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Arbor, Kelly

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(Interviewers Alanna Larrivee and Emma Wynne Hill)

E: Would you mind stating and spelling your name?

K: Sure, it's Kelly Arbor, K-E-L-L-Y A-R-B-O-R

E: Beautiful, and it is October 29th in the sociology department in Portland Maine

A: 2016

K: 89 degrees in the room,

E: Indeed. So, would you mind just starting off by talking about your background? Where you were born, where you grew up, sort of that chronology

K: Yeah, totally. I was born in Rumford, Maine, in 1977. I was supposed to be Dec. 7th and thank the goddess I was late, because they were almost going to name me Pearl Arbor, which would have been so traumatizing, Dec 7th.... disgusting. At the last minute my mom decided on Kelly, which I have always felt was a serendipitous gender neutral name, which is why I've never changed it through the years. And I was an 'IE' baby, I tried all the spellings of Kelly growing up and settled on 'Y'. I lived in Rumford for most of my life. We practically lived in Mexico, on the other side of the tracks, but we were through the Mountain Valley school system. I was actually the first class to go through the entire middle school and high school after the merger. And I grew up going to Robie (SP) elementary school, which was an open classroom model, so it was pretty radical. It was like, the 4th and 5th... 3rd. I think 3rd, 4th and 5th were on the lower level and the kindergarten, 1st and 2nd grade were upstairs, and there was a slide that you could go down. A little library. It was really radical. They were like 'oh you're bored and antsy we're going to take you out of the class for creative writing'. So I didn't learn the planets, but I learned how to write. We did live in Wells and Sanford for a hot minute. My brothers were born in Sanford, and they're twin. Any my mom, I remember her when I was 1 1/2 just being like "Kel, I need you". (LAUGHTER) "I have too much". And, my parents separated when I was 7, so definitely the classic divorced family. Both the families still live in Rumford/Mexico and there was a lot of strife between them, so I grew up with a lot of tension there. And my father was a much more alcoholic, active alcoholic when I was younger. So they had a very tumultuous relationship, and it was just hard. It was hard enough being really different, like I had brothers and had a cousin who was a boy that was with us, like my other brother, and I didn't understand when I got to school why I had to be in dresses. What do you mean I have to go with the girls to go to PE or go to the bathroom? I just didn't get it, and it was very clear to me by like age 5 that I was very different than the other kids, and I just bottled it up and didn't.. I could go home and be myself, and I could be myself at school for the most part... it wasn't like, ah there's a gender code, but it showed up in the places you would expect it to, with like gendered play.. and so I was pretty much a loner, I didn't have friends really... there were a couple of odd ball girls that I hung out with. But I grew up cooking a ton and spent a lot of time alone and floating in the lake. We have a camp up toward Rangely on a freshwater pond. So I would just go to the forest and it didn't judge me, and I could be a weird husky androgenous kid. I loved to thrift. We were super poor, we grew up working class and then when my parents separated my dad decided he didn't want to pay child support so we grew up in section eight housing, my mom worked multiple jobs. We were very classic latch-key kids, we from like first grade on didn't have anybody at home with us. Bounced around a lot. I moved like 10 or 11 times when I was a kid... We're staying with gram now, or we were in this other apartment. And she had boyfriends here or

there. My dad actually married our kindergarten teacher, and she was great. She was like a very loving... she took us skiing and took us on trips and she could provide for us in a way that my mom couldn't, so there was a lot of tension there with like just jealousy of like 'she's giving you things that I can't' and my mom's incredible. So we had a lot of like breakthrough like stuff when I was a kid just around like 'you're amazing, mom, we're on your side, don't worry... like we love everybody, but you've got us... so don't you worry.' So, yeah, we're still close, and we've just been through the like up and downs. She's.. her family's ITALIAN Italian, and french Canadian. But they're very Italian, and they would process. There are a lot of them. There are 8 siblings in their family and my dad had 7, so 2 huge families and her family was like 'we talk about everything', maybe too much, and his family's like 'we don't talk about anything'. SO it's like 'this is... weird'. Um, yeah and I just grew up like, by the time I was in 4th or 5th grade I was like 'I'm attracted to a lot of different genders, this is really messed up too!' (LAUGHTER).. "I can't deal, I can't deal with any of it.' A couple of my aunts are super feminists so they gave me like Women Who Run with Wolves and Starhawk, I'm getting these books in like 6th grade, I'm like '..OK'. SO they knew, they knew. Um, but I just, it was like not a safe place to be out. It was probably safer for me to be out and queer than it was for masculine people to do that... or feminine people... but it was the late 80s and people... I didn't know.. I knew like 2 gay people in my family and it was not talked about. They were like shunned. My grandmother's brother was like a leather daddy homo, and she disowned him. So that was like what I grew up with. And as I started transitioning she was just like 'there's something deeply wrong with you' and my mom was like "I want to spit on her, No! You're expressing yourself, there's nothing wrong with you- you're being who you are". SO I definitely grew up a tomboy, there was no hiding how different I was (laughter). and I talked about gender and sexuality in lots of different contexts, just not like 'here's MY gender and sexuality'. Just creating like... being different, but also running in like a very normative crowd later in middle school.

