Gloria Scott there all these people that are all of my feminist coming of age generation that are in there when they turn 40. So and one of the points of the whole book is when you turn forty you come into your fullness. You no longer have to prove yourself to anybody right? So I was in a very, so I was 40. And somebody gave me that book as a birthday present, not Bobby but a friend. And I...it was really...so I think I felt very much like, like I said earlier, I felt like I finally was myself. When I was able to come out to my mother not only finally myself as a lesbian but finally myself as just who I am. And no more needing to defend myself against anybody. So I think I had a real advantage over all these people that struggle with identity and angst as teens anyway, and then you add that you add being gay or lesbian on top of that I mean I didn't have that my boss was fine, y'know. I immediately out at work and I didn't feel, I mean I never felt. I feel really blessed this way and lucky and it may very well have to just do with the kind of occupations that I'm in. Y'know, I'm in with the arts community and with activism and y'know these are the sectors of society where being gay and lesbian is not unusual or not fr—not really seen in a negative light so I feel like I was really lucky that way. I didn't experience any of that. What's interesting thought is that, that others that I see others and I think even with Bobby, that there were residuals because she y'know was always a lesbian that there are residuals anxiety, residual mistrust, residual fears that carry forward and I think

sometimes manifest themselves where I don't think they're val—actually valid. Like, like I remember one time Bobby's mailbox got hit a lot y'know, it's a rural mailbox out in the middle of the country I don't think those kids beating up on her mailbox had any clue she was a lesbian. But she did. And I don't know which one of us is right. But, for me I saw that, I saw that as this residual fear carrying into current experiences and I didn't have that fear because when I came out I was an adult, I was in my fullness. And I just said "this is who I am", and yeah, so.

MF: Gay pride festival parades here in Harrisburg, did you participate?

AS: Yeah, uh-huh, oh yeah, oh yeah, definitely.

MF: 'Cuz, y'know, I was a silent witness for some of those—

AS: Yeah, I did that once too, yeah.

MF:—and so there was a lot of protesting—

AS: Yes

MF: —and anger for a while there.

AS: Yeah. Yes, there was and I, I did the silent witness a couple of times when what's his name came to town. The man who came to town—

MF: Red [?]

AS: When he would come to town I did the silent witness thing stuff as well. And I, y'know we had Women's Circle stuff at Pride for several years in a row. And I went to those, not so much in the last, I don't know, eight or ten years you know I think after Bobby and I split up it was also a, there's too much pain [laughs] you know.

MF: Too tender.

AS: The loss of that to stake [?], I think I stayed, I stayed peripherally involved in the LGBT community but not as much as when I was actually in a relationship with somebody. But yeah we did Women's Circle things at Pride and yeah, yeah.

MF: This may not be as definitive for you, but y'know, what changes have you seen in terms of acceptance and whatever?

AS: Yeah, so, so I think the biggest change is what I experienced which was, y'know, coming out as an adult in the 90s was a whole lot easier than coming out as adult in the 70s. And so I think there's a significant change that I experienced it even though I might not have seen it, not being in central Pennsylvania I don't really know what kinds of harassment people were experiencing here. I was in Los Angeles, so y'know, that was a little bit more open. But not always, I mean Los Angeles has some very conservative neighborhoods and areas as well. But, but y'know, I was thinking about that question because I think one of the changes that I've seen and I think we still need to work on it a bit, but I think one of the changes that I've seen is a shift from it being about sex in the public mind to being about love. And I think that our efforts, as a community, and the activism and the advocacy around LGBT rights has really helped to make

