

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

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**Title:** LGBT Oral History: Margaret “Peg” Dierkers

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**Interviewee: Margaret “Peg” Dierkers**

Interviewer: Andrea Glass

Date of Interview: March 21, 2014

Location of Interview: LGBT Center of Central PA (1306 N 3rd Street, Harrisburg, PA 17102)

Transcriber: Jennifer Ott and Andrea Glass

Finalized: Mary Libertin

**RESTRICTIONS: Narrator asks researchers to quote with appropriate context.**

**Abstract:**

Margaret “Peg” Dierkers was born in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1957 and attended a Catholic school as a child. She earned both a bachelor’s and master’s degree from Ohio State University, and eventually enrolled in a doctoral program in Human Development and Family Studies at Penn State University. Peg relocated to the Harrisburg area, and soon began working for the South Central AIDS Assistance Network (SCAAN), which assisted individuals and families of those with HIV/AIDS. After leaving SCAAN in 1994, Peg has continued working for other social justice causes including the Domestic Violence Coalition. In this interview, Peg discusses her relationships with both male and female partners, raising her two daughters in the Harrisburg area while involved in a lesbian relationship, and her struggle to fit into the lesbian world after her marriage to a man. Peg goes on to discuss her family’s acceptance of her sexuality, and the importance of spirituality in her life. She describes her on-going participation in the LGBT Center of Central PA’s History Project, and the importance of the Center for the LGBT community of Harrisburg.

**AG:** I am Andrea Glass, and today is March 21, 2014, and I am here interviewing Peg Dierkers at the LGBT Center [of Central PA] in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. So let me ask you Peg, is it okay to ask you a few questions about your experience here?

**PD:** Absolutely.

**AG:** Absolutely. Wonderful. Wonderful. I’m really looking forward to getting to know more about your stories. Let me ask you kind of a very general question to start off, you know. How do you consider yourself to be affiliated with the LGBT Center here or the LGBT community in Harrisburg? How did you come to be involved here or involved in this aspect of life in Harrisburg?

**PD:** Really, probably from two perspectives. One professional — well both professionally and personally. So I have a history of working in social justice arenas and so I come at it professionally and most specifically, having done work during the AIDS — the height of the AIDS crisis for the South Central AIDS Assistance Network in the tri-county area, and really came to know the community through that work and I was also new Harrisburg then so. And then, personally — just in terms of my own coming out, and my relationships, and having been in lesbian relationship and now figuring out what my next relationship is gonna be. [laughing]

**AG:** Okay, okay, wonderful. Well I’d like to explore both the personal avenue and the professional avenue. Do you have a preference for where we start first?

**PD:** I do not.

**AG:** Okay, let me here a little bit more about your professional background. I am just fascinated by the work that you've done, and you have a very impressive resume looking at [PD: Oh, thank-you.] your resume on-line, but tell me about some of your early professional experiences here in Harrisburg. Tell me a little bit more about this culture and especially this AIDS project that you were involved in.

**PD:** Right. I was a graduate student in a doctoral program Human Development and Family Studies at Penn State, and moved to Harrisburg because of my relationship at the time, and had just collected my data and had studied — really alcohol use among youth, and then had to look for a job while I finished my dissertation. So, I started working for a provider of services to people with m—we said mental retardation at the time, now intellectual disabilities, and I did that for a while but wasn't happy. I was really on the administrative end of that and wanted to get back to more of my kind of human relations community organizing work — and applied for a position. It was really interesting 'cause unbeknownst to us there were three people — individuals interviewing for same three positions in the region: The WY [CA] in Carlisle [Pennsylvania], Planned Parenthood down the street here from the Center [LGBT Center of Central PA's current location on N 3<sup>rd</sup> Street], and the South Central AIDS Assistance Network executive director. And I had been offered one position and wrestled with that and said, "No," and really hoped I would be asked to come on board at SCAAN and I was. [AG: Mmm hmm, oh great.] So worked at SCAAN late '88 until early 1994, and really from the time when we started to see pretty systematic treatment of AIDS and actually even moving from focusing on AIDS to HIV and then also really seeing the migration of the disease from primarily gay men to intravenous drug users and heterosexuals. So, very excited, had worked to really build the organization. I was the first paid staff, and the volunteers were very supportive and remained very supportive involved and we wrote about tre— you know medical treatment, helped people pay for their housing, attended a lot of funerals — a lot of funerals, worked with families, and at the time I could really see the change over those five and half six years to — just in terms of how families dealt with their other family members coming out [AG: Mmm hmm] as gay. Lesbians were pretty much volunteers. We didn't have too — pro— I can't even — don't even think I can remember any lesbians who were infected. Which might just have meant they didn't come to the organization. [laughing] But, really relied on the lesbian community. They were providing a lot of care to people who were infected and doing a lot of the education. But anyway, just became really engrossed in terms of gay culture [AG: Mmm hmm] in Harrisburg, and seeing how backward it was.

