

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

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**Title:** LGBT Oral History: Sharon Potter

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**Interviewee: Sharon Potter**

Interviewer: Barry Loveland

Videographer: Lonna Malmsheimer

Date of Interview: October 10, 2014

Location of Interview: LGBT Center in Harrisburg, PA

Transcriber: Sara Tyberg

Sharon Mahar Potter was born in Buffalo, New York and raised in Scranton, Pennsylvania, commuting to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania for the first time when she became the Early Intervention Project Coordinator and spearheaded the development of services for children who have disabilities for the state of Pennsylvania. Profoundly moved by a young gay man's speech in a meeting of the House Education Committee, Sharon established the Bi, Gay, Lesbian Youth Association of Harrisburg [BGLYA], later going on to receive a Master's degree in Human Sexuality, working as the sexuality consultant for the Office of Developmental Programs of Pennsylvania, and then finally moving to California. In this interview, she recalls many successes and triumphs with her students in BGLYA that include issues such as gay marriage, suicide, HIV/AIDS, and homelessness. She won the Fall Achievement Benefit [FAB] award for her work in the gay community and established a scholarship with Melinda Eash for LGBT graduating high school seniors. Sharon emphasizes the variety of support options for the LGBT community today compared to those available in the past, praising the work of the Center in its development and efforts. [Sharon now resides in northeastern Pennsylvania.]

**BL:** All right. I am Barry Loveland, an oral history interviewer with the LGBT Center of Central Pennsylvania history project, and I'm here today with Lonna Malmsheimer, who is our videographer, and today is October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014, and we're here interviewing Sharon Mahar Potter at the LGBT Center in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. And first of all, do I have your permission to video tape the interview?

**SP:** Yes, you do.

**BL:** Okay, great. And we have a consent form that I'm gonna ask you to fill out or sign later, which will describe any way that you want to restrict anything, but it's up to you if you want to restrict content. But you can decide that after the interview. Also let me assure you that any time after the interview, you may ask to take a break or turn the camera off and we can stop and take a break if you'd like, and you can decline to answer any questions if you choose to do that. So, just let me know if you need to break or anything.

**SP:** Okay.

**BL:** All right. Well, first of all, [mumbles and pauses] if you could, maybe, first of all, state your name and spell it for the records, so we have all that correct on the interview.

**SP:** Okay. It's Sharon Mahar Potter. S-H-A-R-O-N M-A-H-A-R P-O-T-T-E-R.

**BL:** Great. Could you just tell a little bit about your background: where you were born, where you grew up, your family?

**SP:** Sure! I was actually born in Buffalo, New York, although my parents were from Scranton [Pennsylvania], and I moved to Scranton [Pennsylvania] when I was two, raised there. Had a younger brother who has since passed away. Lived there, met my—was married and divorced, and then married my second husband, Tom Potter. When we had six children under nine, the youngest was two [camera adjusts] in Scranton, Pennsylvania, that was quite interesting and then I—we both worked there for many years, and then I was offered a position in Harrisburg [Pennsylvania] to build the early intervention system for little kids that have disabilities, and I took that position, and I commuted twice a week between Harrisburg [Pennsylvania] and Scranton [Pennsylvania]. Lived with my friend Beth Bay who was in the [U.S. Senator Robert] Casey administration cabinet. Not long after I was here—when our youngest child—[chair makes a sound] oh, sorry—when our youngest child left and moved to California, my husband then took a position in Harrisburg as well with the Historic Museum Commission and worked with Barry Loveland who I got to know. At one point, after the 18 months of working in early intervention, I was appointed deputy director of the agency, so I stayed on. In that capacity, I was testifying in front of the House Education Committee—one time—about outcomes-based education. Children with disabilities incorporated into the classroom—regular classrooms, and the benefits of that, and I sat down, and a young man came to the microphone whose name was Andy. He was in his early 20s, and he talked to the committee about his experiences in high school. He was a gay man who survived being beaten and harassed. He had two suicide attempts, and what he was asking them was, “What are you doing now to protect kids who are in the schools?” and they were kinda baffled. They weren’t doing much of anything. I don’t mean to say they didn’t care. I think it wasn’t on their radar, and it honestly wasn’t on my radar, either. Tom and I always had gay and lesbian friends, but I—my—my professional world wasn’t focused on that at all, but when I heard this kid, I was very moved. So, I called Barry—I called you. And said, “What can I do to help?” And you said, “Will you start a group?” And I said, “Yes!” And it was that brief of a conversation, I think, and so, we talked about it, and I then called a woman I knew on the Harrisburg Patriot—can’t remember her name—well I could remember it—could find out... I told her what we were going to do, and she did an article and took a photograph, and we—you were, Barry, you were present at the Switchboard, which was the phone-in emergency or “Help me, I’m new in the area, I need to find whatever,” so we met on the lower level of Planned Parenthood, and the very first meeting, a couple things happened. First of all, I was nervous. Seven kids arrived. One of whom was a young Asian man who had his head down the whole time, very shy, and at one point, he just looked up and said, “What you’re doing is a good thing.” Put his head back down. He’s very, very sweet. The other thing that happened right before the group—this man came bounding in, this handsome man in a bright blue ski jacket and graying hair, and it was Bob Cauldren (sp?), the local pediatrician. And he said, “This is a good thing that you’re doing and if I can help in any way, let me know.” And I did later ask him, and he was a really big help, and then, off he went. He did help in a big way, I don’t mean to spring ahead here, but he came and spoke to the group several months later about developmental sexuality and when you come to terms with your orientation, and as he stopped right in the middle of his presentation, and he said to the kids, “I want to tell you how brave I think you are, because you have courage that I didn’t have at a young age, and I could’ve spared someone I loved very much a lot of pain, and that was my wife.” And it was quite an emotional

