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Title: LGBT Oral History: Nancy Helm

Date: January 16, 2016

Location: LGBT Oral History – Helm, Nancy – 047

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Interviewee: Nancy Helm

Interviewer: Bill Burton

Camera Operator: Lonna Malmsheimer

Date: January 16, 2016

Place: Lancaster, Pennsylvania (Nancy's Home)

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Abstract:

Nancy Helm was born in Lancaster Pennsylvania and graduated from Manheim Township High School in 1981. After graduating she worked for a printing company and did other odd jobs before opening a hair salon with her partner. Not long after that she opened a book store across the street called The Closet. She opened the bookstore as an outlet for the gay community of Lancaster so they could meet and hang out and shop. But, the bookstore was eventually the target of anti-gay crime in the 1990s. It was bombed twice and received multiple threats, including from the KKK. In this emotional interview Nancy gives her story about how she dealt with this and how it affected her life as well as the life of the gay community.

BB: Okay. Alright. My name is Bill Burton, I'm here with Nancy Helm at her home in Lancaster, Pennsylvania to interview Nancy for the history project in Central Pennsylvania. The date is January 16, 2016. Nancy, do I have your permission to video tape you and interview you for the history project?

NH: Yes you do, Bill.

BB: At the end of the interview, I've got a consent form I'll have you sign.

NH: Okay.

BB: So that we can use this interview for the history project, for publication, and for other sources. So, let's get started. Nancy, let's talk about—first let's talk about you: where you're from, your family, where you were born.

NH: I am from Lancaster, I was born here, raised in this very house.

BB: Really?

NH: Yes, yes. Yep, been here forever.

BB: So, let's talk about your family, your mother, your father. Do you have any siblings?

NH: Yeah, I have a brother and a sister. My father passed, this April it'll be three years. And that's why I'm back living here. So she can stay in her house.

BB: So you grew up in Lancaster?

NH: Yeah I did, I did.

BB: You went to school here?

NH: I did. I went to Manheim Township, graduated in '81, many moons ago. [laughs]

BB: Yeah?

NH: Yeah.

BB: And what about college?

NH: No, not so much. I started working at Donnelley Printing pretty much right out of high school. Worked there until I got hurt and couldn't do the job anymore, and then did odd jobs for quite a while. And then, actually got a salon with my partner, a hair salon, and then went to hair school. Kinda put the cart before the horse there [laughs].

BB: Right.

NH: But you know—and shortly into that, I then opened my book store. The two were catty-corner from each other in downtown Lancaster.

BB: Now before we get into that, let's stay back.

NH: Okay.

BB: With your early life, did you have—in your early life did you have a strong religious background? Or was that central to your life growing up?

NH: No not really. We had gone to church when I was quite small, but I wanna say, probably five or six we stopped going. So no. I mean I had a few religious friends, but that was about it.

BB: So religion—religion really wasn't a big factor...

NH: No.

BB: in your life?

NH: No. I've gone to different churches throughout the years, I just never found anything that was a fit.

BB: Right.

NH: So.

BB: But you stayed mostly in Lancaster?

NH: For the most part. I did end up ultimately, but I think you wanna keep that down the road.

BB: Yes, but in your early life?

NH: In my early life, yes. I was always in Lancaster.

BB: So did you—you mentioned you had a partner. So did early on, did you know that you were gay?

NH: Oh I knew. I knew when I was six years old.

BB: Really?

NH: I didn't know what it was, or—I knew I was different from everybody else around me. But I didn't understand it, but I knew I had a crush on the gym teacher, you know. Yeah I couldn't make head nor tails of it at the time, cause of course you didn't hear about it. Ever. You know, you thought you were the only one. And that lasted until, I think probably high school I finally met somebody else that was. And it was like, what? It's not just me?

BB: Yeah.

NH: I think that's why I'm so impressed with the youth group.

BB: Did you—did you—did you date at all? Men or?

NH: No.

BB: What kind of life did you just kind of...

NH: I kinda didn't really date much at all in school, school age times. I just hung out with friends. I didn't, you know. I didn't know where to go with all that, or what to do, or where to meet people, or anything like that. So I just hung out with my friends, and I didn't even come out to them until much later. And when I did, I lost the majority of them.

BB: So this is, like, in the 70s, am I right?

NH: Yeah.

BB: So at that time period in Lancaster, was there—how would you express people's attitudes toward people being gay? What kind of pressure did that put on you?

NH: I'll be honest, you didn't hear anything about gay back then, at all. You never did. I mean this is why I always assumed I was the only one, because I never heard of it, never saw it, never knew anything about it. We were very sheltered here. You know, its Farmville [laughs].

BB: Yeah.

NH: You just really didn't hear about it. And I'd say maybe 1980ish, you started to hear more.

BB: So how did you process that when you were young? You knew that you were different. You knew you were attracted to a woman. How did you envision living your life? Or how did you think that you were going to?

NH: I don't think I did, honestly. I think I put it away, because it didn't seem like something that would come to fruition. It seemed like a boat out on the ocean with no motor and just no contact. Because there weren't other people like me that I knew of.

BB: Right.

NH: So it just always seemed to me like something that wouldn't happen. You know and then the 80s—we used to have a hangout downtown called The Loop. And you got to know people that way. And little by little I started to meet more people, mostly men though, unfortunately for me. But at least I had something, you know? Realizing okay, there is a community here. And that just grew and grew and grew. And in the early 80s, it was just amazing. It was like everybody came out of the woodwork. And all of a

sudden, there was tremendous acceptance. And it really seemed like coming into your own in Lancaster. And then AIDs hit, and suddenly everything reverted.

BB: So how big was the community back then, would you say? Well—well before we—

NH: It was fairly large.

BB: Well take me back to your process when you suddenly realized you were gay, then what were the steps. What happened to your—when you realized you were gay, that you were a lesbian [NH starts but stops]. What happened next?

NH: It was very funny. I found out that one of my cousins was...

BB: Yeah?

