

Qualitative Research Methods
 Wendy Chapkis
 Ysanne Bethel
 Thursday, December 19, 2018

Transcribed and Coded Interview

Ysanne: We are here in the Glickman Library, room 230b. It's Monday November 19th, 2018. My Name is Ysanne Bethel — Y S A N N E B E T H E L. And I'm here with Susan Hopkins — would you mind stating your name and spelling it.

Location & Date

Narrator

Susan: Hi, I'm Susan Hopkins — S U S A N H O P K I N S.

Interviewee

Ysanne: Alright and I just want to remind you that if there are any questions at this point, or if you need to stop, in general, we can take a pause. And continue when you're ready. Our interview will go for about 60 to 90 minutes, and if you find that there are other things you want to talk about, insights found in the interview, we can set up another interview. And, I'll give you a heads up around the last ten minutes, so you're aware of how much more time we have. Would you mind telling me how old you are or the decade you were born in?

Reminders of project logistics, duration, participation withdrawal

Susan: I'm 53, I was born in 1965.

Interviewee age/birthday

Ysanne: Alright, so I'm just going to start with a few orienting questions. Let's start with where you grew up.

Birthplace

Susan: Okay, I grew up on Vinalhaven Island in Penobscot bay, midcoast area of Maine.

Vinalhaven

Ysanne: What was that like growing up there?

Susan: Well, it was a small isolated island community, luckily I grew up with stories about my dad's great Aunt. Who was a great influence in his life. She was an anti-racist activist, for him, so she was a self-identified bisexual who was a nurse in Washington D.C. in WWI for African American troops and brought up my dad. I have photos of him when he was about three years old with identical white babydoll and black babydoll, and she gave him a book about how Native Americans were pushed onto reservations. So when he was a child he had an awareness of identifying when they were playing cowboys and indians, he identified with the Native Americans. And how they were sort of, you know he wanted to sort of, fight for them to keep their land. So I grew up with an interesting dad who understood intersectionality. Also when I was 10, he said "would you vote for a woman just because she was a woman?" And I knew it was going to be sort of a trick question. Cause I was starting to identify as a feminist, and he you know pointed out that someone like Phyllis Schlafly was not someone I would want to vote for. So I was lucky to have that in my life. Vinalhaven was very much a mixed bag because when you live in a small community its a social pressure cooker. I started as identifying as bisexual when I was maybe about maybe 11 years old. So that became difficult, you know I would go to girl scout camp, and luckily we had a fair amount of butch counselors. Who you could pretty much tell from the songs they sang and how they acted that you know they were lesbian identified. And that was very helpful. My mom told me when I was maybe 8 years old that it was okay to have crushes on girls. I think she meant admiration crushes, she talked about how she had crushes on the nuns. And I mistook it for like crushes crushes, like,

Feeling of isolation

Bisexual, anti-racist Aunt

Influential father

Intersectionality

Feminism

Small community

Nervous to come out

Lesbian camp counselors

Mom is Lesbian friendly

and that was a good thing for me because it helped to firm my identity. But it was still super difficult because lesbian was used as a slur [pause] Lesbo. So I only kind of felt free to express that on the mainland but still felt that I would be rejected from cousins, aunts, uncles. So, you know, it's tricky. That was the 1970s/1980s, in Maine and Massachusetts my extended family.

Being a lesbian is difficult

Ysanne: Were you close with your family then?

Fear of familial rejection

Susan: My nuclear family, yes, but in high school I came out to a boyfriend who used that against me. And in a really sadistic and vicious way, spread my confidence [pause] you know, I confided in him and he used that against me and spread it in ways that were really hurtful to me. When I was about 17 I was at a Halloween party, down in Portland, one of my older sisters was here at USM. And we went to this really killer Halloween party. And my best friend and I were sharing a bed and we were never, you know, never had a sexual relationship. We were always just, you know, platonic friends. But we put the hook and eye latch on the door, and my ex-boyfriend's brother broke in cause he knew we were in the bedroom and wanted to, kind of, you know, sexualize that relationship. And quote end quote, sort of, catch us in bed together. And it was really horrifying and terrible. You know, it was this big party and we were just wanting to go to bed. And that was it.

Outed by former boyfriend

University of Southern Maine

Harassed for being a lesbian

Sexualization

Ysanne: I'm really sorry to hear about all that. It's extremely difficult at a young age.

Susan: It was a difficult time. And you know, I'd try to make sort of overtures in high

High school was difficult

school. Like I was on sports, and on the mainland for sports events and music events, and things like that. I was very active in high school. You know I kind of, you know, you wanna test the waters, and say “have you seen this film? Have you seen that film?” You know, sort of lesbian themes or whatever, and someone would say “Ahh, I’d punch out a dyke if she’d ever come unto me” or, you know, “I’d mess her up if she never shaved her legs.” Stuff like that. And we all wore tube socks cause we didn’t shave. So it’s like, “Okay, she’s not gonna let me kiss her.” [Laughs].

Ysanne: So, was the mainland a reprieve, or was it kind of just an extension of what you were experiencing on Vinalhaven?

Susan: I knew it wasn’t safe to come out at the time on Vinalhaven.

Ysanne: What does family mean to you? You mentioned chosen family.