thing. And I met his wife and his children many times, actually, but I thought that was pretty profound. The other thing that he did was he began to interview some of his—the kids who were aging out of the pediatric practice, going off to college or whatever, and he had sort of an interview that he did with them, and one of the questions was, “Do you know your sexual orientation and are you comfortable with that?” And if they knew it or were struggling, he would say, “Well, you know, there’s this group—” [laughs] So, we got a couple referrals from Bob. So, anyway, we started the group. There were three of us in the beginning, and there were two of us. (?) and I did it for a long time. And, we had a wonderful time with those kids. We had funny times and heartbreaking times and everything in between. They were quite a group. They did pranks on us, and all kinds of stuff.

[coughing in the background]

**BL:** Excuse me, when the group first started, what was the name of the group?

**SP:** Well, the kids named the group. We had a—we just asked them, and they came up with it, and it was “Bi-GLYA,” and it stood for the “Bi Gay Lesbian Youth Association” of Harrisburg, but they used to call it—it was “Bi-GLYA,” but they also referred to it as “Big-LYA.” You “Big-LYA.” [laughs] And that was, that was pretty funny, because many of them were lying, you know, they would tell their parents they were going to a dance or a movie or whatever it was, and they would come to group. I remember—I have many, many memories, but one young man who—who came in and he said, “This is the third time that I was at the door and if I didn’t make myself come into the room tonight, I was going to go to the Forester (?) Street bridge and jump in the river, and he came in in terrible pain, and he left laughing, and they went to Friendly’s or something, you know, to get ice cream. It was amazing, ‘cause all they needed to do was feel—they could be there, and it didn’t matter, it was completely unconditional, and then there were other kids that were silly and teasing them—not teasing them in a bad way, but like, “You think you have problems? Wait ‘til you hear my problems!” So, it was—yeah, it was being in the right place at the right time. There were some really incredible things that happened. My husband was very patient and funny. I would call him countless times, and all I would say was, “We’re going to have a guest tonight,” and I could just see him like, rolling his eyes, like, “Okay,” but it would mean that one of the kids during group—because the first part of group was always a presentation or an activity, and then the second part was what’s happening in your life, in school, with your family? Like if a kid was going to come out to their parents, we always wanted them to know that they could call us, no matter what time it was. And there were several times when kids were sleeping in their cars or sleeping on somebody’s sofa, so they were homeless. So, I would bring them home, and we had a group—we had I think six or seven families that were a safe house network that would take kids in at a moment’s notice. So, that was good. And often, they reconciled with their families, but sometimes not. They made their own families then.

**BL:** Do you have any certain people that stand out in your mind as being—well, an example one of the other of someone who really blossomed through the group or struggled with his sexuality or?

**SP:** Oh my gosh. So many. Well, one, I’ll tell you about the most recent, because I was just a matron of honor in a wedding in Pittsburgh of Johnathan and Michael, and Johnathan was in one