My friends were, had money and class and were very normative gendered and super sweet people and lots of sweet people around Rumford/Mexico, so I didn't really get the hateful 'you're different', it was like 'yeah, you're Chuck's kid.. you're Norma's kid, you're awesome, you're smart, you play a lot of sports you're super involved.' Those things gave me notoriety in a way that helped me just like put myself in a different category. But just isolated throughout my whole childhood. So, I still take that with me, I'm like 'I'm so different', but I'm like 'No, I'm not'... (Laughter) I know so many more weirdos. But it's like that deep isolation of 18 years, it's like Oh my gosh... like I don't know how to make friends, I didn't have friends growing up, I just put on a show.. telling jokes outside of the school.. but it's not authentic friendship. So, um, but part of that led me to, my dad being an alcoholic, my Gram thought it would be a good idea.. I think I was in 4th grade, it might have been 5th grade, she put me in AlaTeen, which was really intense because she ran it (laughter). SHE was like 'your dad's an alcoholic, you need to go to AlaTeen', and I was like I don't know what that is.. what do I have to do? And it was me and these high schoolers and my Gram, and she would be like 'TELL YOUR STORY, TALK ABOUT YOUR FATHER', and I was like 'Gram.. I'm like 11' (LAUGHTER). Um, but there was this cool program starting those years through DARE... used to run a peer-to-peer prevention program called peer helpers, so I was ushered into that really early on and started doing performance based education and was standing in front of like 500 peers doing, playing out the like alcoholic mom or being like.. we'd break things down into the classic family roles and we would act out scenes that we wrote and did all this collaborative.. it's like very much what MESH... so it's like WAIT I'm doing like the same stuff. And then we would take questions both as our character, like how would our character respond, and then as ourselves like how did it feel playing... so then we would share our stories like 'well for me it's like really empowering and

intense and gives me different perspective to play an alcoholic parent and so... like he never hit us, but he raised his voice, he threatened, he created this air of like hostility, and so there are so many different layers.. or like holding me down and tickling me when i'm saying 'no', like that's classic abuse like beginner stuff. And my mom's family has a long history of incest so there was already this conversation around like 'don't ever be alone with these uncles or these grandfathers, protect your body, you have female parts, like you're going to get molested, you need to be on guard.' and having survivors be my elders, there was a lot of like.. their trauma is still with us, it's like, there's... how do you even when you're brother is violating you when you're little, even though he's killed himself since, what do you do with that energy. So it's interesting doing sex ed in later years and trying to bring that back to them of like 'hey, all this body shame, it's coming from these places, so dig in.' and Yeah... did you have a question?

E: Well you mentioned Peer helpers on your page, and there was a specific persons you name that I can't remember... is that an important name?

K: Linda Daniels, yeah, yeah, she was incredible. She passed away a couple, 2 or 3 years after I had started... so I was really young when she passed away. She was battling cancer really intensely and she was incredible. I just remember her getting us to participate in a way. She was an excellent facilitator. She was like a big personality but she came in and was all about us getting together. And she was merging 4th and 5th graders with seniors in high school, so we were very age diverse. And we were talking about really intense stuff, and she just held space that.. I remember the memorial at the middle school, and the high schoolers are bawling. and I'm like 'What's happening?', but she like saved their lives so like, holy cow. Yeah, so it's like I had a really awesome teachers and mentors that shaped me in like how to be non-judgemental or how to be transparent, like how do you run a classroom and be transparent that theres really poor people in the class, like. I remember my step-mom, I would help her set up bulletin boards and stuff when i was in early early elementary school and I remember feeling weird when she was like, well that kids, you can tell, they can't color within the lines, they're poor. And it's like, What? how can you be so classist? So what if they can't color between the lines, that doesnt mean that they're not smart and we hung out with a lot of the teachers, so i was hearing all of this like... I mean they're kindigarteners, and they're like 'oh you can tell where they're headed', and its like... you're setting them up for failure. It's like, what is happening? so like in the classroom they were inspiring me, and then in the, outside the walls, it was like... I always felt like I was sorta one foot over here and one foot over there, and I was getting more than I should. I always felt like people gave me more information than I should have that was age appropriate. But I always remember Linda Daniels just like... she was a shining light, and it was like she would come in and run the support groups and it was like 'we have space to play it out' and she uses a lot of role play and I loved that, it was like WOAHH roleplay, what is that? (LAUGHTER) We can get like as wild as we want? (knocking..) I think thats my coffee... (leaves room... pause tape)

E: So you mentioned a little bit about how growing up with peer helpers there kind of like started you on this path that eventually led to MESH and that kind of stuff, would you be interested in talking about that a little bit?

K: Yeah, totally... I was very involved with Peer Helpers from 4th, 5th grade through senior year. And we did a lot of performance stuff and we did a lot of 1 on 1 stuff, we did a ton of mediation with eachother

and other students. It was like whatever students needed they could come in. we were doing sex ed in the school, we were doing healthy boundaries, how to communicate, how to stay no, how to say yes.

Emma: This was in the 80's?!