**AG:** That was my question. That was my next question. How did the community react to the work that you were doing? Was it difficult for you to break through some of those barriers and educate people here in the area about the work that you were doing?

**PD:** Well, interestingly, it seems like personal and professional—not intertwined, but of course we live as holistic beings, and it is. Right? [AG: Mmm hmm] So, I was married at the time. Had two children during my time at SCAAN, and so probably as a straight person talking about AIDS and HIV at the time I had some credibility. Although not necessarily always with the gay community. I got put through a lot of tests [AG: Really?] in my first year or so with the AIDS Network. Ya know, got sent into the gay bars — like my first weekend with condoms to see if I could handle it. [laughing] Which of course I could, having done family planning and other kinds

of things at Penn State in my graduate work. But, yeah it was — it was kind of very interesting sometimes — ya know a couple times the slur “breeder” got hurled at me, [AG: Mmm hmm] as I had my two children. Which if you think about it now that’s even interesting with so many of us having children. [AG: Mmm hmm] At the time, in the late 80s, it was — it was unusual unless one of the partners had been married [AG: Mmm hmm] and had had children during the marriage. So, I just really have been able to see the, the kind of cultural evolution in that way. But it was still very much hidden, ya know, a lot of people didn’t have an awareness of the gay bars downtown. Lot of gay bashing people coming out of bars. There weren’t gay student alliances in many schools. Young people, really we were still seeing high suicide rates among gay youth and still very much — ya know there were men that were volunteering that were still going to bookstores and bathrooms to meet people.

**AG:** That was what I was going to ask you too is what sort of landmarks within town were sort of these safe places where people could go to have these interactions and to have these relationships, and were — was it a lot of public spaces or were there private spaces as well that you can remember or think of? What was that kind of landscape like here in the city?

**PD:** No, it was — it was organizations. Dignity, MCC [Metropolitan Community Church], SCAAN, PFLAG [Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gay] was pretty active at the time still — trying to think of what other organizations... During that time Pride Festival I think started again, and SCAAN actually had a walk-a-thon every year. So, that was another time where we really publically were able to bring the community together. The — but primarily it was the bars, and there was a professional women’s group — I can’t remember what the name was [laughing]

**AG:** That’s okay. What...

**PD:** But would communicate through Lavender Letter. [AG: Okay] and they would hold meetings and we’d have potlucks and things at the time, but ya know some of that even is dissipated.

**AG:** What bars stick out in your mind?

**PD:** The Neptune.

**AG:** The Neptune, okay, and where was that located?

**PD:** On North Street.

**AG:** Okay.

**PD:** Try to remember what it was called at the time but became Strawberry— which is now something else, the Brownstone, Stallions of course for dancing [laughing], and then D-Gem — and I can’t remember the year the D-Gem closed, but that was really the only women’s bar. [AG: Okay.] And actually that’s where you would see trans [transgender] people more often I think than even sometimes in the gay bars. Drag in the men’s bars, some tran-folks at the gay bars, but more at — I just remember that really sticking out for me at D-Gem.

**AG:** Did you feel that the community was a diverse community at the time?

**PD:** Diverse racially?

**AG:** Diverse racially, even ethnically or even like you said...

**PD:** No, I think it was predominantly white.

**AG:** Okay, and how did you — did you...

**PD:** White and African American.

**AG:** Okay, and do you think mostly male?

**PD:** Publically, yes, mostly male.

**AG:** And how did you think...

**PD:** I still ask to this day, [AG: Really?] “Where are the lesbians?” [both laughing]

**AG:** Oh, that’s interesting. That’s interesting. So you don’t think as much emphasis placed on that community? Or do you feel that there are resources— as many resources available for the lesbian community?