that shift. Because I think even in the 90s, when I came out, for—the perception is that it’s all about sex, right? And that, that it’s about promiscuity, not about falling in love with somebody. And so I think that has changed significantly in terms of the public’s perception. I think there’s still a ways to go with that but I think that is, I think that has helped for our collective argument to be about love, has really helped people, y’know, see things differently. The other thing I’ll say is that, when my niece was ten years old she came to visit me and I was with Bobby and y’know she went and we went down to Bobby’s farm and we hung out on the farm for a weekend and she was with me for a week and she came back the next year and I have no idea if this is the classic, y’know, everybody has a lesbian aunt thing, but she is now a full blown lesbian and I, I think that for a while some of my family blamed me. I think that they thought I had—they never—nobody ever said that to me and nobody ever treated me as if that were my fault, but I know that when my niece did come out that my mom was heartbroken and mostly my mom was heartbroken for my brother because he was gonna have to now deal with that and explain it and live—figure out how to tell his family and they live in a pretty conservative, small town in Michigan, so she is very out she’s getting married this June to a woman she’s been with for ten years. They have one daughter that her partner birthed and four more possibly, five that they’ve adopted and or are fostering. So they’re in the fostering system and they take children but they also have had teens—one boy, they had one boy in particular who was a—who I think was eleven or something and his former foster family kicked him out because he said he was gay, so they took him in for a while. You know, so, so when I think about her opportunities, she’s never—coming out as a 20 year old, she’s never been shy about it. She’s never been discreet about it.

MF: Mhm.

AS: She’s just been very out. And I think that that opportunity for her is very much due to all the generations that have gone before, the advocacy and the activism that is gone before to try to break down people’s fears y’know, fears of whatever they’re afraid of. Their own selves or something, I don’t know, yeah.

MF: Well, we’re kind of winding down, is there—you mentioned a couple—one thing before we started you wanted to know if there was anything contributed to the Archives and I wanted to give you the opportunity to say that.

AS: Oh, yeah. So a couple of things, so Bernie Pupo who has also been interviewed for this project, mentioned to me that he wanted—that he didn’t know if stuff had been contributed to the Archive from the Unity Festival or if anybody had been interviewed that had been part of the Unity Festival which was a precursor to the Pride Fest. And it took place for several years at Nicki’s place, but I can’t remember Nicki’s last name. So, somebody hopefully listening to this will be able to follow up with that. So there may very well be archival material from that. I did talk to Bobby before I came up here and she thinks that she might have some stuff from HAWN, he Hanging Out With—what is it—Hanging Out, Hanging Out with Women something or other, HAWN. Which was, I think, the precursor to the Lavender Letter. So she may have some stuff related to that. And she may have stuff from the Women’s Circle so I looked through my archives but my archives at home are in the basement and when I went down there last week a

snake fell of the ceiling onto the floor and so I've been—now that I go down into the basement I wear a hat and a slippery jacket in case another snake falls it'll slide right off me, but as a consequence I didn't spend a lot of time looking in my collections but—

MF: Yeah, okay.

AS: —if I have some stuff. The other thing I did wanna just be sure of is, at the tenth anniversary of Common Roads, I was contracted to do a series of interviews with some of the founders of Common Roads; Sharon Potter, Steve Glassman, Melinda Eash, a couple of parents. I did—so I did like eight or ten interviews and I'm pretty sure that I have given them to the Center but I would love if somebody could check and let me know and if I haven't. So I did these interviews and then I wrote an essay that was an introduction to a catalog—maybe it was the 15th anniversary—because it was a catalog of artwork done by 15 gay and lesbian artists and it was it was a catalog for an exhibition and the exhibition was “15 Years of Bi-GLYAH / Common Roads, 15 artists featured” and then what I did was I wrote a kind of introductory essay about the history of Common Roads based on all of the interviews that I did so the interviews were with some of the founders, with some of the parents, and with I think I interviewed maybe I interviewed Chad. I interviewed one of the kids that had been in the Common Roads when I was working with them on the—

MF: So founders, parents, and one child.

AS: Yeah, I think.

MF: Well, hopefully they'll pick up but I will also e-mail.

AS: And yeah so I'm—my hes—the only reason I'm wondering if I didn't is because I did those on—I think I was trying to transfer those to a disk, 'cuz I think I did those on like a tape

MF: Cassettes?

AS: Mini cassettes or something and I have the piece, I have the equipment to transfer it and I remember doing that, I remember seeing it and being in the process of doing that but then that got disrupted by other things happening at ICP and so I just hope that I finished it and if I didn't then I would love somebody to let me know if I actually turned that stuff in because if I didn't then I should go back and see if I can actually find it.

MF: Is there anything else you wanna add about your journey?