K: This is in the 80's!!! It was so radical, in mountain valley, we were in western Maine having these radical conversations and I always felt like, this is really unique that we're doing this, and we feel really privileged that I'm doing this. and I didn't know at the time and that I was getting all this rearing, setting me up for my long term... and I was really active as an activist in my undergraduate programming and then I did social work stuff for some years and then my masters program brought me back to 4th grade. It was like WOAHH this is what I did as a kid, I just didn't have the language for it. So I did a full systems design masters program at Antioch and I focused on identity as a whole system and dialogue as the activity to converge. So creating and holding space and facilitating and whatever came up came up, just getting people on the bus. Multi-sensory spaces, dance parties, and the theory was very much like the language that I was taught as a kid. Like when you have the algebraic equation, this makes sense, I can apply it this way. It was like "oh, here's the theory I can apply". So I just didn't have the language and then I was like, wow, this is what I was trained for. So it was interesting how it like led me back. And then, when I moved back to Maine I kept thinking I've got to do something with this. 1, it's my passion to do change work and art and peer to peer stuff, and I still feel like it's some of the most powerful work we can do, and it doesn't. I think some of the breakdown in schools is that peer to peer meant age to age... but peers can be across any lines. It's like you feel connected because of your co-identity. And so I flicked a little pebble across Portland when I moved back in 2014, the summer of 2014. And I had been coming down through the winter. I was living in Yarmouth for 8 months after I'd come back to Mexico. Went to Yarmouth and was like 'ok, I'll come down here and see what's going on' and Shannyn Vicente nailed me one day, she was like 'so you're basically living out of town so you can sift from afar and not just jump right in.' I was like oh... you see what I'm doing? Shit!" and I was like 'Yeah, I want to know... I don't want to be in the middle of the swirl, I just want to go in and pluck what I want'. I ran a sex ed through Frannie Peabody for men seeking men in a very broad terminology at Justice in the Body, and I didn't turn anybody away. It was like a sex ed dialogue series. And after I got through that round I was like, this is.. 1 it's too small and it's... I don't want to run a support group. That was one thing when I was a kid... when I was in the support group setting I didn't like it.. when I was in the playful role play, dialogue space, I loved it. It was like oh my gosh it's so much more dynamic, we're actually like digging in to stuff and it's changing me. So I was like we've got to do something like this on stage or through cabaret or theatre, like I don't even know (laughter). So I just gathered this circle of people like Gaele Rin Robyn and Amanda Clark and Dana Fidel and Kelly Ryan and.. who else was there... a couple other people and we just did concept mapping. We're like 'lets do some concept mapping, brainstorming what do we know, what's happening, what do we want to be focusing on. Is this about sex and gender, is this about gender, is this about sexuality, is this about sex-ed.. what's the purpose? or the content? And sifted out a few program ideas and just came up with the name... we were like how about an acronym, how about something that has multiple layers that means something like the word mesh... the sort of the interlinking, you know, network. And then it's also a container and it's permeable the porous. So it, um, it spiraled this cabaret performative education. One of the.. I forget who it was we were talking with.. was it the Phoenix at the time? It might have been Dispatch, I can't even remember all of the weeklys that have come and gone in the last 2 years... but one of them was like 'oh, it's edutainment' and we were like 'YEAH, it's edutainment!' (laughter) That's perfect. Thanks whoever you are. And Gaele and I

would just get together and our brains would like merge and explode and it would be like (wacky sound). Jan (partner, in room) knows very well, it was really intense. And, yeah, talk about peer to peer, I mean gaelle and I are like 15, 18 years apart in age, but so much similarity in how we express. That we're, you know... where we came from, how we were raised... our moms are both geminis. And we took on rocky horror, that was something... Gaelle was my boss at the Markethouse Coffee Shop, and Sara Tarbox was working there too and Sara and her partner Kenny had been doing Rocky Horror in Farmington at UMF for some years and Kenny was like "i really want to do this with like a gay rocky, i'm so sick of having a skitish heterosexual boy play rocky.. I want to amp the gay", and we were like cool, lets talk about consent, lets bring in the problematic pieces and update and address and use it. I've always felt like art is an instigation and an inspiration point. it's like, you can look at the same painting and everybody has a different interpretation and that's the beauty of it. Versus the like written word is... though definions and there's like layers to dig into how we feel about the words, its a little more stagnant and less of that space for people to actually show up and bring themselves to. Um, so we're like, oh rocky will be perfect! Because it's like itneractive, and it hasnt been happening for a couple of years, and it's definitely not been happening the way we're doing it (LAUGHTER). "No, Frank, you need to ask before you hit Riff" (Laughter). So that was really fun. It was a really.. that was an expereince that deinately brought me back to peer helpers.. becaue we were making this stage presentation together, we're, as the players looking at how does that scene play out? what the directorial, what does it look like for the audiesnce? what's the feedback? We're hearing that they get the message but they don't get the meaning, how do we bring that to the next piece? Like, whats the info that they're getting and what do we want them to leave with? And it was a cool process. It was definitely like... I have no idea where MESH is going to do now that Gaelle and I have both left the city, but I hope that it's left seeds of trickle through people and organization, that, it's like.. you don't need to.. there's a lot of um.. 'oh we do that the best' or you need to be XYZ to talk about that.. and I don't feel that way. It hink that expertise is a faux pas. That was something working at Babeland that we really hammered into staff, that you can't know everything, it's impossible. we're talking abot relational dynamic things. You can be the expert on yourself, thats fine, but even thing expert means you've learned everything there is to learn, so how do you go forward if you're just regurgitating... you can't change if you know everything. So wahts the point? Education's about transformation for us and for the learners, so, I'm curous to see what will keep happening. I know they're going to keep doing Rocky for sure and I know Jan and I do education in a different way. The way we do sex-ed and just creating inclusive spaces.. i feel like has been a big gap within sex and gender work... you cant get gender neutral sex ed, you can't get sexuality inclusive sex - ed it's like 'oh how do i answer a question for the gay kids'... yeah.. there's gay kids, it's 2 sentances in the health books... The school's we're working with in vermont, it's like OK how do we show up and do we just do storytelling and paneling wiht our own stuff? do we bring in activity? whats the piece for us to offer up? Which we're still sorting out and figuring out.