of the first groups. He was maybe 18 or 19 when I met him, and he—he was struggling. He's pretty feisty, so he was... okay, but his parents were struggling, you know, parents, I think, I've found for the most part, it's that they think they've done something wrong or they think that if their child identifies as whatever it is, that means that somebody could hurt them because of that, that they have no control, and they're scared to death that they just don't know what to do. And I know John's mother, and I know how much she loves him, but it was a hard time for him. And he actually became a facilitator for awhile. He was one of the facilitators, and now he's married to Michael and they're in Venice [Italy] somewhere. [laughs] It was a fabulous wedding. But there are some. There was a young man—two stories that stand out. There was a young man who was really, really struggling, and he—he was living with two men who provided a home for him, Thurman and Ed, and he attempted suicide. He ingested something, and he was unconscious. They called the ambulance, and they called me, and I was—all night in the emergency room with him, and there was a very mean nurse. I did not like her. She could've used some education around this issue. He was in four-point restraint, and he was asking to be taken out of it—one arm—and she said something really mean, like, "I will let you out when you—I—when you can prove you can behave," you know? He didn't want to behave, he wanted to die is what he wanted to do. And, I had words with her, and she told me I should leave—I have to—I should leave. And I told her I wasn't leaving, and she said, "You're not even family, you shouldn't even be here," and I said, "So call security, because I'm not leaving, and besides, you need me here," and she was arrogant, and said, "Why do I need you?" And I said, "Because I'm the only one here that this young man trusts, that's why you need me." And she was [huffs] and rolled her eyes, but he's doing really well. [laughs] He, too, now is married, and in his 40s, but that was—that was a tough one. That was really tough. We had a couple kids that attempted suicide. None successfully which is good. And the other one, which is a funny story, that I mentioned earlier... one of the young men was in a psych inpatient unit, and he ran away, and he called our house at like one o'clock in the morning. He was at the Strawberry, which is a bar in downtown Harrisburg—I don't know if it's still there. But, it's—was an interesting little bar. Long, narrow bar. And he called me and said, "I'm here, and I shouldn't be here, I need to go back. Will you come get me?" So, I got up and threw some jeans and a sweater on, and I had a very interesting coat. It's called an Outback Riding coat. It's very long and flowy, sort of. So, I went down, and I just open the door, and I went all the way to the back, and there he was. And he was okay, and he was upset, but so I took his hand, and we left, and I took him back, and he, too, is fine. But a few weeks later, I was at a meeting, and there was a man at the meeting that I knew slightly—didn't know him really well, but he said, "Can I ask you something?" and I said "Sure," and he said, "About two weeks ago, did you come flying into the Strawberry at one o'clock in the morning with a big coat on?" and I said, "Yeah, it was me." [laughs] But there are things like that that are funny, but I mean, the agony that so many kids go through is pretty wicked, and it was great to have that group. It really was. It was terrific. At one point, we had six kids from Messiah, and that was—got to be funny, because a new kid would come, and they would say, "You?" "You were here?" "You were here?" Yeah, there were six from Messiah, and it changes, you know. We had—it was always changing. Kids go away to school, and new kids come, and we had as few as six or seven, and we had as many as 20 at group. So, it would vary. Yeah, they were—they were a challenge. They were fun. We tried to come up with rules in the beginning, and one of the rules was—which was so ridiculous—that we thought they shouldn't date each other, because there would be too much drama. Well, why else would they be there? Other than that it was a safe place—of course they're gonna date. And they did, and there was drama, and that's

life. It was fine. That was—that was kinda funny. They liked to tease about the rules we tried to—tried to set up. So, that's a couple stories. There are many.

**BL:** Do you find that the group changed a lot over the course of the years that you were involved in it, in terms of what the interests were and the kids coming in, or where they were in sort of the coming out process, or was it basically very similar?

**SP:** Well, I think as it—as it evolved, and because there was a group, and there was more education, that's when some of the allies groups started in the high schools. So—and we also started to do—we had a speaker's bureau, and we went to high schools and churches—we went anywhere that anybody'd ask us to go, and that was—there are some funny stories there, too. But I think as people became—my teachers would say, “Well, a gay kid could come to me and tell me,” and we'd say, “Well, how do they know that?” And they'd say, “Well, because I'm open-minded,” and I said, “Do you have a rainbow sticker or a triangle like in the midst of all of your other information?” and they would say, “What is that?” you know, well, “Just put one up, and you'll find out what that is, because kids will come to you. They'll know that it's safe. But I think kids became more educated and—and helped each other, and teachers became more educated. We had kids struggling with religion, too. And a lot of them came from very religious families, and one time, we were speaking at a church, and a woman said to me, “What if a child comes from a religious family and they ‘choose’ to be gay?” Which, we talked a lot about that. “They're not going to have their religion anymore, what do you tell them?” and I said, “Well, I tell them that they should not be with a partner that's abusive, and they shouldn't be in a religion that abuses them, either. They should find one that doesn't.” And, she was kind of indignant about that, but that's the truth, I mean, you can't exist—sit in a congregation where people tell you you're bad, because you're not bad, you know? That's not—not okay. But a lot of the kids struggled with that, and I think after we moved—we moved again, we moved to St. Michaels, and I don't know if Russ was there at the time, Russ Mueller (sp?). It was someone before him. But that was pretty extraordinary, because that clergyperson, that minister... priest, Lutheran, minister, I guess—would pop in on Friday nights just to see how the kids were doing, and never—and invited them to come, but never said, “Come, I'll save you,” or, that's silly, but—but it was unconditional. I also have a memory of that. A picture in my mind that was extraordinary. It was the young man who I first heard testify, and it was at Pride festival, and I was at the table with the kids. And this young man was in full regalia drag, and he had high heels and fishnet stockings and pink fluffy things and hair and lashes, and he was adorable, actually. And he came sauntering up, and I was standing with Russ Mueller (sp ?) who had his collar on. He's a big man, six foot two or three, blonde, Scandinavian guy, and—and as this person walked up, Russ just tapped her on the shoulder and said, “How are you today?” that's all, but between the two of them, behind them were the protesters with their signs. And I thought, “Oh, if I could've capt—” I have captured it in my heart, but that would be quite a photograph of those people behind them—that religious right that isn't either one, I don't think. And Russ and that young person, so... yeah, I think religion is something that a lot of them—they all—that a lot of them struggled with, and I think they probably just move away from it, unless they can get to a congregation that is welcoming—and there are many now, too, so that's—that's good. I—I—we always had more men than women, which was interesting to me. I don't know how that's changed, but we always seem to have more men than women, and I think in all my time there, we only had two young people that I think were transgender, and that—that may have changed, too. 'Cause I think that,