NH: and started hanging out with her and all her friends. And this was before I came out to anybody. And the one girl said, “You’re gay” [all laugh] and I was like “No I’m not.” You know, of course right away defense mechanisms up. And I kind of just backed off of that situation, cause I wasn’t ready for that and to be called out like that.

BB: Right.

NH: And it really freaked me out. And I came home, and I was just like, whoa what just happened here. Like, why did I do that? Why didn’t I just say, “Yeah” and you know, I was so disappointed in myself, really. And you know the next weekend I went back down and I was like, “yeah, and?” And they were like “okay let us introduce you to the world.” And that’s exactly how it went. I met people through people. And it just—I was blown away by the size of the community in Lancaster. I really was. Cause, here all this time it was all around me, but I couldn’t see it.

BB: Yeah. How old were you then?

NH: Oh well, I was about 20. Yeah because I still wasn’t able to go into the bar. So I was 20, going very soon to be 21.

BB: Yeah. So then, what happened next? Did you meet somebody? Or did you just—

NH: I did. I did. I actually started hanging out with a couple of people I met at the Sundown Lounge, which was the lesbian bar. And I met somebody there and fell head over heels and she was involved with somebody else.

BB: Mm-hmm.

NH: So again, I ended up just hanging out with friends. And I held out and waited for her to be available and, we got together we ended up with a salon [all laugh]. And you know, she ended up straight, so yeah it didn’t work out too well.

BB: Yeah that sometimes happens.

NH: Yeah. Well it’s—there’s a lot more to that story, but we’re not here for that [laughs].

BB: Only if it deals with you, we can talk about it.

NH: Well, bits and pieces will definitely come up throughout.

BB: So, did you—when did you tell your —did you tell your parents then when you first came out or did you tell your parents later?

NH: I told them later. Actually, I came out to my mom and she said “please don’t tell anyone” [Laughs] out of concern. She was afraid I’d get beat up. So I said okay, and I want to say two years later, I had a full on ad page in the newspaper announcing my bookstore, which was not adhering to the advice of my mother. And in hindsight, I probably shouldn’t have done that. But would I change it? No.

BB: Obviously then—you came out and you opened a beauty salon, right?

NH: Right.

BB: You and your partner?

NH: Mm-hmm.

BB: So, take me through that story then. So what happened, cause it obviously leads into the bookstore. Right?

NH: Yeah well, I—I guess at the time I never felt fulfilled in anything. I always felt like I had more to do. There was always something on the periphery that I wasn’t getting to. And I thought, okay. I would go to Philly to Giovanni’s room and I just loved that place. And I thought, we need something in Lancaster. So hence, I started buying books. And I kept them at the salon until I had enough for a store. And I had a friend who had a storefront. And everything just fell into place.

BB: What year was this now?

NH: That was in—it was in ’91. Yup. ’91, it was May of ’91.

BB: Yeah.

NH: Yeah I opened May 15th of ’91 and I closed May 14th of ’92. It was a [laughs]—it was a chaotic year.

BB: Wow. So how were you ordering books? Just through the publisher or were you just—

NH: Yeah. Mm-hmm, yeah. I started setting everything up, I got a bookkeeper, and started setting everything up, building up stock and waiting to find a place to do it.

BB: Right.

NH: Because I wanted—I just, you know, [chair moving] I wanted the perfect location, and I wanted—I figured that if I was going to do it, it had to be full throttle out there. You know, and not hidden in some alley. You know, I wanted it to be right there where people had to deal with it. Because I just felt like, you know, things had to change, things had to get better. We had to have more things that—where we could go, where we could do. And the bookstore was a gathering place as well as a bookstore, so.

BB: So were—how—were you self-financing this through credit cards, did you get a loan?

NH: I was self-doing it, yes, absolutely. I was building it up a little at a time, [BB: yeah] until I had enough to at least start. And then, once I bought enough, you know Penguin Books and I can't remember all of them—they worked with me, they were tremendous. So, it really took off, it really took off. I had people coming from Baltimore, and Philly, and all over the place. And they would tell me, you know, you have a little store but, man, you packed this with everything—

BB: So where was the bookstore? Where was it located? What was the name of the bookstore?

NH: It was called The Closet [BB: yeah] and the sign had a little person coming out of the closet. And it was right on the main drag, Prince Street, so.

BB: Right in downtown Lancaster?

NH: Yeah. My salon was on the corner of King and Price and then catty-corner up Prince Street was the bookstore. It was a—it was a very, very out there location. And it was going well. It was going well.

BB: Did you have gay and lesbian books? And what else did you carry?

NH: Mm-hmm. I carried, you know, cloisones, and mugs, and pins, and all that stuff. I had all that stuff. I had all the extras plus the books. T-shirts. I worked with a guy, Skylar—I can't remember his last name, out of California, he had "Don't Panic" T-shirts. I don't know if you've ever seen them. I know he had a store up in New York. But it would be nobody knows I'm a lesbian, nobody knows I'm gay, stuff like that.

BB: I love it.

NH: I don't know I guess I shouldn't curse on here [all laugh]. There was one shirt I particularly liked that all the guys liked, and it said "Fuck me and the horse I rode in on" [all laugh]. And that was a huge seller. But the shirts were awesome [BB: yeah]. And I did a display in one front window [BB: yeah] with all of these shirts, and, man, people were coming in like crazy. It was really going along well. It was really going well. And the Pink Triangle Coalition had already formed. As a matter of fact, we'd meet there and make buttons and stuff [BB: yeah]. And—

BB: Did you have, like, authors come and read for their books?

NH: No, I hadn't gotten to that phase yet. Definitely down the road it would have happened. But everything was going on all at once because, you know, doing the salon, doing the bookstore, we were fighting for the Public Accommodations Jobs and Housing Act [BB: yeah]. And we were in a battle with the county commissioners at the time, and back then we had the county commissioners and the city council were one functioning unit. And the county commissioners were threatening: if city council is going to vote for this "gay thing" then we're going to split from you. And we thought, there goes that. Well to our shock and dismay, city council voted with us, and the county commissioner split off from them. And I think that's what really started everything up. Because it just got insane. It just got insane.