**PD:** That’s an interesting question. And this is why — I see our resources mostly joint. I can really only think of one lesbian specific resource and that’s the women’s group out of the Center. I just have to — I, I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it in that way, but publically— in terms of if you want to go find other lesbian women— where? Where?

**AG:** Yes, that is a— how are these connections being made?

**PD:** Since I am now single, I am asking. Where? [both laughing]

**AG:** No, and I am very curious myself how are those connections being made today? How do you find someone with like interests here in Harrisburg?

**PD:** I don’t know. I don’t know.

**AG:** Okay, so that’s a kind of — ya know, what role is the Center playing in cultivating that social life here?

**PD:** Right. Its groups. Well, I think part of it too is just Harrisburg. The culture of this region always has been, ever since I arrived anyway, very familial. People really stay closely tied to their families and it’s a very couple oriented place. So, if you’re in a friendship group and ya know isn’t that the stereotype — then you’ll meet people. Women will meet people through other women they know. [AG: Mmm hmm] Since my friendship group mostly was out of town as a lesbian, that’s presented some challenges. So, I really— ya know unless you go the bar scene or on Tinder or Match or one of the other dating sites — seriously where?

**AG:** That’s interesting. So, mostly looking to these either on-line platforms or still bars or areas that they know ... interesting. Well thank-you for shar— and kind of...

**PD:** And as a 57 year old, I’m not really that interested in the bar scenes, so...

**AG:** No, understandable. And do you think that — how do you think public perceptions have changed here in Harrisburg? So you still think there are some challenges to finding a mate here in Harrisburg in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

**PD:** I think there definitely is, and perhaps just because I am older, and had been in relationships for a really long time and moved in — ya know— from another area, but — No, I definitely think there is in this town. I mean I hear single people complain about it all the time. Young and old.

**AG:** Oh, absolutely — and kind of diving a little bit more into kind of your family experience. I would like to hear a little bit more about where you're from, what your family life like, where you grew up. So if you could tell me a little bit more about kind of your biography and your early experiences too.

**PD:** Sure, I was born and grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio. I'm the oldest of six — four girls, two boys. Raised Catholic, so I have all that baggage. [both laughing] Although, I always talk about Catholicism in Ohio, I don't know if it was 'cause beginning of the frontier or whatever but it was not a Catholic as what I found when I moved to Philadelphia [Pennsylvania]. Philadelphia Catholics were very conservative and that's not what I had experienced. Of course I grew up in the 70s, so things were liberalizing a little bit. But somehow Philadelphia must have missed that. [both laughing] Went to Ohio State [University] — really worked in the residence halls professionally. That's how I got to Philadelphia — went to work at Villanova [University]. Loved Philadelphia, hated Villanova. Was such an oppressive place at the time, especially for women, especially for women. Really saw a lot of the hypocrisy and sex abuse in the church there. There was a seminary on campus, so that really wasn't the beginning, but was probably the last straw in terms of Catholicism for me. And then of course, the Catholic Church's long history of oppression and abuse of people who are gay just ya know sealed the deal there. [laughing] But my whole family still lives in Cincinnati. I moved to Philadelphia to cut the apron strings when I graduated from my master's program at Ohio State and just haven't gone back. Moved to Penn State when I couldn't take Villanova anymore. Worked there, really enjoyed that. And then as I said was in a relationship at the time and moved down here. I was gonna live here one year. Came here for one year. [laughing] in 1986, and I'm still here.

**AG:** Still here. How do you feel those early experiences in your life shaped your sexuality? Did you know from a young age?

**PD:** I did not. Which when I thought about our conversation today I thought, "Hmm, this is gonna be a question and I'm not sure how I want to answer it."

**AG:** And that's okay. And if you don't want to answer it you certainly don't have to.

**PD:** It's not that I don't want to, I... I was in two really long-term relationships — on with a man and one with a woman. I would say my relationship with the woman, with my ex-partner was the most satisfying and right relationship for me. Unfortunately, she chose to end it. That was really traumatic for me in terms of the way she ended it. And so I've really been working hard to try figure out who I am and where I want to go next over the last three years. And...and I think as a lesbian in a relationship with a woman again, and maybe I just haven't met that person. [laughing]

**AG:** Mmm hmm, no.

**PD:** As I said, everybody I met is in a couple. [laughing]

**AG:** It certainly, it certainly is a challenge, it certainly is a challenge. I can understand and empathize with that. Did... Where you... Did you feel comfortable expressing to your family that you were in a relationship with a woman? Did you ever feel that you were unable to express to family or friends that you were in this relationship or what was it like coming out?