to me now, is the biggest challenge, is that group of people that—I think that’s a really hard, hard struggle, but those folks are more apt to I think to come forward now with parents supporting them. I just read something in like Family Magazine or Women’s World or something—it was such an interesting place that was a young person who transitioned from female to male, and I thought, “What better place than Family Circle Magazine?” You know, [laughs] it was just kind of interesting. Yeah. I don’t know if there’s anything... I—a couple other things, can I tell you? [BL makes sound of affirmation] One day—I was still Deputy Director of Pennsylvania Protection and Advocacy. I had an office off Front Street. And one of the young people who was a very shy young man came to my office and—and it was my birthday, and he said, “I don’t have any money for a gift, but I want to do something.” And he came inside my office and sang at the most beautiful aurea (sp?), and after he sang, and I opened the door, the whole office was outside, applauding. It was beautiful. Harry, Harry. The other thing that happened was a man came to my office, asked for me. I came out. He told me his name, which I recognized immediately, because it was the last name of one of the young men in group, and I thought, I— Well, I didn’t know what to think, but it wasn’t—it was not a comfortable situation, ‘cause he was there to find something out, and I wasn’t about to reveal anything about this young man. So, I first said to my boss, whose office was next to mine... kinda gave him a look, like beware or something. And “I’m meeting with this man for a short period of time, and I’ll be with you shortly,” I think I said. So, I went into my office, and he had a piece of paper with him that was the first name, last initial of everybody, including the facilitators and our dates of birth. So, he figured these were all young people, and these three people are adults. And he said, “So, I’m figuring that my son is in a group and that you are one of the adults that’s doing something with them, and I want to know what this is.” And I said, “I’m really sorry, but I can’t tell you that. But what do you think it is?” And he said, “I think my son is gay, and I love him, and I’m afraid.” And I said, “Then, you need to ta—you need—that’s exactly what you need to tell your son,” which, he did. And that’s all that needed to be said. You know, so he did, and then the son later came and said, “I can’t believe my dad went to your office! Oh my God! It’s so crazy!” But it was—it was pretty extraordinary that his father did that. I mean, clearly, he cared about him and didn’t know what to say or do, he just didn’t know. So that was one of many, many interesting stories... then there was another one. One of the facilitators, Melinda, as we pulled into the parking lot at Planned Parenthood about 20 minutes before the meeting got stung by a bee, and she’s allergic. So, she was in her car, so I just slid her over on the passenger side, and I drove her car I don’t know how many miles an hour to the—it must have been whatever the hospital is right there, and, I mean, it was pretty scary. She was—it wasn’t—it wasn’t good. So, we’re in the emergency room, and a nurse came in at one point, and she said, “There are about 10 very interesting young people out in the lobby.” They all came to the emergency room, so we could’ve had group right there in the emergency room, but they were all so worried about Melinda, and she was fine. She was fine. We called her husband, and he came down, and then I went back and got to the group, so that was—that was good. Yeah, we had—we had really wonderful times. And I’m in touch with some of the kids in the original group through Facebook and that’s—that’s really nice, and you know, one of them’s a minister somewhere and several are married and in long-term relationships. One’s running a personal care boarding home. One is teaching in San Francisco. You know, it’s nice. It’s nice, yeah... to be able to connect with them.

**BL:** How many years were you involved with group?

**SP:** Oh, boy. Probably 10? Eight to 10, I think. Because then I started graduate school, and that was—I had a lot, I was in Philadelphia weekends a lot, and then other facilitators came on board. So, yeah, it was probably a good eight years. Eight to 10 years. Yeah, and we had talent shows and we had one young man who had Asperger’s, and he was a big kid—a big guy—a handsome big guy, like six foot three or something. And he knit. He was always knitting, he had this big long thing that he was knitting. And he was brilliant, just brilliant. And his mother would drop him off and pick him up, and he would—you know, people with Asperger’s have—their social skills are sometimes a little off-kilter, and his were, and he would say, “You know, I really like you, will you be my boyfriend?” I mean, things that were just, you know, and the other kids would go [sighs], “Could you stop?” so you know, I talked to his mom about it a little bit, and what they decided was he would come to group and educate the group on Asperger’s. So, he did a little formal lecture about what it was like, and everything changed. He would say something, and they would say, “That is inappropriate. Think of another way to say that.” [laughs] And they helped him, and he helped them. So that was, that was kinda fun. And I remember waiting with him for his mother to come, and he would describe the constellations that were incredible, and I know some of them, but he knew all of them. It was—he’s brilliant. I’m not in touch with him. I’d like to know what happened to him. Very bright guy. The talent shows were always fun. [laughs] Yeah, they were. Some really talented kids. I’ve written a children’s book about a fairy that lived in my backyard, and it’s not published yet, but one of the kids was an illustrator, Robert, who’s now in [Washington] D.C. and is a personal trainer. [laughs] But he’s a magnificent artist and so, eventually, that will get out there, I hope. Yeah, I don’t know any other stories, but—well, there are a million, but...