E: So you're going into schools now in Vermont, and they're welcoming that? has that been a struggle to get in there?

Jan: and it Maine...

K: And in Maine, yeah, we did some stuff in schools in Maine... Wayfinders schols brought us up a couple of times, we actually substitute taught their sex ed class, and then we went back in the fall before we left this year, we went back and met with their staff to talk about just being including and what are you doing, what are you wuestions? They were getting a lot of young people identifying as pansexual,

identifying as bisexual, so.... it was great, i was like this is awesome that you're taking all of this stuff on and you're doing all of these things like costumery. Like, what costume do you put on for an interview? Same thing with gender, what costume do you put on to express yourself today.. so it's a lot of it's the reframing.. like great, you have gender neutral bathrooms, you don't have a dress code, U-32, the school we're mostly working with in Vermont, it's all of the towns around Montpelier. I like that she's like 'it's like a donut, there's Montpelier, and then the towns around it is U-32'. And their health teacher is an old rugby teammate of mine and she is amazing, so we're going to go into her health classes and we've been doing an afterschool program, just crafting and zine making, and then the next round it sewing with denim, like repurposed jeans. It's going to be interesting going into Megs class and, i dont know, talk about how queer I am, It's probably visible... maybe not though, I think i pass, and people don't look at me and see a transexual and queer when we're together (motions to Jan), they're just like 'oh, those two wacky artists' (laughter), and so it will be interesting to be like 'actually, i was classified as a girl, i'm super queer, I have AIDS', all of these things you don't think about when you look at me, and what's that story, how did you survive as a young person, where do you shop for your clothes, how do you express what you want to wear? And they've got a trans student at U-32.. I was like 'oh my gosh, this student is just liek hanging out, wow!' they have a gender neutral bathroom in the highschool, I was like, this high schools, it's a middle school/ high school combo, this schools like a cut.. it's... very learned.. and Outright's done a lot of stuff with them, the Burlington Outright. there's not specific support in central vermont, so I think that.. that's sort of a gap that I think we're hoping to jump in and help support that.. there's a lot of alternativeness in these rural places, it's like very rural, just like western Maine, western Maine's super rural, but we've got lots of alternative music, lots of alternative identities, like young people are exploring everywhere, especially now with the internet. So who do they talk to if all the staff can only express and very bland school appropriate model, who comes in... so invite the weirdos in. I know I put down Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinburg as two of my key people. When I met them they changed my life, and I was in college.. like if I had met Kate Bornstein when I was in middle school. *Groans* I would have melted! i melted when lw as in my 20s!And just thinking about like freedom to exress through your dress- like if I was told that as a young person, that it's ok to like wear what I want and not feel shame that we had to shop at thrift stores, that it was an opportunity to express myself in other ways, and that it can get really creative and fun. Like what if you did shop over in the like other gender section. Even for a day.. or like work in that one piece, like wearing a dress and a bowtie.. there are so many.. *makes wooshing sound*. I think the young people are going to be into it. I think that Jan and I are so weird that young people are like 'woah, you've got tattoos!" When we sat with the wayfinder youth, they were just like *Jaw Drops*, had like nothing to say all class.

Jan: They hated us until the end of the class and they were like.. "you're great, where did you get your tattoos done....!"

Kelly: It was so funny, then we would see thema round Portland and they were like "Oh!!!" and we were like "OK, planting seeds."

E: They were probably just shocked at first I'm sure...

K: They were just shocked, and it was like their second health class

J: And we were taking about things that nobody ever talks about at the school, and they can ask questions about them.

K: Yeah, we'll see what happens. One thing that MESH did, that I thought was one of the coolest projects we did, we made this little identity and consent zine "Identity and Consent are So Basic", you flip through it, and it's got the consent 101 stuff, like just around body and identity and agency and 'No is a whole answer', just little things about checking in and then you unfold it and it was a hybrid of the gender bread and Kate Bornstein's work, like the expression and attraction chart, I love that chart that she has in um... 'my gender workbook', and we made it age appropriate and Pride actually paid for it. We printed like 1000 of them and gave them out at Pride a couple of years ago. So it was like, that was a great project, I want to keep doing things like that that are timeless, you can print it in a decade and it's still going to be relevant. And who cares whose name is on it- I don't make zines for notoriety, I like to make zines so people have access to information. Or so they can make zines, too. I diverge from our original question.

E: Oh we were just talking about MESH.