AS: My journey. I don't know, I think, yeah I think it's been...how do I even say this? You know, I firmly believe, ever since I was a child, I believe that one of the best ways to, I believe that stereotypes and prejudices and discrimination come from fear of the unknown and so I think a lot of my professional world has been around breaking down that fear of the unknown and I think that the y'know, it's...it's just like I said at the beginning, once you know one, you know, like my mother she finally knew Bobby and now all of a sudden her granddaughter is a lesbian so she had to kind of open up, you know. And my brother and sister-in-law who are the parents of my niece, my sister-in-law in particular, really just really struggles with it—with it at first but now she's like the biggest supporter, y'know, so I think—so I think that y'know, getting to

know, fear of the unknown is what causes they discriminations and once we can begin to break down the walls so that's it not unknown but it's known then we begin to break down those prejudices and those attitudes and that sort of thing and so for me being in a lesbian relationship has probably been one of the most educational experiences of my life and just because it opened me up to a whole new world, externally and a whole new world of possibilities for myself. And, I think helped me understand the heart of love—what love really—like that. Y'know, that that energy that is love that is in all of us and that if, yeah, so I think it has been a really amazing journey, I have no idea where I'll go from here but...

MF: Actually that was going to be my question. Where do you see yourself taking that [indecipherable]?

AS: So right now I am the Director of a Master's Program in Cultural Sustainability at Goucher College and I'm taking 35 years of breaking down barriers and trying to turn that into a curriculum that educates the next generation of doing that. So, so I, so I—in terms of—I feel like that's a life's work of trying to provide those opportunities for people to open up and to...to see the other as—through love y'know, through, I mean—as a folklorist I value and treasure our differences. I value and treasure the unique—or—that's a terrible word, I don't like the word "unique." I value and treasure the important and distinctive ways in which we manifest our identities and I feel—and I think it's really important that we allow that to happen. So I don't wanna say that we should all know—be each other and know each other and be the same, at all. But, what I—but there is this, there is this energy or light of love that sort of connects us all as humans on this planet or in this plane in this—in this time, moment and that's what I kind of get to teach and talk about and build a curriculum around so.

MF: Sounds like a great opportunity.

AS: It's really exciting and it's—for me, it's like "oh my god", what a great way to kind of end one's career to be able to kind of, look back and reflect on it and then turn it into something that is a way for the next generation to kind of move forward through it, y'know. And, and, a big part, sort of, we talk about—we talk about culture in the kind of commonsense—the usual sense, y'know, Ukrainian dancing and Native American flute music and that sort of thing, but we also talk about the right to marry and—y'know, all of these other aspects of the "other" or of cultural distinctiveness that, that makes, that makes our planet the rich place that it is, it's similar to environmental sustainability in that y'know, if we all raised the exact same corn and our corn look exactly alike then one disease is gonna wipe it all out, right?

MF: Mhm.

AS: I think it's the same thing with humans, you know, if we—we need to respect differences and that sort of thing. But, but yeah so that—so that's kind of a rambling way of answering that question. I don't know if you were asking it on a professional level or personal level but...

MF: Either.

AS: On a personal level, I—there's nothing. I mean, so, yeah it's about...it's about loving somebody, right so I have no idea if I'll ever have another relationship I have no idea what

relationship—what that will look like, but, but yeah, so. I don't know if that's where you were going with that, but [laughs].

MF: [indecipherable] to take the activism that you've had in the past and hear you [indecipherable].

AS: So that's manifested, yeah. So the cultural sustainability program is specifically called cultural sustainability because sustainability to me suggests action and taking action and our coursework, courses are all about activism and all about teaching people how to how to use their voice we all have a voice. So it's not about finding your voice, you have a voice, it's about how you use your voice and how do you use that voice in concert with others to make change, to make change on the planet to y'know, I think our planet is—I think there's a lot of illness right now and yeah, yeah there's a lot of work to be done and not just in the LGBT community but... And perhaps, yeah, I mean, if you wanna get into politics but it's kinda scary.

MF: Sick of hearing or thinking about that.

AS: I know, I know. I mean, yeah so that's really interesting isn't it—that—can, how drastically can progress be reversed? You know. It's an important question. How drastically can it be reversed and it can, it does, it gets reversed. So we have to be ever vigilant.

MF: Well, thank you for coming to the interview.

AS: Pleasure.

MF: And for sharing with us and with the archives your oral history.

AS: Well, thank you. Thank you very much for including me.

MF: You're welcome.

BB: It wouldn't be a project without you.

AS: [Laughs]