BB: Insane how?

NH: Like, there was just such a tremendous waves of, "huh yeah we're doing this. This is awesome." And that's how the Pink Triangle actually started.

BB: Really?

NH: Because we got that passed, and we all went down to the Talley Ho [Tavern] and somebody put a microphone in my hand [laughs]. To this day, I have no clue who did that, when they did it, how they did it [BB: Yeah]. It's just all of a sudden I was just like, yeah why not. And I said, man we've got to keep this going. Let's make something, let's do something. This is good, let's keep it going. And I said, let's call it the Pink Triangle Coalition, and everybody was like, yeah! And it just became this unbelievable ride. It was just amazing.

BB: I mean suddenly you were a community leader activist.

NH: Yeah, kind of. Somebody put a microphone in my hand [laughs]. What can I say beyond that [BB: yeah]. Back then, there weren't a lot of people that wanted to be on camera, so there was basically, maybe three of us in the whole group that would actually go out and do the interviews. And we knew that...

BB: See I find that, and this is 1991?

NH: Yeah.

BB: I still find that, kind of—is that because it's Lancaster, people are still afraid to—I mean—

NH: Oh yeah.

BB: I was living in Boston at that time. I mean, big city.

NH: Big city was totally—I mean right down the road in Philly, it was completely different there than here. And that's what? 35 miles? It was a different world. Harrisburg to Lancaster, it was a different world. Here it was, people were still very—as a matter of fact I was in Rehoboth and a girl walked up and said, “Are you the girl that opened that bookstore in Lancaster?” And I said, “Yeah I am.” And she said, “well I'm gonna tell you right now, I'm never going to your damn bookstore, you put it on Prince Street.” I said, “Well that would be your issue, wouldn't it?” And you know, [laughs] it just—people were either on my side or not.

BB: Oh, so people were afraid to walk into your bookstore on Prince Street, because that would identify them as gay?

NH: Exactly. Exactly. And I said, “I think you're missing the whole point—or premise of ‘The Closet’”, you know [laughs]. The point is to come out of it. The point is, if every one of you would turn around and say to everyone in your family that you're gay, and they had to deal with it, it would be a better world. Because everybody would know somebody, and then they'd have to deal with it. And, well, she wasn't having any of that. There's not a lot you can do, you know? I mean you can talk until you're blue in the face, some people are just never gonna, you know, be honest about who they are.

BB: I'm sitting here with my mouth open because—

NH: I'm sorry [laughs].

BB: No, because it's 1991, and this is Lancaster, and people are afraid to walk into your bookstore.

NH: Yeah, yeah. Well,--

BB: There's a bookstore in Boston, in 1991, called We Think the World of You opened the same time you did on a major thoroughfare in the South End in Boston. Of course, that's the gay enclave.

NH: Right.

BB: People are walking in all over the place.

NH: Yeah.

BB: And you're experiencing the polar opposite. I mean, explain to me the culture—

NH: There was a culture—

BB: Where did the culture come from in Lancaster?

NH: There—there was such a fear of being out and about here, at the time. And it wasn't unfounded. I mean, you could feel—you know it was nothing to be walking down the road and have the, you know, “you fucking dyke” or whatever thrown at you.

BB: Did that happen to you?

NH: Oh yeah, many times. Which, you know, whatever [laughs]. That—that didn't really—that never bothered me.

BB: Really?

NH: No. No, I thought, you know, the more I would be out there, the better it was and the better it would be. And the more I got to know people. And, you know, when I look at Lancaster now, versus then, it's amazing. It's amazing. Almost all of my friends are straight now. Every single one. And every single one of them accepts me for who I am. Versus then? It was like, I had a guy come up and he said, “Well, I'll tell you right now,” as if I asked, “I could handle seeing two lesbians kiss on a bench. But if I see two faggots kiss on a bench, I'm going to throw up.” And I said, “Why look? If it's going to make you ill, why would you even look? Why do you care? Did you want to sleep with one of them? I mean why would it bother you? Unless you had some kind of feeling inside of you that you're uncertain about, I don't see why you're even concerned.” [BB: right]. Of course he just walked away at that point [BB: right], because I hit a nerve [BB: right]. But, you know [BB: inaudible]

BB: So, continue back—

LM: Stop one minute. I'd like you to move over here a bit, like come closer [chair movement] that's good. That's good. [BB inaudible] We're just getting more of her face now.

BB: Okay.

LM: That's good.

NH: It's like [LM and BB inaudible] I'm coming out! [All laugh]

BB: Alright, so let's go back to the bookstore again. Back to 91, the height and stuff like that, continue with what happened.

NH: Well, everything was great. Everything was so great. I mean it—you had your bad parts with the, you know, the girl on the beach. But, all in all—I mean I had Amish people come in and look around and say “well I don't see anything wrong with this store at all.” And then they'd leave, you know. It—it—but that being said, again and you're mouth's probably going to fall open again, because daily almost, the

police would come in to raid me. It wasn't really a raid. Because they got so used to these calls, they'd come in, walk around, and leave. They'd say "Hi Nance" and leave. Because they knew that what they were being told was unfounded. But they'd get calls constantly that I was carrying pornography, and I was doing this and that. And cause people wanted the store closed [BB: right] -- desperately. They did not want gays to have any kind of identity downtown.

BB: But you had no magazines in there or—

NH: Hmm-mm. Nope. No. I had all—

BB: No magazines, no DVDs, no—

NH: Nothing like that. Nothing like that whatsoever. The first time they came in, they checked everything. After that, they were like "Psh, no big deal." Just come in; look around; leave. But people had this need to just harass to no end. I would love to know who it was making the phone calls, but you know, hakuna matata [laughs]. [BB: yeah] It's just never going to happen. But, you know it was a time of unbelievable acceptance, yet turmoil, hate, and discontent. I mean, you didn't know what emotion was going to hit you next, at the time [BB: Right]. It just felt like, depending on which way you turned, was what you were going to get. It was insane.