K: Yeah, I really was super involved in the school politics when I was in school. We had 3 principles in 4 years of my high school and I was part of the search committee. We had teacher walk-outs that we had organized that was... we started a radical underground newspaper that was anonymous that came out of our writing class... just like calling out bullshit and raising our voices and taking the halls. And that was, it like put the... I'm not very political in the like politics of the country, because it's just a circus and it feels very inaccessible. I'm very much a classic Italian anarchist. Like, this is about community, this is about leveling hierarchies, this is about holding us all in accountability and love and laughter. And not shunning people. Like, if you come into a space and don't behave in a certain way, like, how do we hold you accountable? how do we ask you to leave? that was a lot of stuff that MESH did. We don't want just to get kicked out, people need to learn, and if they think that they can't come into those spaces or that they're not welcome... that was another thing that came up with us, the sort of 3rd wave queer. That there was the like-- the first wave was this, um, reclaiming, I think was the first wave. The second wave was reactive because it was during the AIDS crisis, and now we're in this place.. it's less about a push back than a welcome in. And queer is non-normative. So queer doesn't have to be your gender or sexuality, it could be that you're a bicyclist. Those are all very against the norm behaviors so, how does that show up in the space and that was a lot of stuff we were doing at UVM when I was an undergrad, was that the people getting the sex and gender education, we were a very small minority and we needed to get it out to the student body and I think that's where I started doing a lot more social activism because it was less about 'yeah I'm pissed!!!!' like we're standing up and being like, supporting the teachers! and like 'We hate you!'. That negative, that's the classic activism that I grew up with, that was like.. standing up and saying 'NO, this isn't ok!', and we're reacting with our anger. It took me years to let go of anger being the primary like.. "I'M MAD!". And through my activism at UVM I was like 'cool, let's do some social stuff, let's do some passive education.' and things that are arts based. Paulo Friere's work was really inspiring to me just around like how he raised literacy for people through multiple different avenues of education, just changing the way that people are learning and thinking outside of the box. The way we educate is really archaic and very verbal dominant. And not really, doesn't really work. And so I was doing like art installations... I made one, I turned the library pillars into a closet door, so you're walking in and out of the closet all day. And there's a tunnel at UVM underneath the road, and there was so little... like trans people are getting killed... these were the Matthew Shepard years, in the early 90's. And there was definitely a lot of like.. so my kin are getting watched as they're slain on the streets and they're not pretty enough or white enough or rich enough to be acknowledged and this data

needs to come out. And I did this like really intense exhibit through the tunnel that was just outlines on white paper of somebody like holding an axe over another. The aggressor was in black and the slain person was in red and it had the data... so like 'this person was slain in brooklyn on this date.' just calling out their names, it was probably around the trans day of remembrance. And people had to walk through that and nobody took that exhibit down which sort of suprised me, i was like 'somebody's going to rip this down' and it was unscathed. And I know it was intense for students. Like you walk through and you can't not acknowledge that these gigantic images.. and they weren't like 'oh Im going to give you the flashy blood and gore' it was no, just their name, just the outline. And that got me into like, how do i use art as an artist, and how do I use my words and my story as change. I did a lot of paneling those years, which is sort of a spin off of the peer helpers... like how to use my personal story, how do I craft... And panelling... I've panelled with a lot of people over the years and it's like .. oh geeze we should have had some prep before this. We got the questions, but you don't know how to tell your story. you can't just ramble. You've got to... you've got this much time, we've got 2 minutes to tell these doctors and nurses what you want them to leave with so what's your intention. And that all hit harder when i was at antioch- whats my intention, who are my stakeholders, whats my design, thats the access..

E: and that's when you met Kate and Leslie?

K: I met them at UVM. I... who did I bring in first? I think i brought Kate first, I think I was a sophomore, maybe a junior, it might have been my junior and senior year or sophomore and juionr year, and we had... I brought Kate for one student. there was one trans feminine student in the math department who was having a miserable time, and had no community. The Free to Be LGBT group on campus was not welcoming. Our president at the time was asking people like 'well you're bisexual, you need to pick', and it's like...umm... and just wanted to like hang out in the woods and sing songs. I was like 'weve got to do work, we've got to raise visibility, people are tearing down the gay flags, we need to react with something, something active.' and I was like.. I dont know, theres got to be somebody we can bring... and I came into Kate's work and was like 'WOAH WHATS THIS PERSON?!' I didnt even know anything about them. And I picke dher up at the airport in my subaru and shes just standing there outside of my car. I'll never forget this moment. I was like, oh my gosh, i've already pissed off Kate Bornstein. And she goes 'A gentleman never lets a lady open her own door'. And i was like.. jumped out.. was like 'whatever you need I'm here for you" (LAUGHTER). We were like shopping downtown Burlington, she's got me on her arm. She's like 'try those shorts on.. oh they're fabulous' I was like (SIGH). ANd she brought in this post-modern edge that I was like very peripherally into. And.. I like theory, but i'm not like 'oh you've got to read the theory', its a little.. very like materbatory. Like 'we write this theory for eachother and then we only talk to eachother and you cant read it becuase its convoluted." and i'm like, this isn't accessible.. these kids... they dont know queer theory, they just need ot be nicer (laughter). And Kate was just so down to earth.. we got the math department to chip in for that event. And she came to campus and did the like gender is performative, and we did the gender workbook, and there were a good amount of students there that were not queer and it was awesome, she's so dynamic. And i think it was the year after that I brought Leslie. Becuase it was.. whats his name... there was a wrongfully imprisoned person of color that Leslie had done a lot of.. ugh i cannot remember his name... Leslie was doing a lot of speaking out, I think TransLiberation has just come out, that book, and Ze was doing lecture just on social justice. And i was like UVM needs this. we were a very apathetic campus. And I organized them to come and we had a student dinner the night before and invited in a couple of community people, and then a few people from the Free to Be group and we just shared a meal with Leslie Feinburg and just

being in that time of space with them. They passed everything around the table before they took any food, and they were just, their presence was so powerful and quiet. They're a very very quiet presence. I was just sitting there through the thing like 'oh my gosh youre such a dreamboat.' and I was waiting for the event to start and all of a sudden all of these old school butches star trickling in to the spcae where ze was speaking. And they're like all dressed up in their suits and their hats. And I was like in tears... and they were just all sitting there and they were like waiting until the end of the thing and then they were all coming up. And I'm like... these people are Leslie's age. These are the people who lived through Stone Butch Blues. (sigh) It was so amazing. It was really sad when Leslie passed. that was a hard one. And Kate was really sick. Actually I saw kate last year, I was biking behind local sprouts and theres Wendy and Gabe walking down the street with Kate Bornstein! I was like 'hello, hello, hello', I was like 'here you are.' Every time I see Kate she's got a comment about my outfit, it's so cute. I used to see her in the lower east side at events and she would always come up to me and my ex and be like 'well don't you two look fabulous'. it made me feel like... Kate likes what we're wearing! Just geeking out. Totally nerding out about Kate.