**PD:** It certainly was hard. I was... I'm trying to do the math... I was 43. Yeah, 43. Ya know, I had this big ta-da revelation one morning I describe to people. I was on the treadmill in my basement and it was like the gears in my head finally all clicked and aligned. And, I was like oh, "I can't have the relationship I want with a man." And then I was lucky. I fell in love with a woman and life was really good for about 12 years there. But I knew, and maybe it's because I didn't grow up with all the baggage of oppression and prejudice and hate, I knew that I needed to be out. So, took a little time to really understand where I was and where our relationship was and how — how I wanted to talk to my children, my two daughters, but also friends and family — and then did. And I grew up in a really, what I would consider, healthy family now having known how lots of people grow up. I always... I knew my family would not be... my parents wouldn't be happy, but I knew that bottom line — they always supported us, [**AG:** That's really good] and that was my experience.

**AG:** That's really... So you never lived in fear of ever having to express how you were to anyone that was close to you?

**PD:** No, not for more than a few moments. Ya know, that... that was hard to tell my parents. I knew they wouldn't totally understand. I luckily [stumbles on word] though I have cousins who also are gay. Which is I think is fascinating. My... As an ethnographer — my mother has three siblings. The oldest child of three of the four siblings are gay. [laughing]

**AG:** Interesting.

**PD:** Raises lot of, well ya know, and I was trained as a developmental psychologist more or less so nature vs. nurture really raises a lot of interesting questions but...

**AG:** Yeah, it certainly does.

**PD:** But no, my... again my parent weren't excited both — their very Catholic, religious, and so they had all that they had to sort through and, ya know just their age, but they were always very accepting. And we spent Christmases with my family and ya know, just never had an issue. Went on big family vacations to the beach together. All my siblings were very accepting — my one brother kinda had to work through it a little bit and I'm not sure what that was about but he was fine then.

**AG:** That's great.

**PD:** My kids were in Catholic school in Harrisburg and I really wondered how this would affect them once we all moved in together. And I always felt it necessary to tell parents when their kids were coming over to do overnights even. And never, never one problem.

**AG:** That's wonderful.

**PD:** I know. I feel really blessed in that way that — in fact, and this is again just a comment about how much out culture has changed. In fact, they kinda got bonus points for having a gay mom. It was like at the time, kinda novelty. [**AG:** Hmm.] Like the thing.

**AG:** I find that int... I mean did you have parents that were curious that asked you questions, or friends of your daughters' that would be curious and would ask you certain questions about your life?

**PD:** Yeah, I could feel some of my daughter's friends kinda observing more than asking direct questions, but the parents wouldn't really ask questions, but they would come sometimes check it out. [laughing] They would make extra effort to come into the house, ya know, kinda just check out what's going on and see the other half lives. [both laughing]

**AG:** That's interesting.

**PD:** But ya know, there wasn't one kid who wasn't allowed to come stay overnight at our house, or never had one problem. Which I... I always complimented the parents. I kinda used that a diffuser in in the whole like talk, ya know, "your daughter's been really supportive of my daughter Blair, I know, ya know, that says a lot about you, who you are as a person and teaching your children to really love all people," and kinda in some ways put them in a position where they almost couldn't...[laughing]

**AG:** That's great. So you have almost have used it as a teaching experience in a lot of ways and to kinda make connections.

**PD:** Yeah, I guess that's true.

**AG:** I really, really like that. How do you feel religion...what role do you feel religion plays in your life today? Do you have any other associations with religion still or association with the Catholic Church?

**PD:** I don't. I mean it is the tradition I was brought up in. If I was gonna practice a western religion it might be that, but I just don't feel that I need to belong to an organized religion.

**AG:** Mmm hmm.

**PD:** I ... Spiritual person, but not a religious person.

**AG:** Well, Understandable, and what role does spirituality play in your life or are there other outlets that you turn to, or other interests or hobbies that you have?

**PD:** Spirituality is more — I probably experience spirituality more just in term of my self-help work and self-awareness. Spent a lot of time in therapy over the last three years. And just really... I think too in terms of doing social justice work and seeing the good and evil that we do to each other. And, kinda draw on my sense of the collective and sense of the the rhythm of the universe that way. I do like to spend time outdoors, so that's probably in some ways a component of it.