Susan: Oh wow. [long pause] So, I want to University of Maine in Orono, and I lived in a women’s cooperative dormitory and had my first female sweetheart there. And we were going to live together the following year. And she decided not to come back to school. So that was my first sort of conscious choice wanting...I think what I would have considered an adult relationship that would have been akin to chosen family. So, that was tough. So, I guess in this interview I’d like to limit it to those contexts. To the female sort of chosen family. And for me I think it would be people with whom I felt safe and loved. And within this context it would be women with whom I felt safe and loved, I would say within the LGBTQI context. Anybody with

Active in high school

Coded language to figure out if someone is lesbian

Hate speech against lesbians

Vinalhaven unsafe to come out

Chosen family

University of Maine Orono

First lesbian love

Chosen family

Feeling accepted for whole identity

whom I felt safe and loved who accepted me [pause] my sexuality, the whole package.

Ysanne: So, In what ways were your relationships with chosen family members — if you want to call it that — were they different from your given one? What was the distinction?

Susan: That I could be very open about my sexuality. And that we could take freely, almost in shorthand, and be on the same page. And we had the same values. Yeah.

Chosen family has similar values

Ysanne: Is this where you made some intergenerational relationships or?

Intergenerational friendships

Susan: That was always there. Vinalhaven, another very cool aspect about that island, is the intergenerational friendships that are a foundation of that sort of subculture.

Ysanne: Were there any challenges to being friends with those who were older or younger than you?

Susan: Never.

Ysanne: Never. Did you have to adapt communication styles or did you learn from each other?

Susan: Never felt that was an issue. Code-switching is [pause] sort of comes naturally, I think, on the island. So, I'll kind of leave it at that. Yeah.

Code-switching

Ysanne: Code-switching between island life and mainland, or?

Susan: Nope. Even within the island. It's, like on a lot of parts of Maine you have a summer community, you learn [sigh] with all kinds of people how to code-switch. And you develop a fluency in that, so I guess that's one of the enriching parts about living out there. And I think that's transferable. It's like learning any other language, you know, for a polyglot, let's say if you learn two languages as a child it's easier to become someone who is fluent in many languages. So, code-switching, I think, is similar.

Island dynamics

Polyglot

Ysanne: So, you mentioned a few topics that you wanted to talk about. And I guess I just want to check in where, which, direction you want to take us in —

Susan: Okay.

Ysanne: Um.

Susan: I guess one thing I want, um, I saw, I think, this project began as sort of talking about LGBTQI+ community in Maine over the past thirty years. You know, and it seemed like [sigh] grounded in something that is frustrating to me. Maybe, I'm not sure if it said thirty years. Because I, there were a lot of activists in the um [pause] Maine Gay and Lesbian Peoples Alliance, I forget. MGBLTA, what was it? It was pre-equality Maine. And I found that problematic because [pause] it seemed like they thought they were the first ones. And I shouldn't maybe generalize like that, I understand there are risks in that. But um, but, one of the members, one of the founding members, said to me one time, "Who are *you*?" At the friend of a funeral [funeral of a friend]. He was, uh, a lot of those people were Democrats and he was a [pause] log cabin Republican. And [sigh] myself and a friend of mine were the only two

Project description

Frustration

People taking credit for others work

Friends funeral

Republican

people who were visiting him when he was in jail and taking care of him besides his daughter, in his end stages of AIDS. And um [pause] the people who had founded that organization with him had abandoned him but had showed up in great force at his funeral and were questioning my relationship with him. They were questioning it because they hadn't been there in the last years of his life. He had problems with alcoholism and [long pause] part of his probation was being sober. [Long pause] so it was very difficult for me to see people want to take front and center stage but they hadn't been there for him. So that was sort of another intergenerational relationship. You know, I called up Olympia Snow and Susan Collins, he grew up friends with Susan Collins, and let them know. And [pause] John Baldacci. [Long pause] His daughter had asked me to help with all of this, I took care of his dog, I donated, you know I was helping out with his estate, I donated his items here to the archives. And um, [long pause] I forget what the original question was [laughs].

Ysanne: Oh, I just asked what topic you wanted to go on, and —

Susan: Oh! Yeah, so that was going back to the whole foundation of this project —

Ysanne: Yeah.

Susan: So, um, I mean he was one of the people that, I guess, was, you know, maybe back at what was deemed to be the beginning of the [pause] kinda. Do you have the statement for the kind of thesis statement for the uh —

Ysanne: The project?

Friend was incarcerated

AIDS

Abandoned friend

Alcoholism

Intergenerational friendship
Olympia Snow and Susan Collins

John Baldacci

Donations to archive

Project description

Susan: The project, yeah.

Ysanne: So, here is the informed consent for participation and here is the purpose of the project. This is from the form you signed earlier.

Informed consent/participation, project purpose

Susan: Okay. But I was thinking that, uh, okay [pause] that's procedure. Purpose of the project —

Ysanne: Right here.