E: I would just pass out I think.

K: Yeah... So i feel so blessed that I had both of them come through my.. I was like 20, 21. So I was like, so glad that I got to hang out with those elders. And I would see Kate at Babeland actually.. she would come and do.. she came and did the suicide... 1001 Things To Do Instead of Killing Yourself book and she's just. She's getting older, I mean she's had a lot of health stuff. And, talk about a zaney wild weirdo! She's so kinky and into anime and she's so good! Shes such a good auntie.

E: Its so important to have those elders.

K: We're so blessed to have Wendy and Gabe in our community. I remember always seeing them at the farmers market and being like, "who are those radical queers?" and people were like 'oh it's wendy and gabe' and I was like 'OH I need to know them.' They're awesome. And when we started MESH that was one of my indicators, I would be out postering and putting up fliers for whatever event and Wendy would just be like 'thank you so much for doing this work!' and I would just be like (SIGH) "putting a smile on your face is all i need.. like that is all i need, I dont need anything else I just want to make you happy." becasue shit was hard here, it's still hard here, so yeah giving back to eachother and ourselves. Thats so important. Of all the educational stuff, if we're taking care of ourselves too.. and like, holding the story. Because losing the story, that's a big gap for younger people that.. even from our generations, i'm like, these youths are growing up where they can, when they're very young, start transitioning, or have alternative identities and have queer relationships. And it's in the schools. not that theres not lots of hate and violence. But there's more visibility about what to do and how to support and with the media and we're losing these gaps of like... we've gone through a lot of change in 60 years with our politics andfeminism too. Its like we're still going... I still meet young 2nd wave feminists and I'm like, how does that happen? how is this 20 year old a 2nd wave feminist? And its like boggling to me, and i'm like, it's not heirarchical, it's like these waves come crashing in and it's how we identify with and the story isnt changeing so much that I can't identify with 'I dont like porn and BDSM is always nonconsensual' like those things are still really present in our current stories. So it's interesting to like get those snippets pop up.. and it's like, then we're losing all these other stories.

E: So you, Im trying towrap my mind around your chronology.

K: My little map.

E: so you lived in Portland before, as well, right? In the 90s, is that correct?

K: Yeah, it was actually, the early 2000's. I graduated in '96 and went to UVM in Burlington until 2000. I took my extra semester in Amsterdam, so when I came back from there I moved back to Mexico for like 6 months and taught.. substitute taught in schools, and then I moved to Portland for a couple of years. And sister's was still around, so I spent a lot of time at sisters dancing. Sisters was a dyke bar.. is it a chinese restaurant now?

E: Zen Chinese...

K: Its funny, they always turn into restaurants, the gay bars. There was a lot of drama. I have never seen so many fights as I have seen out front of sisters. Its not suprising that there would be some dramatic fist feuding love triagles. but it was super mixed. it was definitely a female dominant space, but there were lots of gender nonnormative people and also a lot of male people that came and I still see people around the community and I'm like 'ohhhh, sisters.."' it was on Danforth St. sort of down by where that Japanese restaurant is, by where Frannie Peabody is now. So we spent a lot of time there, we spent a lot of time at, I think it was Some Where, and then it was Some Where Else. Lots of chareoke. Lived with Kennedy for a few of those years. And, yeah, I loved portland, it was really fun to come back and I was too young to be here. It was like.. I love Maine, Portlands a hard place to live, something's missing for me.. I was working at Sweetser down in Saco, in a lock-down facility in a girls specific unit. Thats was like really intense work. But I was going sex ed with the girls, but it was hard work and I'm glad I did it when I was young. And then I went back to Burlington and ran the Spectrum Shelter, a transitional unit for at-risk homeless youth over there for a a couple of years. And then I moved to seattle, for like 3 1/2 years-ish. Got my masters. I always thought I would get a west coast masters, because I had a very traditional east coast experience here in Burlington. moved to Brooklyn, and then I was in Brooklyn for almost 3 years, moved back to Mexico for like a year and a half, then back down to Portland, now I'm back in Vermont! I made a made a map one time. But, yeah I was here in the early 2000s I was delivering pizza I remeber when 9/11 happened here, I was like 'whats going on?' I think I was on my lunch break, I was living on Cumberland Ave. I was just like 'oh mygosh, the world is... theres some fucking shit coming our way in this country." i've felt that always. I'm very anti-war. I am emberassed at how our country acts in the greater global community and at home. Becuase I dont feel like thats how... my experience of people has been. it's like, this isn't who we are. We're very misrepresented with our actions and we just don't know how to make change... um.. or say ya Basta, that's enough! And we're in a poor state, Maine's a very poor state, the poverty here is intesne. Especially outside of Portland, and it's, it is a lot like Vermont in that people who grow up rurally just move to Portland for an urban experience. So there's a lot of mainers that live in Portland, and... Burlington's a little different, in that there's a lot of out of state people there, but theres a lot of Vermonters still in vermont. And there just living in the city, so it's like, we have this investement toward... our families live out there, like, these aren't strangers, these our our roots. I love Rumford/ Mexico, I don't love the papermill, but i love that area, and my family. I'm lucky that I didnt get disowned. People are tossed out and I'm not neive to the statistics of risk for poeple that are different.