**AG:** I really admire your passion for social justice. How did you then come to be so involved with the domestic violence issues?

**PD:** Well, ya know, just to take a step back, probably my... That's my social justice work is how my religion has stayed with me or played out of my life. Because the one thing I'll say Catholics, at least Catholics in the 70s, social responsibility was a huge component of what I was taught — and taught to practice all through my grade school experience in a Catholic grade school. Ya know, be it mission babies, collecting money for mission babies, or UNICEF [United Nations



International Children's Emergency Fund], or ya know the food pantry, or visiting older folks in nursing homes. Social responsibility work was really important and really emphasized, so kinda the small "C" catholicism part. So I think that's how I started my social justice work really, and let's face it — growing up in the 70s plus that emphasis directly every day at school and at home. I don't, I... There were probably a lot of us. My father always called me a rebel without a cause. So I figured I had to find causes. [laughing]

**AG:** I can certainly relate to that in a lot of ways. I was raised Catholic as well, and so I have a lot of similar opinions about social justice. I'm just fascinated.

**PD:** Yeah, so worked in residence halls, I — my master's degree is in student personnel work, which I always describe as social work for college — with college students, and ya know again because of the times, but also because of just the issues you deal with — with young people living together, was trained and did a lot of training around racism and homophobia, sexism, and...yeah, then did work in those areas and I think it's just carried through and it's really the non — I tried to do for-profit health care for a while, [shakes head back and forth] just didn't— no. I couldn't get excited, getting up every day, going to earn money for somebody else who gonna earn a lot of it, and not share it. And who didn't really care about so much about the quality of what they did and the impact of what they did on the people who were relying on their product. So, in 2008, I — the healthcare company I was with working for relocated headquarters outside New York City [New York] and I wasn't going to New York City, and so when I looked for a job this one was open — at the Domestic Violence Coalition. And a number of people that I had worked with in other arenas, including the AIDS experience, said you really would be perfect for this — you really need to try it out. And I was like, "no, no, no," and you know, "I don't really know that much about domestic violence." But I did, and it was, it was a good move — it was a good move. It's been hard, because anybody who took the helm of a non-profit at the beginning of the recession [in 2008]—what possessed me in the fall of 2008 to now be responsible for a non — the success or failure of a non-profit I don't know, but I did. And you know, it's worked out really well and I've learned so much and it almost seems kind of that collective cosmic-ness because some of the trauma I experienced in the split of my relationship I really could understand so much better. Both in terms of what was going on with my partner who was leaving, but also how I was impacted by that because of the training and the work that I had done at the Domestic Violence Coalition. Which I would have never had, had I not gone to work there, so in some ways my healing from that break-up really was helped.

**AG:** So in many ways your personal and professional life really has always been intertwined — [PD: Yes, although it didn't seem like it!] each informing the other, and so, you know I guess a sense that you know you're always driven by this higher purpose and this need to help others. Was it hard to kind of emotionally disengage from your work at times? Did you find that you became overly invested in what you were doing or hard to ever separate?

**PD:** I definitely have had those moments - I mean - and part of that is just maturing, I think, professionally. But I always credit my kids and now my dogs — I mean — every night when you came home with two small children you had to refocus your perspective immediately. And I think that helped me not take myself too seriously - always take the work seriously but not my role in it too seriously. And also it just caused me not to — what's the word I'm looking for — become so absorbed or consumed by the work because I had these two little people, who now are big people, [laughs] who caused me to really focus on what was important. I mean I grew up,

you know, family was number one and that really still resonates for me. [AG: Mmm hmmm, that's] And having — doing the AIDS work and then just in terms of my age now having gone to so many funerals in my life, I am telling you the people that are with you at the end are your family and a few very close friends. [AG: Mmm hmm] And that's where we need to spend our time.

**AG:** No, absolutely. What about friendships? I mean do you have close friendships that really defined your life or defined who you are or helped you along this path in understanding who you were professionally, personally, with your sexuality?