**BL:** What kind of programs do you recall offering? Like topics, or you—I guess you brought in some speakers or things like that?

**SP:** Oh, yeah, we did.

**BL:** What sorts of things did you do?

**SP:** Well, every once in a while—we’d try to repeat it, depending on the change in the composition of the group. We always did safe sex things. And there was always something new going on around safe sex, and one of the things that jolted me about that, which just popped into my head, was that there were—that this whole thing called “gift givers” and “bug chasers” were like what? And it’s young people who feel—it’s almost—it’s so bizarre, and I hope it’s changed. But, it’s young people who want to become HIV+, so they feel like they’re part of the community. And they will—they are the bug chasers, they’re trying to find someone who will give them the gift, which was like what are you talking about? That was terrifying, but it was good for us to know that, because we could pass it on to schools that were educating kids. That was—that was pretty scary. So, we always did good sex education and boundaries and relationship stuff. One of the things that we recommended. I’m jumping off topic a little bit here, but one of the things I think is a problem when you have facilitators and young people is facilitators need to be able to set boundaries with the kids, because it can be problematic. Kids who are just coming out—they come so out so fast and so far, it’s like the swing of the pendulum. They don’t—they come in and they’re scared and whatever, and the next week, they’ve got, you know, like purple hair, and they’ve got rainbow flags, and they’re just, you



know, it's just cracked me up. They're so funny. But they also can fall in love and be sexually aggressive toward the facilitators. And you have to know how to deal with that. And that's—we recommend that as part of the training, and I think that's really, really, really important. But we also had, you know, we had things about how they could handle stuff in school and how to tell your parents you're coming out, you know, just start on a little low level. “Hey, what do you think about Ellen?” [laughs] Something that's simple that was intr—a little introduction. Things about, you know, relationships—we did some stuff about religion, too, and different religions and how they approached, you know, accepting people that were—were different. We had a lot and then we had—you know, as I said, Bob Cauldren (sp?) talked about sexuality from sort of a clinical point of view. I also had a dear friend who was a transgender man, but never did transition, and he came down from the Scranton [Pennsylvania] area and spoke to the kids, and he just had a blast talking to them. He since has passed on, but he just felt the same way I think that Bob did that he, if he had been younger, if he had been born at that time, he would've have a very different life. He would've been more blended with who he was, but he couldn't do that where he was teaching and living. But the—I mean, it could've been—we had speakers and then we also had activities, you know, we would have games and all kinds of things, but the second part of it for me, I think, was the—and we would also ask the kids, “What do you want to know? What do you need to learn?” and then we'd get someone to address that, but it was the talking about the nitty gritty stuff that—what happened in school, and we would arrive at the schools. If there was a kid who was being harassed, one of us would be in that school within a couple days, and often the solution was—well, not often, but one of the solutions was they had a... they accompanied this particular kid from one class—they assigned someone to walk with the kid from one class to another, which infuriated me. That's—how about calling an assembly and saying, “Under no circumstances is this going to happen in our school, and if you do it, you're out of here. Period, that's it.” Not like guide the kid to class. That was ridiculous. And then we had, you know, some principles who kinda dug their heels and said, “Well, if they weren't so—didn't wear lipstick then...” No. That's not okay, you know? And if you do wear lipstick and wear makeup and you're a guy, know that the impact of that, but if that's what you choose, that's what you choose, and that's okay. But it's not okay for someone to hit you, and so, we did a lot of—we did a lot of education. And then, you know, you'd also have teachers who then would want to support the kids, but then sometimes they were gay-lesbian teachers, and they were kinda scared to say, “I'll start an allies group... but then I'll maybe have to come out and oh dear, I could get fired,” which, you could, probably still can, I think in some places. So, that was—that was interesting. We did conferences. We did workshops at conferences. We just had fun times. [laughs] Lots of fun times, and then we—you know, and then people would support us and invite us to picnics and we went to people's homes, and there were campfires and stuff. We did have a kid with a physical disability that used a wheelchair when we were at Planned Parenthood, and he couldn't of course get down the stairs, so we used the freight elevator, which we weren't supposed to, so sorry! But we did! [laughs] We just couldn't get him down the stairs, and I think that's one of the reasons we were looking for another place, too, so that he could get in and—and we also had a young man who had some... I guess mental health issues, I'm not really sure exactly what they were, but he came—he lived in a group home, and he came with a staff person that brought him to group, and that was really cool, too. The kids were always so supportive of other kids that came and were new, and it was always funny to find out how they found us. That was really comical. “I saw it in the paper,” or “My mother told me to come,” or “My teacher told me,” or “Dr. Cauldren (sp?) told me to come,” or I think I maybe mentioned