Jan: Kelly's family is so rad and different, though, you are really lucky that you were raised by a bunch of kooky ladies.

k: They're wild.

Jan: Wild Italian, outspoken and dirty.

K: Very raunchy! Yeah, my oldest Aunt was giving us sex ed when we were like 6 with like the Joy of Sex. She was like, let me break out my 'joy of sex' book, we're going to have a conversation. My Gram would always be like 'just call me before you're gonna have sex.. call Gram so I can tell you to use a condom.' I was like, 'I'm pretty sure you're not going to be the first to know'. (LAUGHTER) We came down to Portland, was it 6th or 8th grade, we came down for a trip, and my Gram was like "Kel, get me some french ticklers at Condom Sense." (LAUGHTER) I think I told Nelly that story when I first met her, because I was like, "I will always remember my first CS boutique experience, back when you were Condom Sense my Grammy needed those french tickler." (LAUGHTER) It's funny, she has dementia, and they ask her now "Grammy what do you miss about Norman?" "The sex." (LAUGHTER) They were amazing. My grandfather when he was alive, he wanted to see my mastectomy scars... it always skips a generation.. like it was hard for him dealing with my aunt being queer, but then they were like... yeah, the grandkids, you can do whatever you want. When I was dying of AIDS, he was like 'it'll be OK, Robyn on general hospital is ok.. they've got all sorts of meds and stuff' (LAUGHTER) I was like, Oh Norman, I love you guys. "If they can do it on general hospital, Robyn's ok, you're gonna be ok, too!" (laughter) Oh Geeze.

E: Its so interesting to hear you talk about the... you mentioned before when you were talking about the generational trauma that has been through your family, and then to see, how all of that education that that came along with has manifested itself in this incredible work that you're doing. That's a really beautiful progression to watch.

K: yeah, I've always felt very called to action and when I was younger didn't understand.. it was hard, it was like what am I supposed to be doing? Like, I know I'm doing these things, but like it didn't make sense. there was a disconnect, and the older I got it was like my own identity. I was coming out in all these ways that I needed to, just express myself in different ways. And... invite other people into that. My trans experience has been my families trans experience. And I stopped talking to my dad for 4 years when I was in my late 20s. Yeah, cuz I had had a mastectomy and had been on hormones. I was like transitioning my body, even though I've always been very genderqueer. my family knows that, they were like ok we get male to female and female to male, but what's genderqueer? 'Love that you asked!' (Laughter) And he just, he couldn't deal with it. I was daddy's little girl, as much as I was a tomboy. He just, he didn't.. he doesn't know how to communicate, so it was really difficult. He had actually found all of these zines I had made through college, cuz i was storing stuff in his attic, and he just couldn't handle it. And he got really mean to me, like turn to give him a hug like 'hey dad', and he just turned away. I was like 'we're fuckin done for a minute, i need a break.' I spent 27 years dealing with your bullshit, I need to take care of myself for a minute. And I was moving to Seattle. SO I was like, you don't know where I am, you don't know how to get in touch with me. Just completely cut off communication with him and his family. The couple times I'd tried to talk to a couple of your aunts all they would say is 'you need to call your dad, you need to call your dad.' It was like, well I can't have a relationship with you two if this is what you're going to be like, because I'm making a good decision for myself. i was like, its so much easier for me to love him without him in my every day. And it was great. that was one of the hardest, best things I ever did. And now we have a better relationship. Like, he is, it hurt him and he, i think he doesn't want to push me away. And he doesn't like walk on eggshells, but he is trying to get it. It was cute, he gave me a Christmas card that was like 'to my Son'. I was like this is a big step for Jack, holy shit! (laughter). But it was hard. I mean literally, the day I reconnected with him, I was on my death bed. So

this is probably your nightmare, but I'm dying of AIDS, and I would love to see you, I get going down to New York might be difficult, but I am dying so.

E: And when was that?