Susan: Yeah um [long pause], I thought someplace I saw that there was kind of “looking back over the past thirty or forty years” or something. Okay. I may be confused about that. But anyways [pause], here's the thing, in looking at what we said is kind of narrowing down my topic — Bell Telephone and AT&T, and other corporations, large corporations, would only hire women if they were unmarried. Back in the, you know, 30s, 40s, 50s. So let's start in the early 1940s. Cause the women that I'm going to be talking about were hired at Bell Telephone back then. And they were [pause] they became fast friends. A lot of them were lesbian identified, so they worked in different offices in Maine — Biddeford, Portland, Augusta, Bangor. [Long pause] And I would say, well, I know, that they became chosen family. They bought houses and trailers together, and again I'm not saying every woman who was there, but many of them, okay. They owned pets together, they traveled together, [pause] and they maintained friendships together for decades. The culture there in general, a lot of the women would be in the same bowling teams, and take cruises together, they would travel together — they'd go to Hawaii, the Caribbean [pause and laughs] Disneyworld. You know, do all these kinds of things, but,

Misunderstanding of project goals

Bell Telephone and AT&T

1930s, 1940s, 1950s

Many lesbian women working at Bell Telephone

Biddeford, Portland, Augusta, Bangor.

Chosen family

Lived together

Lifelong friendships

Traveling together

you know, the kind of main focus was in the Belgrade Lakes region. I have photos I'll share with you about, and also videos, of the women setting up a camp, and really a nice one, it was two sort of camps put together so there would be plenty of room to have plenty of bedrooms for everybody. All these women, this circle of friends. And the video footage, I have still shots for you as well, there are the women hanging out on the beach there after work. And my friend who, most of the archives I have here for you, are — her names Virginia June Harris, she went by June, J-U-N-E H-A-R-R-I-S. Her mom is also in these pictures, cause she was working also as a telephone operator and she lived with June towards the end of her life and she was always very accepting. So you see her in these pictures and she's throwing a stick for the dog on the beach, and the women are all just hanging out in their work clothes after a long day, having, some of them having, cigarettes and most of them cocktails. And it was very typical, most of them had wonderful parties. A lot of sports, boardgames, uh really wonderful full lives. One of the things that June did back in the 40s and 50s also was go to Boston and go to these Burlesque shows. And some of the top Burlesque acts of the time would be there. And also when she would go travel she would go to Burlesque shows. And so what I have for you also are [Lebreto], I guess you'd call it, from Lou Walter's Latin Quarter, photos and songs. It's got the music in here, and sort of cartoons. So also back then she could take photos at the shows, and towards the end of her life one of the things we'd do — this magnifying glass I'm going to give you this, June's magnifying glass — we'd get out her photo albums and look at the photos that she took of um, oh goodness, I don't want to say Sally Ried, but one of the burlesque performers in particular.

Belgrade Lakes

Campsite

Beachdays

June Harris

Gatherings/parties/cocktails

Burlesque shows

Lou Walter's Latin Quarter

Photos of burlesque shows

Photo albums

She had photos of them. This, this is from the 1940s. She would say “well, well, well, what do we have here” [laughs]. Um let me see, you know it’s so funny, because this is just another example the time. We’ve got, you know, the men who wrote these programs featured on the inside page “together with Lou Walter’s as a head in the Palm Beach Island of New York Latin Quarters; the theatrical tycoon E-M Low, owner of a theatrical chain extending from Bangor to Miami beach!” And you know, so they talk about these men who produce these shows, “what are the little girls made of?” You know, and, then they don’t list — they got beautiful photos of these performers and don’t list their names. So you know, they’re incidental. So they talk about the costume designers and how lovely these women are, and, you know, refer to them as girls. But then you get right into the music. So, it’s you know, anonymous, you know, just like a lot of these women that I’m going to speak about. Kind of, you know, the anonymity of these older lesbians in Maine. These were um, what I would call checkbook activists. A lot of the older women in Maine worked really hard in their lives. The ones I don’t have permission to talk about worked in other large industries and were also very well monied, I would say. There are social circles that exist in Maine who I met through Seacoast Maine in York County. Um, a lot of these women worked very hard all their lives, in big industries [pause] you know have these tight social circles. And didn’t really have time for a lot of boots on the ground activism. So they would write big checks [laughs]. You know, work hard play hard. Otherwise there was a sort of anonymity to the lives of these women. They were right here in Maine — these really vibrant social circles. So, as the bars in Maine were kind of closing down,

Description of burlesque magazine

Sexism

Anonymity of these women

Lesbian elders in Maine

Big corporation women

Tight social circles

Well-monied women

Anonymity of these women

there was — and the rise of the elder care industry in Maine, was proliferating — there were these social groups that were coming up in Maine too. Portland Lesbian Coffee house and Seacoast Sapphos, and there was also this, sort of, Northstar Café. These different group entities that came along and provided social opportunities for people who were elderly and younger people who kinda didn't stay up to late or wanted a quieter environment. That gave us opportunities for intergenerational friendships. And so you could have really enriching experiences. I guess one of the other [coughs and long pause] relationships that I had out of this, that came from Seacoast Sapphos, was winding down the last lesbian feminist bookstore in Maine. Sherry and Dotty, the owners, [long pause] allowed me to take all of the inventory. Every single thing that they had left. And just, you know, get rid of it. The Allen Avenue minister of the time, Mike Johnson and her partner Margee Dowser, let us set it all up — all the purple book cases and books, all these pulp fiction novels and all the jewelry and cards and posters. And I just reached out to friends, you know a lot of that was pre-Facebook, before the advent of Facebook I think, maybe 2012/2013. I guess not really advent, but anyway a lot of this went by email. So that was another friendship that was like, kind of like, chosen family. That came out of Seacoast Sapphos and was part of, within that circle, of women who were in corporate industry before they hired married women. So I guess [long pause] these were sort of hidden subcultures, in Maine, and people really missed out. They missed out on that last lesbian feminist bookstore in Maine, you know.