BB: Was it—was the store, you don't have to answer this, was the store more successful than the salon, revenue-wise? I mean that wasn't producing—

NH: Had the bookstore not been blown up, I probably would have gotten out of the hair salon, it was going that well. It was—it would have been huge. But, I had to let it go [sighs].

BB: So what happened?

NH: Well, it was after we had the law passed, and we started to really move forward. And we were really making an impression. And I had one interview after another.

BB: Interview with who? The local papers or?

NH: All—all—it was all over. I had—I did interviews with people from different states, you know, everybody was hearing about this movement in Lancaster, you know. And they wanted to know more. So I think all told, I ended up doing like 300 interviews. You know, not before the bombings. After the bombings was the majority, but there were some before. And some were in the local paper. And the next thing I know, it was June and it was like, a month and six days after I opened was the first bombing. And I get this phone call in the middle of the night and its—

BB: A month and six days?

NH: Yeah, yeah. I get this phone call, and I'm like, "what?" You know, I just couldn't even fathom what I was hearing on the phone. And the guy says, "Look, just come down here. You'll see for yourself." And I'm like, "What?" I turned to my partner, and I said, "My store was blown up." And she said "What?" [Laughs] and I said, "Right? We've got to go down there, I don't know what's going on." So we, quick just threw some clothes on, and we go down there. And all I can smell is gun powder and there's still smoke. And [BB: Yeah] you know, and I'm like "Who would do this?" you know? "Who would do this, this is crazy." And the cops are like, "Well, you know, I don't know. I don't know what to tell you." There were very matter of fact-ly about it at the time. And so—

BB: How bad was the damage?

NH: I'm trying to think. This time it was put on the window over at the side. So it only—the damage was very isolated into a small area. So it was easily fixed.

BB: Did the police seem to investigate?

NH: I would like to think that they did, but I'm pretty sure that they really didn't at the time. I think it was more like, you know—it was probably just juveniles or you know. The chances of us finding out who did this are slim to none, you know. Back then you didn't have video anywhere.

BB: No fingerprints.

NH: Yeah. Anything that would have been left behind would have been blown up. So it was—

BB: Did they know what kind of bomb it was?

NH: It was quarter stick dynamite.

BB: Oh.

NH: I guess taped together and then taped to the windowsill.

LM: What did—did people say on the phone calls?

NH: On the phone calls—oh you mean when they called to tell me about it?

BB: To notify you?

LM: No, before. Leading up to—did they threaten you?

NH: No. I—I didn't actually get threatened until after, after the first bombing. My partner and I broke up and you know, I don't know if it was all of this going on or—

BB: Was there newspaper coverage after the first bombing?

NH: Yeah.

BB: Lancaster—local coverage, not gay coverage?

NH: There was Harrisburg and then Lancaster. Maybe York, I'm not sure. I know—I can see channel 27 and channel 8. I think 21 might have been there too. Which is—

BB: When you went down to investigate?

NH: No the next day. They came the next day, in the morning. I don't even think they were notified until the morning, to be honest. People just started showing up. Calling me, "Hey I want to do an interview." And I was like, you know what, on the phone, "Let me wrap my head around it first, because right now I don't know what I could tell you that could help you to understand this anymore than I do." And I kept waiting to have somebody say, you know, call me and say, you know "I did this" Or—

BB: To take responsibility.

NH: You know, that never happened. So, cleaned it up, moved on more determined than ever. And just kept fighting the good fight. Trying to, you know, get things copacetic in Lancaster for everybody. And, again, everything started going great. I had even more business. Because everyone was like “Man, I had to come and see what the big deal was, [BB: Right] you know, you’re just a bookstore. What’s the big deal?” I said, “It’s small-minded individuals, that’s what it is. You know, a lot of people are not willing to accept us. Period. And they’re going to have to, because we’re not going anywhere.” [BB: Right]. And then the KKK started crap.

BB: When was this now?

NH: That was also in ’91, and that would have been—

BB: After the first bombing?

NH: Yeah. I want to say it was July.

BB: And what did they start doing?

NH: Well they came to town. I was told to leave town. The police told me to leave town, do not open your bookstore that day, go away, do not be here. If you stay, you could be arrested.

BB: For what?

NH: You tell me, we’ll both know. At any rate. So, a couple friends said, you know what, let’s just go to the beach. Let’s just go to the beach, just come on, you don’t need to go to jail over this stupid crap. And so that’s what we did. But I had a couple friends, video—as a matter of fact, if I could find the video I’ll make sure you get it.

BB: Alright.

NH: It’s very interesting.

BB: The video of the KKK?

NH: Yeah. And after they came to town, I actually ended up going on channel eight. They had a show that would come on at I think 12:30. It was called Live, and it was myself and Tom Keefer, who was also a member of The Pink Triangle, [clock chimes] against Charlie Juba, who was the grand Poohbah grand titan], or whatever they called that, of the KKK. And, man, we just made the biggest ass out of him on that, ‘cause, you know, you know how they work. They look for the lower-minded end of the species. And he was—he was an idiot.

BB: What were they doing? Were they protesting? What were the KKK doing exactly?

NH: They were protesting gays in Lancaster, and the fact that Lancaster was accepting gays, which they weren’t. But, that was their reasoning to come to town.

BB: Were they holding rallies? Protests? Or what?

NH: It was a march. It was a march through Lancaster. They wanted to come by the bookstore, but they wouldn’t allow that. They made a march—I want to say they got to march on, like, Queen Street and Lemon Street, but they wouldn’t let them get anywhere near the bookstore or that area.

BB: Where they in their hoods and—

NH: Yeah, mm-hmm. Yeah, I think there was one arrest for somebody having a shotgun. There was— shortly thereafter that there was a drive-by shooting, but they shot the building across the street instead of mine. So, you know, it was non-stop idiocy. I ended up—I started dating somebody. They lived in Lebanon. They would try to follow me, like, they would—I would see them following me up that way, and then—

BB: The KKK?

NH: Yeah. And I would see them pull off, and they would sit there and wait for me to come back down.

BB: How many of them?