**PD:** Sure [pause]. I've always been the kind of person that had a few close friends, and operated in bigger social groups. But — so I would say that's a point in my life that's — needs to be regenerated too. I think I said earlier that a lot of my friends, friends as couples — as a couple — many of the really close ones were out of town. And unfortunately when there are break-ups — I don't know why — but people often feel like they have to choose a side, so my friendship circle's gotten smaller. [AG: Mmm hmm] And then some of the folks that we used to hang around with a lot were work friends and some of those people have relocated to other cities and, you know it's nice we keep in touch, but it's not the day-to-day kind of friends. In terms of impacting me over — you know, yeah I can name, one or two or three people at each stage in my life. I've just reconnected with a couple of friends from college and early grad [graduate] school via Facebook — yay — [AG and PD: laughing] you can find each other easily. What did we do without the internet?

**AG:** It's true, it certainly does help facilitate those connections in many different ways, [PD: right] and kind of help...

**PD:** But yeah, you know and I have a couple of close friends here. But feel like that's an area that I really need to focus on. I think for so long my hobby was my daughters and my re — my significant relationship, and so now that that's all resorted because my daughters are older, you know I need to rediscover my hobbies and likes and people who like to do — who have common interests and like to do those too.

**AG:** Mmm hmm. No, it's kind of a great opportunity to take inventory [PD: Yeah, absolutely] you know, what's important in your life and where you want to go - and certainly you know looking back, you know what would you like younger generations or the younger generations here in Harrisburg to really know about your experience? You know what kind of advice would you give to them, those that are kind of coming of age and grappling with their sexuality and maybe grappling with some of these issues — what sort of advice would you give to them as they're kind of starting out on this journey or finding their way?

**PD:** I think I am a great example of the fluidity of life and - as well as — sexuality. These decisions feel so absolute and as if there's a yes and a no or a black and a white answer, and life just isn't that concrete. Which is good, because I've made plenty of mistakes in my life [laughing] and have had lots of opportunities to do better, and it really is true that it gets better. And — I don't know — I guess the advice is really to invest in knowing yourself and being true to yourself. And when I think of times that I've made bad decisions or gotten in trouble it's because I wasn't being true to myself. And a random act of kindness here or there, really can make oneself feel better as well as be the world of difference to the person that you help. [AG: Mmm hmm] And I've kind of really renewed that philosophy lately. Because I know just in these last

few years when I was at my lowest, it was always the people you didn't expect that made the biggest difference.

**AG:** Absolutely, I can agree with that. And I like this idea of how comfortable you are, and I like this notion of fluidity and kind of breaking down those barriers of there having to be, you know, one way or another. How did you come to identify as lesbian versus bisexual – or how did you go about describing yourself or representing yourself? Was that a process of choice, or how did you come to that?

**PD:** Well, I think I still struggle with it a little bit, actually, and it's a big challenge for me in thinking about another relationship because if you identify as lesbian you can close off relationships with men, right? I think, "Wow, if it's difficult even as a lesbian to meet people how hard it must be for people who identify as bisexual" – I and – I may be bisexual, I don't know [emphasis]. And I really spent a lot of time trying to figure that out last year. You know what I decided? It doesn't matter [laughing]. It kind of matters but it's you know - doesn't help me to get all tied up in knots. I've always been a kind of person who meets people, enjoys people, falls in love with a few people, and likely that's what my experience will be again, and then I'll know, right? [**AG:** Mmm hmm] But it's – really feels a little risky sitting here even saying that right now. There is a lot of backlash or prejudice about bisexuality. I had friends say to me, "well you're not a real lesbian, you had a relationship with a man." That's really hurtful. Really hurtful. And I'm not sure why it matters. As long as you're being honest and genuine with the people you are friends with or in a relationship with.

**AG:** Mmm hmm. And I find that interesting that you would experience almost that reverse prejudice in a sense. So you did get that feeling that there's a level of authenticity, would you say [**PD:** Oh, no] Or, how would you categorize that, so you feel that if you didn't always know or maybe you had a diverse set of experiences that you were treated differently than if you knew you were a lesbian from a young age? Maybe I'm not summarizing that correctly? [**PD:** Or only with women, or with multiple women] Okay, okay. [**PD:** Yeah, with many women] Well I find that fascinating.

**PD:** Yeah it was – a – it was hurtful and it used to anger me because I felt it was hypocritical. Because we're all socialized, right, in our society, first as straight. And many of these women who said you're not a real lesbian, [laughing] you know, dated boys [pause] but of course weren't married to them. So, I think it was the fact that I was married. But at the time when I was really - you know in the nineties [1990's] – when I was really figuring this out, there was a whole body of literature. What was the book – I even think I donated it to the Center [the LGBT Center of Central PA] – *From Married Life to Lesbian Life*. And there were – I knew lots of women at the time – who'd been married and then figured out, "mmmmmm, no this doesn't fit". So, yeah I think we really do ourselves a disservice when we have to label and categorize and somehow make ourselves feel more secure I guess.