Ysanne: What was that called?

Elder care industry

Portland Lesbian Coffee house
Seacoast Sapphos
Northstar Café

Intergenerational friendships

Seacoast Sapphos

Lesbian feminist bookstore

Memorbilia

Chosen family

Seacoast Sapphos

Hidden subcultures

Susan: Um, it was in Cape Neddick, it was called “Artistic Amazon.” And so, a lot of, we have here at USM — I donated a lot to USM [laughs]. Some of it went to Mama’s Crowbar, which was a sort of like a bar/coffee house on Munjoy Hill. I think it was, I want to say, Trish Price. So bad, I can’t remember her name. Anyway, that’s the thing. The sort of hangouts where you could get a cup of tea, or a beer, you know, and play a board game, and grab a book, and maybe take the book with you. So I just brought all these lesbian novels and was like, “Hey you want these” and she was like, “Yeah!” And took them to libraries, you know the Westbrook library was having a book sale and I brought in, you know, just maybe 11 big plastic totes of books. After days and days of people coming to Mike and Margee’s house for, you know, to go through the garage and give donations or not, to kind of clean out the bookstore — which was a lot.

Ysanne: Was that your way of trying to shed light on this hidden history, just trying to donate to different places so that people had access?

Susan: Ah, a little bit. I mean a little bit of it is just being a Mainer. You know, Maine is one of the top three states in the country for reuse — reduce, reuse, recycle [laughs]. So, sharing with people who otherwise wouldn’t have access to this and to whom it was important to recognize the significance of it, uh, really value it, you know? One of the women who was in the group of women who were in the the industry, who wouldn’t have been hired had they been married to men, had all these first edition lesbian pulp fiction paperbacks mounted in shadow boxes. And when I was on the board of directors for Lucid Stage, which was coming on, and that

Cape Neddick
Artistic Amazon
University of Southern Maine Archives

Mama’s Crowbar

LGBTQ hangouts

Lesbian novels

Westbrook library

Lost/Hidden history

Maine culture

Recycling

Lesbian pulp fiction paperbacks

Lucid Stage

was accessible theater that did a lot of Carol and Gage's work — which was Butch visibility. She [pause] Carolyn got those from a fundraiser we had, so I mean, she was aware of these subcultures through me. And she is someone who cherishes those. And she also came to that sort of book sale, book give away, from the bookstore that we were winding down. So, that was the other thing, it was people who were kinda working poor who really understood and valued what was happening. And it was a way of honoring the women who were winding down, because, I think, you know, sometimes it made them want to scream that people didn't understand what was treasure in Maine. [Long pause] So one of the things I should get back to about chosen friendships too, is the intergenerational friendships. I spoke a little bit about the rise of at home care industry, or elder care industry, in Maine and June's partner Selena, who she had met early on — they worked at AT&T or Bell Telephone all their adult careers. And, you know, they bought land together and when they had a break up or whatever they would remain friends and then get back together. But towards the end of their lives they were just friends but looked after each other. And then, Selena started to get dementia, and that's when I met them. My best friend, who I mentioned earlier, became a companion, to Selena. So the four of us would socialize, we'd go out together or stay in, and have dinner and sit around and play with animals and feed animals in the back yard and watch them. June ended up taking care of Theresa's love of her life dog, so Theresa could go to college. Cause the dog was spoiled as can be and couldn't be left alone. [Coughs] So here's an example of June and Selena, a photograph of them that Theresa took with them and Peetle, a little dog.

Butch visibility

Working poor

Lost/Hidden history

Chosen family/friendships

June Harris

Bell Telephone

Break-ups

Live long friends

Dementia

Socializing

Beloved pets

Ysanne: That's a great photo.

Susan: [Laughs] Yeah. So they like to go to — that's the thing they were always on the water for fun. You know, these cruises, or at Belgrade lakes, or going to the beach. You know, Hawaii, whatever. So June would take care of Peetle, so Theresa could go to school. I've got pictures also, I've got to get to you, of June and Selena [pause] having fun in a big sink when their relationship was new. So it must have been in their 20s. It is so freaking cute, it's like the best thing ever. [Gesturing to photo] And that's the picture June took of me with Peetle, she drove me out to Fort Williams — when June was like altogether and fit and with it. You know and she always had the best of everything, well, it became different when she started getting dementia. But she had a big SUV with all the bells and whistles, she was pretty butch. [Gesturing to photo] And this is back in the, oh, probably the 50s. That's June, their friend Gloria, and Selena, all waterskiing behind a boat in the Belgrade Lakes at June's camp. So this in the Bell Telephone Newsletter, it says, "Come on in the skiings fine, three operators from Augusta, who seem to operate beautifully on water skis, are June Harris, Gloria Boolette, and Selena Williams. The girls all work evenings, 5 to 11, so this summer they've gotten in a lot of skiing at Vastleboro at Ms. Harris' camp." So the photo that Theresa ended up using for June's obituary was June water skiing, where she's waving at the camera. Um, and later on June got dementia. And she'd always said she didn't want to go into a nursing home. And that was the thing with Selena too, she didn't want to go into a nursing home so, [sigh] Theresa took care of Selena at home. After their last break up, Selena sold out her interest in their mutual home and [laughs] bought another home like