NH: It would just be a couple of people in a car, and there was probably five different cars. They were—they wanted to burn a cross in my yard. You know, that kind of thing. And I knew the area much better than they did, so I was able to lose them every time. But—

BB: Why did they single you out? Because you were the bookstore owner?

NH: Because I was the bookstore owner. I was the target. I was the easy target. I was the person that was out there that they could focus on, you know. There was more than one gunshot attempt.

BB: Were you the only lesbian that they were following?

NH: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BB: Did you report this to the police?

NH: Oh yeah.

BB: And what did the police do?

NH: Well unless you can get a, you know, license plate. Well how can I get a license plate if they're following me? You know, I'm giving you a description of the car. I'm telling you this happens all the time.

BB: Well it's because Pennsylvania has no front licenses.

NH: Right. So, it was just—there was never any serious help, when it came down to it. And this just went on and on and on. And finally a friend of mine—

BB: How long of a time period?

NH: It was probably a good three months. And then the girl I was dating moved in with a friend of mine in Lancaster. So, there was no more trips to Lebanon. Which was very helpful in that aspect. But it was, like I said, a time of turmoil. I didn't really know who my friends were anymore. I had just—I honestly felt like, what it was like to be hunted. And it was, it was pretty horrible. It was pretty horrible. And the girlfriend and I didn't last very long at all. And it was probably a lot of this. You know, it was pretty, I guess pretty [BB inaudible]—you had to be pretty brazen to be hanging out with me [laughs]. My so-called best friend had no problem being there when the cameras were rolling, but as soon as they were done, it would be like “can you move over there, because if a bullet strays I don't want you to be beside

me because I might catch it.” I’m like, “You know what? You need to take a hike, just go.” It was just crazy.

BB: How many—was there other bomb attempts after?

NH: Yes. Mm-hmm

BB: After the first one, and the KKK were harassing you with their bomb attempts in between that time?

NH: There was another—there was one more bomb attempt. Well there was a threat, a threat of a bombing in between. And that was done yelled out from a car, you know, “We will throw the next bomb.” So I knew it wasn’t the person that actually did it, because they didn’t throw the bomb, they placed the bomb. And then in August, they blew the store up again. This time, they actually put the bomb—the door had a lovely brass rail to open. And it was really heavy duty [BB: yeah]. It was old school, probably back in the 40s, it was beautiful. They put the bomb, this time, I think it was like four—it would end up being a full stick. So it was four quarter sticks. And they taped them together and placed them behind this handle and the glass. The force of that was so strong it blew a chunk of the brick wall out that was probably, probably from here to there (hand motions). So, about 20 feet back. And it blew a nice sized piece of brick out of the wall.

BB: Wow.

NH: It did a lot of damage. I had an old candy case from way back when that I had a lot of my display in, and the glass shards scratched the entire front of it. It was like, it was like a sun burst [pew], you know [laughs]. My flag was burnt up, my gay flag that hung in the window was burnt up. And they hung it, as a matter of fact, there was a unity festival that same time as the KKK march.

BB: The, what festival?

NH: A unity festival.

BB: Oh.

NH: And I think that unity festival was a very big turning point also. But, they had that hanging. They had balloons and rainbow colors coming up and then the flag hanging down with burnt holes in it. So, you know.

BB: Moving.

NH: Yeah, yeah. So I wish I had that flag. It disappeared, but I’m sure it’ll resurface sooner or later. I think it was a big turning point. I think that finally, after that second bombing, people were just walking up and handing me money and saying, you know—

BB: Really?

NH: “Anything we can do to help?” And you know, we got another threat, and this time it was in five o’clock traffic, which was bumper to bumper on Prince Street. And I couldn’t determine who said it, but it just hit home, and I thought “Man, I don’t know if I can stay open.” Because if they’re willing to do that in five o’clock traffic, what if they really did just throw a bomb and somebody got killed. How would I ever justify staying open.

BB: Did someone just yell out of their car?

NH: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And, like I said, there were so many cars, I couldn't—like I was looking at everybody [laughs] you know? Who the hell said it? But you couldn't tell.

BB: What'd they say?

NH: They said “We're gonna—we're gonna bomb your store again.” And that was it. Just that. “We're gonna bomb your store again.” And I thought, “Man, can I keep doing this?” But that was August. And I hung in there, and then I got another threat, probably January. But—

BB: By cell phone? By?

NH: Another car, right out front. Right out front.

BB: Now what are the police saying all during this time?

NH: Nothing.

BB: After the big second bombing? What did they say? Did they investigate again?

NH: Well “we still haven't found it. We're still working on it, we haven't found anything.” And you know, business kind of got back to normal and things were starting to go well again. Christmas was awesome. I had great sales. And I thought, “Well, maybe this will work out. Maybe people are starting to calm down now. Maybe this is going to be a better situation.” But it really wasn't. [Cell phone rings].

BB: Let me silence this. Sorry.

NH: It's alright.

BB: So, [NH laughs], what—obviously this takes an emotional toll on you too.

NH: Oh god, yeah. Yeah, yeah it did. I think the worst part of it all was [laughs] just never knowing [tears up]. Never knowing what was going to happen next, or when, or how, who was going to pay a price. You know, I didn't really care about me, but the thought of somebody getting hurt because of me [cries].

BB: Your customers and your—

NH: Yeah, yeah. [sniffs] Yeah, I had a really good customer base, I really did. They were great [cries]. I'm sorry.

BB: No it's fine. [NH sniffs] It must have been a constant—

LM: We can stop if you wish.

NH: Yeah, let me get a minute [cries, she is moving chair to get up,].

[END OF VIDEO ONE]

NH: [Laughs] I have a feeling I know where it is but—

BB: The KKK?

NH: Yeah.

BB: That's always the case when—are we rolling again?

LM: Yeah.

BB: Oh okay [chairs moving]. We'll pick back up again. So I want to jump back into the, the second bombing and then the—then we talked about the, the threat again from the car. And then, the police—did the police know that you were getting these threats too. And the bombing? And—

NH: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, I made them quite aware.

BB: And what was their basic reaction?