earlier the little cards that they left in bookstores? We had little cards that said what the group was and where it was and what time, and the kids would leave them like at Borders or in libraries in—next to books on LGBT issues, so that was fun. And once or twice a year, we also had a group where the kids invited their parents to come, and that I thought was really awesome, because one facilitator would be with the kids and another facilitator would be with the parents, but we also had someone from PFLAG [Parents, Families and friends of Lesbians And Gays] come and talk about what their issues were, and then afterwards, we'd come together, and it was—that was pretty profound. I hope—I hope that still is happening, because it was pretty—it was really good. You know, you'd have parents that felt like they were all alone, and they'd done something wrong, and they didn't, so... that was a nice way for them—and then they took up with PFLAG and what could be better than that? Yeah.

**BL:** There was a scholarship program [mumbles]? [coughs]

**SP:** Yeah, there was. That was really honored about that, and I also got the FAB [Fall Achievement Benefit] award one year. It was wonderful. It's sitting on my mantel in California. Yes, it was the Eash-Potter Scholarship named after Melina Eash and me, and it was for a graduating senior. And I did have an issue with that one year. One guidance counselor—one of our kids went to the guidance counselor to get this scholarship, and it didn't—they pulled it out. They thought it was inappropriate. Well, oh dear. So, I went and met with the guidance counselor, and she thought it was inappropriate, so I found out when the next school board meeting was, and I also called the Lambda Defense Fund and spoke to somebody. So, I went, got on the agenda. I forget who the secretary of education—not education, the superintendent was, but she was—she was there, and it was my turn to speak, and I thanked them for letting me be there, and I said that I was Sharon Potter, and there was a scholarship named after Melinda Eash and me for a graduating senior LGBT or an ally. And that it had been pulled. And I wondered if there was an explanation for that, because if there wasn't a good explanation and if it wasn't resolved, by—this was maybe a Thursday—by Tuesday of next week, then Wednesday of next week, the Lambda Defense Fund lawyer would be there. And it was back on Monday. [laughs] Yeah, that was outrageous. That was outrageous, and I did meet a couple of the kids that got the scholarship. That was really nice, and it went on for a few years. It doesn't exist anymore, I'm sure it doesn't. I don't know, but there should be some kind of scholarship. Maybe the Loveland scholarship. That would be good. Yeah, that was—that was quite something. I'm trying to see if there was anything else that was fun. Oh, they did have a night where a bad—they did a bad thing. One—a couple of them came in, and I don't if they were with—dated each other or what, but they had a huge hickey on their neck, so he gave them a lecture as I would give my own kids about branding and marking yourself and, you know, pride and you know, they were kinda giggling under their breath. The next week, they all gathered in the parking lot before they came down, and they all gave each other hickeys. Yes, they did. Bad kids. Bad, bad, bad. It was pretty funny, though... yeah. Yeah... they're—everyone—I bumped into a kid once, and I don't even know who it was, and I—said this when I got the award, the FAB award, we were in a restaurant, and it was the waiter. He was a wait staff, and I don't think he came a lot—I mean, he looked familiar, but he was like grown up, and he said, “Are you Sharon Potter?” and I said, “Yes,” and he said, “You saved my life,” and I was like, “What?” and it was the group that saved his life, but—and I don't even know his story, but he was in bad shape, and then he—he found the group, so... you know, a lot of those kids are connected—stay connected to each other. Joey, who was a

delight. I see him once in awhile. He has moved in with his partner, Joey and David. They had a bed and breakfast now in Rehoboth [Delaware], and that was one of those things that, you know, Joey was 18 maybe? And we were always concerned about older kids coming to group, and Joey met David, and he was older. And I was like, "Oh, I'm worried about that," but they've been together for 20 years, so. [laughs] That was a good—that was a good match. But we were always protective of that, too. We didn't want the younger kids to get—or any of the kids that were vulnerable to be taken advantage of, 'cause they were needy, you know, and you just have to kinda watch that. We also had a young man who came to group once and told us that he'd been diagnosed HIV+, and he had to notify all his partners, and he said that's a problem, and we said, "Why?" And he said, "I don't even know who they are. There are hundreds. No way to notify any of them," and that was pretty heartbreaking. But that was another funny story, actually. He was homeless, then he got an apartment, but he had no furniture, so we had a sofa, and we were giving it to him, so Tom rented a truck—[shakes head slightly and chuckles] God Bless Tom—rented a truck, and he—we were going over, and it was a second floor apartment, and the kid measured, and yes, it will get in. He can get it in. Meanwhile, it started to snow. Anyway, we got over there, and Tom and this young man carry this sofa up, and no, it's not going in, so then they carry it back down. And then he says to Tom, "There's a fire escape—there's a big window over the sink in the kitchen, and there's a fire escape, so that might work. So Tom goes up the fire escape onto the roof, and says, "You know, I think it will work," so in the snow, up they go. Up the fireplace onto the roof through the window, and he had a place to sleep then. Yeah, he was—that was really something. When Tom died, one of the kids—Johnathan, whose wedding I was just in, said, "If a kid could choose a par—if a gay kid could choose a parent, it would be Tom Potter." And that was true. That was really true. He had many a kid in the house. Many a kid. Including our six, but... many others. I don't know if I have any other stories.