Traveling and cruises

June Harris

New relationship

Dementia

Butch

Belgrade Lakes

June Harris

Vastleboro

June Harris

Dementia

Break-up

two doors down in the neighborhood, so they could still be near each other. And Theresa took care of Selena so she could stay in her house. And later on June got dementia, and she said the same thing — she wanted to stay home. The thing about her was that she was an animal lover, so that was the other thing, was taking care of the animals too. So Peetle was there and June had a cat too, and then she got another dog. [Gesturing to a photo] this is June with Peetle [pause] and Penny, that's another dog she got. And that's her with a different magnifying glass. And after Peetle died they got another Maltese, Ms. Mae — for Mae West. June was an avid bowler, [gesturing to photo] this was before she got dementia, she'd take Theresa bowling and whip her ass [laughs]. So, you know she liked to have fun. When she passed away I took a lot of her stuff to Preble St. Resource Center. Tons and tons and tons of stuff. Her mother, June's mother, had been a hoarder, and June when she got dementia got that thing where, you know, you get on home shopping network and go nuts. But there was a lot of cool stuff from when she was, um, with it and stuff from her social life that was like Dr. Ruth's sex board game. So I'd like go in to Preble St. Resource Center and bypass the desk and put it on a table [laughs, and people would be like, "Yeah! Let's play this!"] [laughs]. One time I had been down there and just brought all these unopened toilet trees and, you know, the people at the desk always wanted to inventory everything. And I understand they want to do it for donation purposes, so they can send it to their funding, you know, matching — whatever. But there was a woman standing crying wanting conditioner and I pulled some conditioner out and handed it to her, and the woman behind the desk was like, "No, we need to inventory!" And it's a conditioner

June Harris
Dementia

Pet

Pets

Donations
Preble St. Resource Center

Hoarder

Preble St. Resource Center

[exasperated], you know and that's the way June would have wanted it. She was very generous and openhearted. And so it's all kind of that chosen family thing, making sure her wishes are carried out. Very generous, um, [pause] and so I mean that goes back to her thing about her camp too — her camp was big enough for her friends. And when you see them in these photos altogether she was hosting them. And when she wanted to stay in her home, she had a bedroom for Theresa, and a bedroom for Theresa's ex-husband. So this is more of the chosen family stuff, because when Theresa needed respite and to get on with her own life in different ways, her ex-husband would take care of June. He didn't have any family here, he was from Pakistan. And he loved June, he took care of his own mother when he was 18 and his own mother was dying. And that was a huge value for him and he loved these dogs too. Peetle was his baby, you know when Theresa and him were still married. So that's all that chosen family stuff too, even though they're not, you know — there was still sort of that outcast thing.

June Harris

Generosity

Campsite

Intergenerational friendship

Chosen family

Ysanne: Do you know how they, working at Bell Telephone, how they realized that, who were unmarried, "a lot of us are lesbians."

Bell Telephone
Lesbians

Susan: Yeah. I think, um, that was the first thing, is that it starts with that conversation about, "Are you married?" You know, "Do you have children?" You know that thing. And then how you look into someones eyes and how you smile. And, "do you want to go out for drinks?" And, unfortunately, or whatever, I mean, later on some of it evolved into drinking problems. But for the most part, a lot of it's like what we do now. It's that looking into someone's eyes and smiling. You know, and maybe you're having a party, a

Coded questions

Alcoholism

ruckus party or something, and you give your friend a hug and it gets a little warmer and deeper. You know, those things haven't changed over time. You know, you're in your bathing suit to go skiing and, "wow she looks cute." You know, and you let her know, and you know. Um [pause and laughs], so it was a lot of that. She [long pause] would be someone who would invite someone down to a burlesque show, and, uh, they'd say 'yes' or 'no.' And the comments would flow and you'd get an idea. So, that's the thing about her, she would invite someone to her camp and they would — so they became aware through socializing with her. You know there was another couple there who built the foundation for their trailer together in Augusta, these men who worked in the industry brought the trailer in and the women did what they could of the work to, you know, it was a double wide too, so it was a money thing again. But it's kinda like, you know [long pause] they all get the idea. For a lot of people it goes unsaid. But it's that whole thing, "well if you're not going to hire married women, what do you expect?" And for another couple from one of the other industries it went like this: one of my friends, and this was early on too, this is when they were relatively new in the industry, so they were probably in their — they both went to college — so they were probably in their early to mid-twenties. One of them, I mean she knew she like women but she also had quite an appetite so she, um, [pause] she got together with this guy at work. And they had sex in the office after work [laughs], they had like, they went out for drinks and they came back to the office to have sex because they didn't want to go back to either one of their apartments. And so the next morning, she was dressed in the same outfit, and, uh, one of her girlfriends, friends at work, co-workers, kinda

Friend crushes

Burlesque shows

Living together

Unspoken knowledge in lesbian social circle

Unmarried women

Office sex

raise an eyebrow at her and she was attracted. They were attracted to each other, so that's how their relationship began, because she figured, "oh she's a sexual person" [laughs]. She hadn't known it had been with a guy or whatever but she figured, "she's got something, you know, she's not shy." So that's how their relationship began and they were together for 12 years and they remained friends for the rest of their lives. One of them is still alive and with that same circle of friends. The other one passed away a couple of years ago. But, um, it's not any different than it is today, I think, you know. [Pause and thinking out loud] maybe in some circles people are more forward about it, but I mean I think still today some of us are still really afraid about the consequences of coming onto someone, or revealing our identities. But some like June probably would be more forward about it, you know.