NH: “Oh you know we'll see what we can do. We still haven't, you know nothing's solidifying.” You know there was always just a run around. A run around, no, no, no—I just felt like they weren't even trying. I felt like when I did inquire, I was just put off. You know, they were telling me whatever they thought would shut me up. And it was crazy. It was just so—like if it would have been anybody else's business, you know, would they have had that same attitude? They didn't look at that as a legitimate business that was the problem. It was just a gay bookstore. And that's how I felt. And I had one detective that was supposed to be working my case, and I mean he would stay in touch with me, but he never had answers.

BB: How often were the—you had two bombings.

NH: Two bombings.

BB: And how many threats?

NH: Three. Three. [BB inaudible]. Two, two in that summer time frame, and then like I said, you know, Christmas was good. And then it was January was the next threat. And that's when I really started contemplating closing. And—

BB: That was a drive by threat?

NH: Yeah. Yeah, and—

BB: Did you think about the in between times? Was it always on your mind or did you just put it out of your mind or how did you?

NH: I was always, always a little bit there. It was always a little bit there. It's not something that you bounce back from easily. Because it was like [sighs] a constant thing. Everywhere I went in Lancaster. I couldn't go to the grocery store without somebody recognizing me, somebody making a comment.

BB: Like what?

NH: Just, well the one time actually, I was alone and I was at the store. And there was a couple there, and the girl came up and said “Oh my God, I know who you are. Way to go. Way to be proud of who you are. You're doing a great thing.” And I was, you know, “thank you. Thank you.” And I just wanted to shop, you know. And I would—they were going one way and I was going the other. So every aisle and she would say something to me every aisle. And I could see him getting sick of it. And finally, by the end, he made it clear that he wanted to kick my ass, you know. And I said, “hold up, number one she's talking to me. I'm not talking to her. I didn't approach her. She approached me. If you have a problem, I believe it

would be with her, not me.” I said, “But if you want to go out front and we can throw down, and I’ll embarrass you in front of her that’s on you.” And she hit him and said “And she probably would kick your ass” [laughs]. And I said “and you’re not helping. You both need to just stop. Go on with your lives, I’m not part of it.” And they—it just ended there. But this was all the time. I was seeing somebody else at the time, and everywhere we’d go there would be somebody with some comment.

BB: Positive or negative?

NH: “There was that fucking dyke.” No, it was almost always negative. There was once in a blue moon there would be a positive, but the majority of it was just hate and discontent [laughs].

BB: So you were a celebrity then.

NH: Yeah, hah, I’m a “celebrity” [uses air quotes].

BB: You’re a celebrity because of the bookstore and the bombing. And then you’re known as this lesbian about town that—

NH: Right. Now see if they would have approached me with that I would have been okay. But it was never “Oh look it’s the lesbian about town” it was always “there’s that fucking dyke.” You know, that was the part that—there was always a feeling of being threatened at all turns. It was always a heavy weighted comment that could have led to something else.

BB: Oh so it was either your bookstore was being bombed, or threatened to be bombed, or it was them being “oh there’s that dyke.”

NH: Yeah. It was never—

BB: It was like this constant notoriety.

NH: Everywhere we went. And she even said, “Is this going to be our lives?” I guess it is.

BB: Where you—so basically, you were the “dyke with the bookstore.”

NH: Right, right. Yeah, yeah. I’m the—actually I’m the “loudmouth dyke with the bookstore.” Yeah. I am.

BB: It all started with...

NH: I am the loudmouth dyke because I’m not going to be held down [laughs] you know. But—

BB: Do you think it all started with the passage of the ordinance?

NH: Yes. Absolutely.

BB: Do you think that was the beginning of it?

NH: I think that was the beginning of it because it was like, “oh well you two guys thinking that you have rights?” And that’s where it all started. The turmoil started around that. I even had—we went to a local fair, and one of those county commissioners, as we are standing at a stand I mean literally at the stand, walks in front of us and shoves me backwards. Right there out in public. And the woman I was with, you know, was like “What in the hell is your problem?” I said “Don’t feed him. He’s an idiot.” And she said,

“Oh, do you know him?” I said “Well yeah, that’s a county commissioner right there. Aren’t they upstanding people?” [Laughs]. So you know if “the top notch,” as they say, is willing to do ignorant things like that, what chance do you stand? And that’s kind of where my mindset was. You know, because I was already having issues at the time. I mean my store had just been blown up, the fairs all start in the fall. But you know, like I said, Christmas time everything started to come around. Things started to get better. And then, boom, another threat. And then chr—you know I’m thinking, you know here comes summer again. What am I going to have to deal with this year? Who’s going to get hurt this year? What’s going to happen? And the police were kind of, more or less saying “We’re not getting any resolution here. We’re not getting results. We’re not finding anything.” They came down to question me because, the so-called best friend, that said “can you stand over there because I don’t want to catch a bullet,” her mom called the police and told them that I probably blew up my own store to get notoriety. So it was like, oh my god, everywhere I turned [laughs]. You know? [BB: yeah] It just felt like something was coming at me at all turns. So I was really kicking around the closing it down thing. And that went on the whole winter. I just kept thinking, “Mm, I don’t know. I don’t know if I can do this anymore.” Then the police came one day and they wanted to use my bookstore to watch the salon on the corner. I’m like, “you’re kidding me. That’s my salon.” And they said, “Well you need to sell your part then, because they’re dealing drugs when you’re not there.”

BB: Oh no that’s—

NH: I’m like, give me a break. Are you kidding me with this? He said “No. So I’m not going to be able to use your store now that I’m aware that you’re part owner of that.” He said, “I know you’re not involved, but I would get out of it.” So I immediately approached my partner and said, “You know, this isn’t for me anymore, I want to sell you my half.” And I sold it to her super cheap to get it done and over with quick. [BB: Yeah]. Because I didn’t want to go down with that ship. So yeah, it was just, like I said, it was a time of turmoil from all angles. And it just never, it never felt like I was going to make it through another year with it [BB: yeah]. You know, it just felt like there was something out on the horizon and it wasn’t going to be pretty. And the more I thought about it, the more I thought “you know what? I am going to have to close the store.” I wanted to try and stay the whole full year, and I did technically, but amazingly, one week after I announced the store closing, oh they caught the people that did it. Isn’t that something? Isn’t that something?