**AG:** Did you – speaking of books – did you find any books or magazines or television shows or films helpful for you in defining your sexuality or any sort of other kind of popular culture sources that you looked to?

**PD:** Mmmm. [Pause] Well that, that book was help – I mean that didn't help define, but it helped me feel not so, odd.

**AG:** Mmm hmm.

**PD:** And there – you know I read lots of books, that’s what I do [laughing] being an egg-head, kind of a nerd. I have an issue, I read all about it, try to figure it out that way and then talk to people. [laughing]

**AG:** Mmm hmm. Did you turn to websites or forums? Or any other sort of advice areas?

**PD:** No. No, ‘cause you know people were just using email a lot then. Still instant messaging on AOL [both laughing]. [AG: Mmm hmm, mmm hmm] It was a really – just think about it – it’s not that long ago, it was a really different time.

**AG:** You’re right, no things have rapidly, rapidly changing in the digital world, for sure. What about – I’m also kind of fascinated by this notion of how we kind of perform our sexuality or how we’re made to feel we have to perform a role, say as a lesbian. Did you ever feel the need to perform, to dress a certain way, to customize your language, to speak in certain terms? Did you ever feel the need to adjust who you were to fit in to a role?

**PD:** Mmmm. I think because of the group of lesbians that I spent the most time with I didn’t really. You know and we were older, so folks had kind of been through that. I think, yeah, I remember sometimes at first where I thought, “oh, I can’t wear that” [laughs] it’s too girly, or you know, “only a straight girl would wear that”. But other than that I don’t know. I don’t – no, not really. The - I did – I have the experience where though where I thought “Wow, there should be a guidebook” you know? [laughs] That should get handed out to each of us. Yeah.

**AG:** It’s true, ‘cause there’s kind of these stereotypes that are out there of what you’re supposed to be and what you’re supposed to look like and supposed to fashion yourself as. I just was curious if you ever felt pressure to kind of conform to a certain image?

**PD:** No, it wasn’t conform to a certain image but there were certainly many times where I felt pre – kind of ignorant. And I think that led to the, “gosh there ought to be a guidebook”. [AG: Mmm hmm] You know, and now, if you know what questions to ask or how to ask them you can find most of it on the internet – you really can. So there are kind of guidebooks or... [both laughing] cheat sheets on the internet. But – and that’s just really a role – and that’s another reason why I’m so committed to the Center [LGBT Center of Central PA] because in each of these different experiences over the last several decades you know, we would all look at each other and say “there needs to be a community center.” Where people could gather, where people could find information, you know, where somebody would be responsible to kind of help you along.

**AG:** How often do you come to the Center?

**PD:** Probably like once a quarter, and it’s only through my volunteer work, really.

**AG:** Mmm hmm, and what sorts of projects do you volunteer for?

**PD:** I am a volunteer for the history project [the Oral History Project]. I’m helping raise money for the – to support the project, to buy the cameras. We want to – we’re applying for a grant to buy the equipment for a traveling exhibit. And to develop a website that’s a lit – somewhat

interactive so that we can really disseminate this kind of information out to, you know, the entire community.

**AG:** Great, did you look to other cities or other centers as a model for this project, or for this Center?

**PD:** The creators did. And there are websites that we point people to. And, and they've been really helpful too, even talking to us now, most recently about how they developed their own websites. Two of the faculty from Dickinson [Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA] though, who were really helpful – the one faculty member [Lonna Malmshemer] had been very involved in creating an oral history of Three Mile Island – the disaster, and that really has guided our work on the history project too.

**AG:** That's great, great. What about personally? Did you look beyond Harrisburg for advice or did you ever go to, say New York [New York City], or another large urban center to have any sort of experiences or to guide your personal life?