Ysanne: Were there any consequences, from like the managers or?

Susan: She never talked about any. They valued these women so much because nobody else would take the jobs. They, these women, they had great benefits and promotions. You know, they were so valued. I mean, oddly enough when I was an undergrad one of the jobs I had was going into the Bangor office and taking care of their plants. And this was before I knew any of these women. And then, of course, they were hiring women who were married. But, it seemed to be, even then, which would have been the 80s, it seemed to be a pleasant environment, so not like a toxic, sort of, culture. And I know the telephone guy on Vinalhaven, where I grew up, seemed to be very happy with his job. When my mother came out to the island in the 50s as a teenager, to visit and met my dad, she always

Sexuality

Longterm relationship
Live long friends

Fear of coming out

No consequences at Bell Telephone

Good benefits and promotions

Bangor

1980s
Healthy corporate culture

Vinalhaven

had really pleasant stories about the operator out there. Everybody did. So even those people weren't in an office type setting — it seems like Bell Telephone in Maine seemed to have a healthy corporate culture, seemed to value its employees. I never heard anything bad about it anywhere. And I knew one of the people, in Bangor in the 80s, who was — I think she was straight, she was married to a man, had kids, always seemed happy with her job. I never heard anything bad from June or Selena, they seemed very happy with it and very proud. June did have, you know, guns and kept sharp on the shooting range. And had lots of security around her house, so she had, um, she had issues about men. But not her, not the um, [pause] male co-workers.

Ysanne: You mentioned that a lot of these women had very long relationships and then were able to [loud noise] friendships after. What do you think, like, makes, like, allows for that? Is it the chosen family or?

Susan: I think so. Um [long pause], you know, another thing is like, ahhh, social-psycho stressors of poverty. I think, in hanging out with working class people [pause], lesbians, let's just narrow this topic, stay on topic. People have sort of chosen family in Maine who are poor and, you know, grew up in really deprived environments with a lot of abuse, neglect, and poverty, um, you know, substance abuse, and mental health issues in their family. A lot of that I think comes out of poverty, you know the psycho-social stressors. And let's face it [long pause], didn't have to deal with a lot of that. You know, they were compensated for their work and it just makes life so much easier, you know. People say money can't buy happiness but, frankly, it made life so much easier. You just don't see — they had this tight social

Healthy corporate culture

Happy employees

June Harris

Guns

High security

Fear of men

Good relations with co-workers

Longterm relationships

Chosen family

Social-psycho stressors of poverty

Working class

Poor

Abuse and neglect

Mental illness

Social-psycho stressors of poverty

Money and happiness

Social support

support, and that's something you see time and again, that, you know, to old age, it's what sanes us. They have those studies about Alzheimer's being connected to not bearing children, but otherwise they had so many factors that tied into wellness and old age. These women were happy into their old age, even though they did get Alzheimer's, they had really good social supports. You know, only two of them that I know got Alzheimer's. I know another woman, well, two more women, who worked for At&t who did not get Alzheimer's, who are still alive. Of course, in their late 80s early 90s now. But, it's just, yeah, I think that chosen family when you got money and a lot of social supports, um, makes it easier to remain friends because it minimizes the toxicity, I guess. You know.

Old age

Alzheimer's

Old age

Alzheimer's

Alzheimer's

Alzheimer's

Chosen family

Social support

Toxicity

Ysanne: You mentioned that there are still two women who are alive, are you in contact with them or?

Susan: I have been on and off but there is an interfering niece, who is looking at the money [laughs], so I'm kind of backed off it. Just kinda get social services to try to intervene there, because I really, uh [long pause], I think I'll leave that alone.

Relatives want money

Ysanne: That's okay.

Susan: Yeah.

Ysanne: So, you talked about Seacoast Sappho's and Portland Lesbian Coffee House Meetup.

Seacoast Sappho's

Portland Lesbian Coffee House

Susan: Yeah.

Ysanne: Um, what's your, like, history with those?