BB: That’s amazing. So who did it?

NH: It was this—it was this guy, his girlfriend, and they got three young guys to actually place the bomb. But here this guy had an entire garage full of these explosives. And God knows what was coming. They said if that garage would have blown up, it would have taken that whole block out, there was that much in there.

BB: And they ever discover why he was targeting you? Did he ever confess?

NH: Well, he ended up doing federal time.

BB: For this?

NH: Yeah. I think he only did like a year. But I was sequestered from the court room, but my mother and my friend were in there. And he claimed that he was forced into homosexual acts as a child, and that’s

why he did it. I happen to know his cousin, and his cousin said “None of that’s true.” So you tell me. I don’t know. I don’t know what the answer is. I have never—

BB: Sounds like a latent homosexual to me.

NH: Yeah.

BB: Fighting off his sexuality—I don’t know. I don’t know the man [laughs]. Maybe we should interview him.

NH: Yeah and the other—well he did some things after he got out of jail that, well I guess it’s not really my place to speak of on tape. But, I would say maybe not latent homosexuality as much as pedophilia. And I think that in his mind, maybe he was, I don’t know, maybe he was fighting that at the time. Maybe—I don’t know. I don’t know why anyone does anything they do to be honest [laughs]. But it’s a sad state of affairs that other people have to pay for them to justify who they are or who they aren’t. Because I really think that it would have went somewhere, it really would have went somewhere. And it really would have been a good thing. And Lancaster is a much better place now than it was, it really is. The acceptance of everybody has just been amazing. I mean I left the area for six years, because I thought I had to. So that I could just be forgotten. And here I am, being videotaped [laughs] so.

BB: So after it closes then what happens? [clock chimes]

NH: Well after I closed it, not a whole lot happened. I just tried to blend at that point. I just wanted to forget all of it. I just wanted to walk away. I was so angry at the time, because how could it be that there was no “oh we can’t find anything that is going to help us catch these people, blah, blah, blah.” All this lip service, and then exactly one week after I close the store, “oh got him!” Really? How could that be? Because had I known that they were on the cusp of catching these people, I certainly would not have closed my store. You know, I would have stayed. But I felt like these people were out there, they have no clue who they are, summer’s coming, more people out and about, you know I just couldn’t justify staying open. But then, you know afterwards, it was the turmoil of “I have to go to court for all of these court cases.” You know, I had to go testify in his trial, and then be removed. I had to testify against the woman. And, man I never wanted to hit somebody more in my life than I did that day in that courtroom. [BB: yeah]. Because she sat there with this smirk on her face that just, [grunts], I wanted to knock her teeth down her throat. And then to find out, that down the road, she ended up with a woman. Really? Really? So basically—

BB: Did she get any time?

NH: No because she had five children. That’s the only reason. But the judge told her, “If you ever end up in my court room again, you’ll lose all five of those children and you’ll never see them again. So you better think twice before you do anything stupid again.” You know, and the three kids, the one was obviously mentally challenged. And he walked right up to me and said “Ma’am I am so sorry for what I did, because I had no idea what I was doing. I really didn’t.” and I said, “Don’t worry about it.” And I gave him a hug. And I told the judge, “Just let him go.” The other kid, oh my god. He was horrible. And I wasn’t allowed to have anybody there with me, because they were juveniles. They could have their whole family. And the grandmother of this kid, this totally disrespectful kid, sat right behind me and says, “Well she says the brick was blown out of the wall [scoffs] I find that hard to believe.” And I said, “You’re a grandmother I find that hard to believe” [laughs]. You know, I mean seriously? Your kid, your grandchild

committed a crime, and that's the crap you're going to sit there and say? Quality people all the way around [laughs]. The guy, his wife had hit a jogger probably three months before the bombing. Hit a jogger, and drove off. Left him for dead and claimed she thought she hit a dog. You know, I mean when you look at all the things involved, it's like wow.

BB: So this went to trial in Lancaster, right?

NH: Mm-hmm yes. Yeah.

BB: In '92, '93?

NH: Man it seemed like it took forever, I—I... It was probably '92, '93. I can't say for sure, but yeah it did seem like I was—

BB: Only the guy served—

NH: It seemed like I was in court every week almost.

BB: But only the guy served time?

NH: He did and two of the kids did a little time.

BB: So with the state or with the city, the kids? How was it prosecuted, the state against...?

NH: I want to say it was the state. I want to say it was the state because he ended up doing federal time. And I don't—I don't think I ever knew what the kids got exactly.

BB: Was there press coverage on this too?

NH: Oh yeah. Yeah I believe, yeah. Yup. It was 13 times in one year is what it was, in court.

BB: Wow.

NH: Yeah. Well, it was a lot. It was a lot.

BB: So when this is over. Then what did you do then? Was then when you—

NH: That's when I was trying to blend [laughs]. Trying to just, you know, just get along. Get along and try to move on, is what I was trying to do. And I couldn't do it. I couldn't do it because everywhere I went, there was somebody. I got a job working at a pizza shop and I was actually really happy there. And I made really good money because I cooked and delivered. I was making, actually making money hand over fists. This guy paid really well. And I was happy as could be, and I was working in there. And it was like four years later, and I was actually starting to feel like, "Hey, maybe this is all going to end. Maybe it's going to be okay." And this girl walks in, and she's sitting there and, I think I was taking an order on the phone or something, and she kept looking over. And I thought, "Hmm, what's her deal?" And all of a sudden she stood up and said, "I know who you are. And she walked out and left her food." And I thought, "Oh crap, where's this going? I don't want to bring anything on this guy who's been really good to me. So I quick ran in the back and I told him what had just happened. And he said, "Well I know who she is, she comes in here all the time. So if anything happens, you know, don't worry about it because I'll know who was responsible." And I'm like, "Yeah but I don't want to bring that on you." You know? I say, "How about for now I just work in the back and nobody gets to see me." And he said, "You know

what, that's fine. We'll do that." And that's what I did, I just cooked. That's it. I didn't go out and deliver anymore, and you know, it just—and I thought, "This is crazy; am I going to have to live this life forever?" And I got with a woman who was a truck driver, and I started riding with her. And we were going across the country and we found some land in Tennessee, dirt cheap, and we bought it. And ultimately ended up moving down there. And I was down there for six years. When I came back, it was tremendous. Nobody knew me anymore. It was gold. I was like, "This is fantastic. Nobody knows who I am anymore." It was amazing. It was amazing the difference in life.