**LM:** Was there any trouble with anybody?

**SP:** Well, we had one young man that lived with us that wouldn't leave. [laughs] Yeah, that—that was trouble, yeah. He just—he had some mental health issues, and he would leave many one, two in the morning and go out, get home at breakfast and sleep all day, and it was—it was a problem. And he said, "You can't expect me to leave if I can't handle living on my own." It's like woah. Okay, but, it's not going to work here. You know, and he was with us a couple months, and we'd—you know, it just wasn't working. Tom talking to him, and we did have another place. I think he went with Eva Adim [sp?], I think. But there was a house waiting for him, but someone that Eva found that was waiting for him and had made the connection. So, it wasn't that he was out, but that was—that was hard. I mean, it was very hard for me to tell someone that's in need that I'm not gonna help them, but there's a point where you're facilitating them in—that's not the right word I'm looking for, but you're... contributing to their issues, and that couldn't be. We then had—when we moved to St. Michael's, we had—when group got out, we had cars circling the loop to try to pick up kids, and some kids I think might have wanted to be picked up, but many of them didn't, and we were worried about that, so I went to the police, and said that I was worried, and they had a patrol car just—on Friday nights, around 10 o'clock, just drive around and be sure everyone was okay and nobody was being harassed or anything. So that was—that was a little bit—that was scary, but you know, it was pretty—it was pretty good. I mean, the suicides and the worry that they were gonna die was awful—that they were in pain. I mean the one young man that has done incredibly well is Doy (sp?), a young man who came

from Vietnam, and his father had died. He supported his mother and sister. He worked in a factory. I think he lived in the factory, frankly. Made enough money. Brought them here and missed school, so he was maybe 16, he was in eighth grade or something—silly, because he was so bright and accelerated pretty quickly. He was tutoring students by the time he was a senior in high school, and his mother found out he was gay and threw him out of the house, and two wonderful women—Lucy and Kiss (sp?)—I met—oh, that was—I was—there was—something happened in Elizabethtown [Pennsylvania]. There was one—there was this thing that happened with—I don't even remember if it was a policy issue with the school—"a family is one man, one woman and their natural born children" or some absurd thing. So, this alliance of people came together, adopted kids, fostered kids, gay families, so there was—and I went down to protest or do something. I also spoke at the memorial for Matthew Shepard, which was pretty profound, but anyway, I went down, and I was sitting in the audience, and the school board meeting was happening, and they were saying silly things that made no sense, and I was like, "Whatever!" and I heard these two women behind, and we got talking, and they said, "If ever we can help, we will." So when this happened with this young man who was sleeping in his car, I called them, and we took him—he stayed with us that night, and I took him over the next day, and they walked him through their house, showed him the house, and as we were leaving, they handed him a key, and he just started to cry, and he said, "You mean, you accept me?" And they said, "Yes." And he lived with them. His senior year of high school, they took him to see colleges, and he went to Temple [University], and that's... history. That's history now. He's a really good guy. Yeah, we did some good with those kids. It was... it's a gift. I always say it's the second best thing I did in my life. The first one was marrying Tom and having the six kids. But the group was the second best thing, for sure. But the Matthew Shepard thing. When he was killed, there was a vigil—in that, it's called the Veteran's Field behind the Capitol building. It was there, and Ann Van Dyke from the Human Relations Commission was one of the speakers, and I was one of the speakers. There were five or six, and when I got up to the podium, what I could see in front of me was the dome of the Capitol with the—what's her name, on top? Ms. Liberty or Ms. Justice or whatever—the gold lady that's all good up there. And, I had—I had little notecards that I was going to say something, and I got up there, and I looked down, and there were the kids from group. It could have been any one of them that would've been—that would be dead. So, I don't even know what I said, but I didn't follow my notes, but that was a really—that was another moment that I wish I could've captured, because it was—where it happened—the place where it happened—in the Capitol under the dome, pretty much, and those beautiful kids, but yeah... that was... that was crazy. A lot of good came out of that. The good always comes out of those tragedies, most of the time. A learning experience. So...

**BL:** So since finishing your association with the group, you've gone on to study additional coursework and then you've had a second career in California?