Susan: Oh gosh. Oh! And this goes to the same thing — of this healthy social support. You know, around, not drinking. Or about providing outlets besides getting drunk I would say. It's not about not drinking, per se, you know, if you wanna have a few beers and play twister, or, maybe even have a few beers and play — I think it's called life. One of the women brought the game of life. She bought several editions of it and threw out all the men, and so it just had the women, the female characters. So you could play a game of life and just, or go hiking, or just so many different — you know, go for canoe rides. And I mean, the photos that are in here too, they are, you know, they got a bunch of inner tubes on the lake. And these are the types of activities [long pause, phone alarm goes off] Seacoast Sappho's let's say would have a secret santa thing, and these groups would do that type of thing too. You know, one of the really femmey women would dress up like, kinda like Eartha Kitt type of character during "Santa Baby." The first time I met one of the women at Seacoast Sappho's, that I had a relationship with, but she's my parents age. So this was tricky. They had a St. Patrick's Day dance, and the way this would go, one of the women from Artistic Amazon, one of the owners, Sherry. was a marine and so she'd get the VFW down at Portsmouth to let them have dances there. And the thing was, so many of the women in that group were older, so they would start the dances early. And they would have, let's say, green leis for women who were partnered, and, white leis for women who were single. So, I went to this dance and they played "Unforgettable" by Nat King Cole, and there was this table of, let's say, 11 women and 10 of them got up to dance. And they were all in their 60s, 70, maybe late 70s [sighs]. And I saw this one woman sitting who looked like she was in her

Social support

Having fun

Boardgames

Outdoor activities

Belgrade lakes

Seacoast Sappho
Secret Santa

Eartha Kitt

St. Patrick's day dance

Artistic Amazon

Portsmouth

Older lesbians

Nat King Cole

Older lesbians

70s and I found out that she was, like, my parents age. And I went over and I said, “Hey, you’re single, I’m single, wanna dance?” [Laughs]. And she did and we had a blast. And it turns out her longterm partner had died a couple years before. And her friends said that she had kinda lost, you know, for a couple years had kinda been really depressed and lost her zest for life, or whatever. So, we had a ball for a couple of years. But she wanted me to be her, like, you know, her life partner, and I couldn’t deal because I didn’t want to lose her. So, I wasn’t ready for that. I was in a space where I was kinda like too, “no monogamy! No commitment!” you know [laughs]. And I was kinda like that for years, and, uh, it really hurt her. She’s in touch with my nephew, one of my sisters, and my mom all the time. And we’re not in touch at all and it hurts, but she’s I guess still stinging. I, uh [pause], this is a tough one, you know? Because that’s one of the ones who always remained friends with her former partners but not me [laughs]. So, I mean one of the other things was, her cat Rosie, who was really her deceased, late partner’s, cat. When Rose died, Rosie was 21, and, um, I cleaned up Rosie’s bedding and Pat got mad at me because she wasn’t ready for it to be cleaned up yet. It was like a link to her late partner and I didn’t realize that that would hurt her. So [long pause], you know, I guess, I really inadvertently hurt her very deeply. [Long pause] we’ve spoken on some light issues, since then, but I haven’t been able to mend that and I just try to respect her boundaries.

Ysanne: Do you think being friends with people that are so much older than you can be difficult, just because, like, as you said, you’re not ready for like, death?

Intergenerational relationship

Death of longterm partner

Live partner

Non-monogamous

Break-up

Death of pet

Susan: Well [coughs], I think it's more enriching. And it's more natural, you know, uh, because humans are meant to live in villages. We're not meant to be avoiding death all the time. I used to work in HIV and AIDS law in D.C., in the mid-90s and I feel like people who are facing death, kind of crystallize life into what's more important. So, I think, growing up on an island that's part of life, you know, you gotta face that cycle. And, uh. But for a primary relationship no, I mean I know some people who can do that but I had had a lot of loss. I was coming back to Maine on the heels of a lot of loss, and I wasn't really ready to get into a primary relationship with someone who had just, you know, lost a partner within the past couple years. You know, and had been a smoker for most of her life and had CPO and I wasn't really thinking she would live much longer. So, I wasn't ready for that.

Ysanne: Would you mind telling me about the AIDS center that you worked at?

Susan: So, it was Whitman Walter Clinic in D.C., [long pause and sigh] chosen family was huge. [Long pause] So, I got involved my first semester at law school by being the team captain for Howard University School of Law. We raised, me, [laughs] team captain, there were like two of us [laughs], we raised [laughs] the most money of any law school in D.C. Which was just so ironic because we were the poorest law school. And, uh, so I did an internship there and found my community in D.C. there relatively quickly, and it was my first year out of law school. And also how I got into immigration law, and I've had case here that were based on [pause] persecution for being gay. So, it was difficult coming back to Maine and being immersed in, [pause] you know, I'll use the word queer — because that

Intergenerational friendships are enriching
Natural

HIV and AIDS

Vinalhaven

Maine

Smoking

AIDS Center

Whitman Walter Clinic in D.C

Howard University

Law School

Internship
Community

Cases on gay persecution

Queer terminology

was the word I was using then “queer culture.” And coming back to Maine and not having that, because you’re immersed in it all day at work and then you go out clubbing with your friends. Or you have potlucks, or go to movies together, to queer movies, one in ten film festival. They’re just, you know events all the time, you know, it’s your life. And to come back to Maine and really have to work at seeking it out. So, that’s one of the other things about, you know, working and seeking out these little subcultures in Maine, that are so enriching and so affirming, I think people are really missing out. When I see things on Facebook, it’s like we’re eating our own. When young people are saying, “Baby boomers this and baby boomers that” and “we’ve just discovered intersectionality” and “blah blah blah blah blah.” These younger people who think they’ve just discovered stuff and are blaming elderly for XY and Z. It’s like, wow you’ve never met your elder siblings in the LGBTQI plus community here in Maine, and what they’ve been through, and who they are, and what they’ve done. You know, and I’m only talking about a very small subculture here, I could go on and on and on [laughs].