BB: What made you come back?

NH: I came back in 2006. Yeah.

BB: So you were gone from 2000 to 2006?

NH: Yeah. And you know, it was so ironic. As badly as I was treated here, when we moved down there, we were talking to different people about housing. And the one place they said, "Oh you know what, you guys are going to need to get special coverage because, you know obviously you can't get married, but you're together and blah, blah, blah." And it was like, we're in Tennessee, you know? I didn't see that coming. I thought, boy this is going to probably be worse than Pennsylvania, and it was not. It was not. It was pretty cool down there.

BB: Where in Tennessee?

NH: It was between Nashville and Memphis. Yeah, it was a little, tiny town [laughs]. Really tiny. It was like, I think, 220 people lived there. Yeah [laughs]. It was like a 45 minute drive to go to the store. Yeah, it was out there. It was a different world.

BB: So what brought you back to Harrisburg? I mean Lancaster.

NH: That situation didn't work out, and I just wanted to come home, you know. So that's what I did. And it's better. You know, it's way better here now. The changes are pretty immense. I wish I would have been here to see it. But I couldn't be, [tears up, cries]. I just couldn't live that way anymore. And now here I am [laughs] putting myself back out there.

BB: So the last ten years, what have you been doing here?

NH: Working for the hospital. I've been working for the hospital. And making some really awesome friends.

BB: Awesome friends?

NH: Yeah, yeah. I need a break.

BB: Okay.

[END OF VIDEO TWO]

BB: I was going to finish up on a couple things, but...you work at a hospital now, which great friends you said.

NH: Yes. Yup. Yah I have a really really great group of people around me, and no matter what happens I can turn to them. They are understanding, accepting, and like I said almost all my friends are straight people. To me that's mind blowing because that wouldn't of happened in '91. I'd say 90% of the people I consider friends are straight and me being gay is not even a topic of discussion. As a matter of fact, when anything about gay comes up they will be like...I don't know..."Nancy, help us out here!" At my job, everybody knows at my job too. One day in particular I was sitting there talking to this guy, he was waiting for a patient to come out, and the guy behind the counter, all I could see was from here up [shows from the nose up on the video] and we started talking about TV and I said, "yah all these channels and nothing is on." And he said, "well you can't change a channel without seeing a homosexual." And I just immediately went, "yup they are everywhere." And the guy behind the counter is just dying. He's like, "How'd you do that with such a straight face?" I said, "That's nothing [laughs]. That is nothing and you have no idea how bad it can be. I can take him and his...yah know." But that's a different world. That's actually a place between Lancaster and Philly where that happened. And it's almost like going back to '91, being there. It's the stuff you see, and hear, and whether it be against a black person or a gay person or whatever, it's a very prejudiced area. So, still work to be done.

BB: Yah. Still has work to be done. So the...since you've...I guess, what do you think accounts for the major change that you've seen in Lancaster, from the '90s to now? There's still work to be done, [NH: Absolutely] still a lot of prejudice, [NH: Absolutely] but you've commented that Lancaster has changed. [NH: Oh yeah.] So what do you think has brought about this change?

NH: I think a lot. Like the hospital I work at for example is in the city, and the city is where we fought for that law, and the law is still kind of questionable as, you know, validity wise. But I think the changes, like at the hospital, you can't be prejudiced against a gay person. You know, we are all inclusive and that's the bottom line. And I think things like that have changed the opinions of a lot of people. I think dealing more and more...because the...I don't really know what the percentage is of gay versus straight at the hospital is, but I know there's a lot of us there. They really do equally employ and I think that has made a huge difference, because people are having to deal with people, and they find that they like the people, and then they find out they are gay and it's like, "Oh, well you're not that bad after all. All these things that I have been taught are crap. You guys are just people too." And I can't tell you how many times I've had people say, "Oh my god, your relationships are just like ours!?" Well yah, what'd you think? We fight just like you guys do, we have arguments over dumb stuff too. It's never different, it's always the same. The only thing is who we sleep with, and if you're not in my bedroom I don't think it should matter. So, there's a lot more open-mindedness than there used to be. I mean you just didn't see that back in '91, and now it's like...wow! Totally different.

BB: I think it's the sameness issue and I think it's the bravery of people like you that have come out back in those days, in the 80s and the 90s, that forged...that's why your story is so important Nancy.

NH: I guess [laughing]

BB: That you're one of those trailblazers that made those steps that breaks those...blaze that trail. That's why these things need to be told. [She chokes up.] But I want to...one more thing I just want to jump back to something that you said off camera. That the people that made the threats got more severe punishment or...

NH: Just one of the threats. It just so happened that that threat...I don't know if they were driving by and pulled into a turn lane or something, I can't remember exactly how it went down with that one in particular, but I was able to get the license plate number, and someone else witnessed it, I believe. So it was followed up on and it was kids and they had a parent's car but they were over 18, and I know they got a fairly severe punishment. I don't remember what it was but...

BB: Through the courts?

NH: Yah yah.

BB: That's something we should look into...So is there anything else you'd like to add?

NH: [sighs] Um no. I think we covered everything. I can't think of anything off the top of my head.

BB: Well I think we've covered a lot of important ground here. And I want to thank you again for sharing your story and being so open about it. And I am going to thank you on behalf of the history project. It will be used and people are going to read your story. So I want to thank you Nancy.

NH: [Cries] Good. I'm glad.

BB: Thank you.