**SP:** I did! I went to graduate school, got a Master's in Human Sexuality, and became the sexuality consultant for the Office of Developmental Programs for the state and did a lot of training and education of staff around the state. I ran two training institutes. We trained about 80 people all over the state. We did a—I co-authored a best-practice manual. It was good work. I loved doing that. I did practicum in the Camp Hill Prison, and I remember coming home from a meeting with some advocates—disability rights advocates, and I came home one night to my husband, and I said, "Oh, I just had the worst meeting with my colleagues. They're driving me

crazy. I can't wait to get over to those sex offenders. They're so nice." [laughs] They were. They were. They did bad things, but they weren't bad people, and you were trying to help them to use the good in themselves to not do any more bad. I loved working there. And, I helped to start a support group for gay men at the Camp Hill Prison. Yeah. I don't know if it's still happening, but that was pretty cool. That was really cool. And then I moved to California, and I'm looking to do more work there. I've done a workshop and a—my—so my two areas of expertise are disabilities—intellectual disabilities—well, really three—sex offenders, and LGBT issues. I'm also going to be doing some work with the Pacific Center in Berkeley [California]. I'm excited about that, 'cause I miss this world. [laughs] So, it's good. Yeah, it's good to be back. I'll have to come back every year. I'll have to come back for FAB. That would be so nice. I'd like that. Yeah.

**BL:** Well, is there anything else you can think of that you wanted to add?

**SP:** Oh my gosh, no. I think what's happened here at the Center is amazing, and I know that, you know, Louis was a little reluctant to take the position, because he's so young, but look what he's done. He's remarkable. He really is. He's one of my favorite people. I just love that it's here, and I feel I was part of it, so it's pretty cool, yeah. And I'll go see the history project, yeah. I'm gonna do that on Saturday. See if my dear sister-in-law would like to go with me and Joshie, the young gay man in my life at the moment. [laughs] Expose him to some of his elders, although he considers himself totally mature. He talks about "the kids." He's 24. [laughs]

**BL:** Well, thank you very much.

**SP:** It's been a pleasure.

**LM:** Well, as soon as we turn this off, you're going to think of another story.

**SP:** Possibly. I did write...

**LM:** Did anyone ever exercise (?) you or the group's existence (??)?

**SP:** Well, yes, we had one infiltrator. We had a man who looked a little bit older than the kids, but he could've been mid-20s—and sometimes there was someone who was a little older, but they clearly needed support. But, you just didn't want a 25-year-old in with a 14-year-old. It didn't make a lot of sense. So, this young man came and, you know, we're talking about things, and then, he said something like, "I think that Jesus Christ Almighty," you know, "would not want you to do this, and you know, you shouldn't be," it was—and what he [laughs]—well, I'll tell you what they did. Those little naughty kids. [laughs] They—he told them that they should have spiritual orgasms. That's what they should do. They should, like pray and spiritual orgasms is what he should do and not be in touch with each other, and so we ask him to leave and he left, but then the kids sat there and when "Oh god, oh god, oh god," and we're like, "Stop it!" But—so that was an interesting night. And yeah, there were always the protestors, you know, that you're gonna go to Hell, and you know, at the Pride festivals, which I loved. I love that [Governor of Pennsylvania] Ed Rendell rode in the car and went to the Pride festivals—the

governor, but it was hard to see those people. I know that the folks that are trained to do the umbrellas and to stand—what are they called?

**BL:** Silent Witnesses.

**SP:** The Silent Witnesses that stand between the protesters and what's happening. I have a lot of patient, but I can't do it, they just make me so mad, I wanna just smack them, and I'm not a smacker, but I just—I think about the pain that these kids have been through and how dare they. How dare they. They have no idea what they're doing, and so that was always hard to see them and try to ignore them. That was—that was hard. So, I never was a Silent Witness. It's a good idea that they didn't give me the umbrella. [laughs] Yeah, so talent shows and dances, that was fun, too. And places opened up to us. I think Stallions gave us one night a month with no adults, just kids no adults, no liquor. The kids could just go and dance and that was fun. Yeah, they had their own place to go. I do—I should tell you that when I got the FAB award, my mother came down. My two friends came from Scranton and brought my mother who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and as they're coming down, my friend said to her, "Now June, do you know why you're going here?" You might know this story. And she said, "I—I think so. I think it's that Sharon has so many gay friends, they're giving her a prize." [laughs and BL laughs in the background] And Beth said, "That's exactly right." But that was—that was my mother's take on the... but my mother had—my mother was a beautician, and her best friend was a man named Tommy, and he was wonderful man, and he was always in my life. He was her friend, and I always knew him. So, what was—it wasn't unusual and anyway, that was what it was, but I thought that was funny. "A prize." Like, and I think Tish Fredricks (sp?) who I'm still in touch with. She roared laughing. She said, "Well, you didn't never notice that person behind you with the clicker. [makes button-pressing motion] 22, 23." [laughs] "104, 105." [laughs] No, I never did. [puts hands up to face] Oh my goodness, but I'm so delighted that there are three groups, and you know, the annual conference, and there's so much happening here that... and there are groups for seniors and aging with pride and AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] groups. We have an AA group and all kinds of stuff, I mean. You know, 20 years ago, people died. They jumped off the Forester Street (sp?) bridge, and they're not anymore, because you're here. That's pretty wonderful. So, thanks for the opportunity.

**BL:** Thank you again.

**SP:** You're welcome. Thanks.