K: that was the end of 2009. It made me think, when you were saying the trauma of generations, the trauma of AIDS for gay men in the 80s, I experienced that in the 90s as a trans person that was in a gendered healthcare system. Literally being told 'you have a mystery illness'. It's like, you're white blood cells are low.. asking for tests and being told that you're not at risk, because you're, even though you're sleeping with men you're not a man sleeping with men.... I'm like, Wow... and I still get that rhetoric, that's why I like to work with healthcare providers. We have to breakdown these boxes, things are very blurry and there's lots of men sleeping with men who don't identify as queer and their wives aren't having safe sex with them, why would they? It's the shame and blame culture.. again a lot of what MESH took on. We've got to bring light to these things. When I was in a support group in New York, I had 5 T Cells, I was wasted down to 90 pounds, meningitis and pneumonia, I don't know how I was walking around never mind biking groceries around New York. And when I got into the hospital my doctor was like 'you have been sick for like a decade, you are so sick', and I had been dealing with chronic cysts and on the shadow side for a hysterectomy because I had chronic cysts, so I was like, cool I got my hysterectomy, but my body can't heal and my body is always sick, why am I always sick? and I was young, it didn't make sense to be like 'what's going on?' It's hard to know the savviness, and moving a ton is a very dangerous thing for healthcare, that there's no continuity of care, providers see people way less and the years have changed where you have to pay out of pocket for your labs that was happening through the 2000's to, that they don't just test you for everything like they used to, they pick and choose because labs get expensive. So I mean I was learning this stuff like way after I was sick and didn't want to bring shame and blame into my experience either, and it was just like confounding and then like... I need to talk about it because people are at risk of infection and this isn't about identity, this is about care, it's about healthcare and I was doing sex ed with Babeland at the time I had been with them for 5 years and had a really like weird experience with them, with some of the upper echelon people just like... they couldn't, I think they couldn't deal with the fact that somebody had AIDS that worked for them. It's a very female company, there's only like 2 or 3 guys that worked there. It's the lesbians stood by, the newer generation of queer women, they weren't the people standing with their friends that were dying and like buying their houses and supporting them, caring for them. That was a generation before so, again we lost that story, and we hold it against each other and it's so weird, it's like all this internal combating, like you're taking something away from me, or your bringing this thing to my table that's like inappropriate, I don't want to see that. It was just so weird. And I was just so sick I couldn't deal with anything but my health for the last 5 years. Now I'm great! My T cells are off the hook! It's amazing and I just outed myself to everybody, I just was like 'I don't know what to do, I'm dying, I need ya'll. I don't ask for things, I don't know how I'm going to pay rent, I don't know how I'm going to eat because I can't cook, I can't stand there and cook, I can't get groceries.' And I just had so much love and support from my family and extended family and that's not the norm. I feel very lucky through that. I did a support group with, um, it was hard to find a support group being a trans person, they were like... there's men's support groups men who sleep with men support groups and then there's like heterosexual women's support groups. Lots of immigrant folks are dealing with it. And one group was like, well we're open to it, and I was like... that's not the same things (laughter). but I found a great support group at the LGBT center in New York. And I had assumptions going in that there's a lot of shame and a lot of people living in the closet.

And how can you talk about having HIV if you aren't out as queer. Because that's what people want to know, people ask, 'how did you get it? do you know how you got it?' and if you can't answer that question they're going to assume one of two things. You shared needles or you had sex with a guy. And it was shocking to me how many of the guys were just like, I want to just go back to my life the way it was, like partying and unsafe sex. I'm like.. but, so you're just going to bareback and because everybody has HIV it's ok? Don't you know that you can get infected with another strain? HIV's really smart! It adapts! If you miss a couple of med doses it learns how to make the meds ineffective. There's not much I know, but I fucking know that. I don't want to screw around with it! The meds are much easier than they used to be, they're not as toxic. I'm very lucky that we had so much activism through ACT UP and all the communities that like demanded healthcare. It was just shocking. So you just don't want to talk about safer sex. Ok. WHAT? And I came to the conclusion that I had a different experience. Like being on your deathbed with full blown AIDS is very different than learning that you're HIV positive. It's not a crisis, it's something that you're dealing with. It's like 'ok, now I have herpes, I have syphilis, I need to tend to the infection.' but what are the social ramifications? How does it play out with your identity? How does it play into this deeper gay shame? There's so much gay shame! So much gay shame still! And then we just blame, blame, blame. It's like... ok, maybe in 10, 20, 50 years can we not feel afraid to say, yeah I was dying of AIDS! I mean, I was standing in front of rooms, bawling, like.. I don't know what to do. This is what happened... I hated my body, being a trans person, I didn't make sense, it was like, I don't want to protect this body, I hate this body. I'm young, like, I'm invincible, whatever happens happens, everybody's going to die of AIDS or cancer, who the fuck cares? That was my attitude as a young person. And, holy crap, that's a dangerous set of self talk. So, it was, it was the most traumatizing thing I had ever been through, but I was like, well, I came out as a trans person, I came out as a queer person, I've lived through a community of incest survivors, I've got an amazing network, and I don't want to die! I'm like, WOW! it's just like this fire! I was telling someone last night "It's hard to kill a flamer!" (LAUGHTER) It's hard to keep a flamer down. but I was just like, I don't know what's going to happen when I get out but I know I need to make change. I need to change my diet, I need to change my relationships, I need to change my attitude, I need to change my focus, I can't focus on the negative. We joked when I was on the hospital bed. My ex and I were like, "it's ok, we're positive! (laughter) too soon? too soon for a joke? no no, just right, just right, bring it in!" Just like, we need humor, we need laughter. If we're not... How do you combat hate and violence? You raise the laughter and love and that's what I've been doing for the past 6 years, and it's like circling back to peer helpers, what was I doing in peer helpers? We weren't just teaching... I also worked in a domestic violence community when I was in middle school, and talking with people that are in abusive relationships as a young person and just trying to give people support with like 'it's not your fault', like, 'you are not the person to blame and safety first, you need to get somewhere safe' and 'what do you need?' that was something that came up in my shelter work later on, when somebody walks in in crisis you don't just give them a 30 page intake form. You don't ask them if they've ever killed somebody, if they've ever been in jail, what their active military... those things can wait.. like... "hi, welcome, what do you need? do you need some food? do you need a shower? do you need a bed? is there anybody that you need to call? do you have any medical things?" the first layer of care is missing a lot of times. (1:10:50)