**PD:** I really – I haven't. I didn't and I haven't. I think about, "Where do I want to live next," if anywhere else. I knew though that I wasn't going to leave the Harrisburg area until my children were launched out of college, so I still have a couple years. But I feel like that's a decision point, and, and part of that decision point is really thinking about is it a community, is it a city that support – has a support – is supportive of the gay community there and you know, how does it rank on the "top ten American gay cities?" [laughs] Which interestingly, Cincinnati [Ohio] was rated very highly last year. [**AG:** Really?] Yeah. [**AG:** Really?] Which cracks me up because it's is a very conservative town. In fact, it was just on Buzz Feed [the website] or somewhere that the archdiocese [of the Catholic Church] of Cincinnati has expressly created a provision in the teachers' contracts that if they are gay or if they support "gay" they can be fired.

**AG:** And how do you think your experiences in Ohio kind of shaped your experiences here in Pennsylvania? Do you think in any way?

**PD:** I feel a kinship with Western Pennsylvania. Western Pennsylvania is a lot more like Ohio, I mean I really feel the differences between East and Western Pennsylvania. I really like the East Coast now though, but it took a lot to get used to it. Just the pace, and culturally it's very different. And you know it has a much richer ethnic mix and an international focus, the – I guess it wasn't so much Ohio, though this is true for Ohio, but the Germanic history of Ohio and my own family probably helped me in Pennsylvania. Because of the Pennsylvania Dutch roots in this area – if I was other places in Pennsylvania it probably wouldn't have. The – I just think another theme throughout my whole life though is I didn't quite fit, you know. [Both laughing]

**AG:** You really felt that? You felt that you didn't fit at all stages of your life, even here and now?

**PD:** Yes, like I really couldn't identify with the girls – I didn't enjoy groups of girls all that much, the whole – well the only thing I know how to describe it is the whole bitchy clique thing. So a lot of my friends growing up were guys. One or two really close girlfriends, but had a lot of guy friends. And then feeling like I didn't fit in the straight world and I didn't quite always fit in the lesbian world, so.

**AG:** What tools do you think should there be in place to help us with that sense of belonging? Because I think that's something and I think that's a universal theme that most people struggle with at some point in their life, and what tools do you think should be in place to help people feel like they belong, or what would have helped you feel more like you fit?

**PD:** Hmm. [Pause] **AG:** That's a, you know, impossible maybe question, but...] Yeah, I don't... I guess acceptance just that expressions of – sorry [waves fly away from her face] expressions of “everybody's an individual” and yet we can all belong, and there isn't one way. But I don't know how you really operationalize that in terms of culture or a community. **AG:** Mmm hmm] You know, I guess the only other thing I can think of is there's just not structured mechanisms to connect people. There's some “ya'll come” kinds of experiences but then when you get there, it often, you know, you're kind of on your own. And I've gotten better and more comfortable with that, you know, over the years, but I think especially for a young person I think that's hard and I think that's why Common Roads [youth group at the LGBT Center] is so important because it helps establish a friendship group.

**AG:** Where do we go from here? Where is – what do you think Harrisburg's future role is in facilitating this, or what do you think this - where do you think we're going? How can we help those in the future?

**PD:** I think we have to be visible. I think we have to help people still come out [communicate to others about their sexuality], be out – not so much come out – be out. Really integrate too, have a role as a community in the larger, in the larger community and really make a difference. Again, I mean just like the rest of the country there's more and more acceptance but we live right on the edge of the Bible Belt [in the Southern US] and I think that holds us back, you know those attitudes that get communicated [about being gay] and often in the press really kind of hold us back. And I really would like to see women – the lesbian community – I'd like to see us more, especially more visible.

**AG:** Are there any stories that you'd like to share that we didn't get to talk about, or any questions that I didn't ask that you really would like to share, or answer, talk about?

**PD:** Well I would just say that, you know the progress for the LGBT community really is because people got involved. It's been very grass roots and I just hope that we can maintain that grass roots power, really, empowerment. But yet as I said, kind of at the same time organize and be more visible. But I don't think there's any stories. I wonder what happened to many people that were involved in the AIDS work early on. Some of them are dead, and it's just kind of a shame that, you know, we didn't get to memorialize them and their life before they passed. We have a long way to go here, but we've come a long way too, so.

**AG:** Absolutely. Thank you so much, Peg, for sharing [PD: Sure] all these wonderful stories and answering questions, and talking about your life and sharing that with us, we really, really do appreciate it [PD: Thanks!]. So thank you so much for sharing.

**PD:** Thanks, thanks camera woman [both laughing].

**RC:** You're very welcome.