Ysanne: So, what terminology do you prefer? Because you said you [loud phone alarm] —

Susan: Well, I’ve just been called out for using pansexual, by a younger person. Yeah, so, uhh [sighs]. It’s so frustrating, because that’s the other thing — for me, a cornerstone of respecting each other, and this is tricky for me because I’m guilty of it myself, um, but, trying to respect each others desire to self-identify. And I mean I could have a conversation with you about why I think it’s, you know, kind of weird for a woman to call herself gay, because I think of gay as being a

Maine

Clubbing

Maine lacks community

Subcultures

Baby Boomers

Intersectionality

Young vs. Old

Terminology

Pansexual

Self-identifying

term for men. And I think — let's say we're talking in those parallel terms [used pen and paper to draw], let's say gay is for, and again, this is very very narrow. Let's say we're talking very narrow. Gay, a man attracted to a man. Lesbian, a woman attracted to a woman. I know, massive spectrum, that those could cover, however [long pause and writing]. We could have assigned male at birth, a trans woman, attracted to a cis-female, you know, lesbian-identified, whatever. I know it does taking on all kinds of permutations, but when a woman refers to herself as gay, let's say for me, it gets under my skin. But I'm not going to go out there and say, "you have to call yourself a lesbian." You know, but, now I'm getting shit for calling myself pansexual. I've had to explain myself, "well, you know, I've been with men who identify as gay who also are drag queens, but primarily identify as gay." I'm not going to tell them they're bisexual. I'm not going to tell them they're pansexual. If they, their primary relationships are gay or they primarily identify as gay, and they want to hook up with a woman once in a while, that's their business. You know. And also with lesbians, you know, that's their business. I feel like, if I hook up with let's say a man who identifies as straight but is a self-identified crossdresser, um, you know, someone else might call him something else. He calls himself straight. But also, if I hook up with a butch identified lesbian who is thinking about transitioning, thinking that she felt like a boy when she was little, and then while we're in our relationship starts a process of transitioning — I don't care, you know, about these people's identities. You know gender identities or sexuality. Or if I'm with a self-identified straight cis male, or a gold-star lesbian [laughs]. You know, whatever. I guess I just feel like pansexual

Nuances of LGBTQ terminology

Lesbian

Gay

Transgender

Cisgender

Pansexual

Crossdressing

kind of is more accurate for me, than just saying bisexual.

Bisexual

Ysanne: Why were you, you know, chastised for using that term?

Susan: Okay, so it was a meme and it said, um, something about “bisexual has always included transpeople, dummy, stop using the word pansexual.”

Meme

Ysanne: Do you think all the different terms can sometimes be difficult to navigate when other people are trying to censor how an individual identifies? Like what’s your experience now, you kind of went into that, but what’s your experience?

Censoring LGBTQ identities

Susan: Well, and I also start with queer you know. I identified with queer because, for me, I have experienced oppression for gender expression as well. Cause I don’t shave my armpits and legs, and I haven’t forever, and I get a lot of shit for that, and it hurts. And a lot of people aren’t comfortable with my sexuality. On — all over the place — even when I was working at Whitman Walker, even though I felt like I was surrounded with people who supported me, there were also people who identified me as bisexual who said that, “ugh, yuck.” You know bisexuality is this fringe sexuality and “ugh, gross.” And you know, “it’s not real,” “you’re privileged,” “blah blah blah,” just [disgusted noise] “not committing.” It’s so exhausting but c’est la vie [sighs].

Queer

Gender expression

Whitman Walter Clinic in D.C

Bisexuality stigma

Ysanne: Do you think being bisexual in the LGBTQA — IA plus [community], can be difficult just because of that conception of, “you’re not committed,” “your identity isn’t valid,” and so on.

Susan: Yeah, but I haven't identified with the term bisexual since maybe 1990 — maybe around 1996. So, I kinda started referring to myself as queer, because my sexual partners were becoming more varied. It wasn't just [pause], or I recognized [laughs] that my sexual partners were becoming much more varied. So yeah. My relationships I should say too, because my relationships were much more varied.

1990s

Ysanne: Have these identities had an impact on your identity or your self-conception?

Susan: No. It's just learning new language. More accurate language. Because I've always been very openminded, I think growing up in a time where there was, uh, for example David Bowie. Some of his albums were my early albums. Rod Stewart. And I had crushes on female, I guess I would say women who were really butch. You know, and I got to say this. Um [sighs] transgender people just weren't really visible. Um, you know we had Bobby Riggs, was in the news. Growing up on an island, you know, in the middle of the Penobscot in Maine, there just wasn't really exposure to that. I just have to say that. [Sighs] Bobby Riggs, Bobby Riggs was in the news. So, that kinda led me to research more into tennis. And there were, there was an issue, of transgender people wanting to play [long pause]. I think there was an issue of transgender people wanting to play sports. Um, let's say maybe a trans-woman wanted to play in a woman's league, so, and this is a tricky thing too, because the language thing too — if you're a trans-woman, you're a woman. So, you know, but again it wasn't really on my radar then. So, but I think that's fair for a lot of kids to say. The culture's changed a lot — a lot more visibility. But again that's the media too. You gotta

New terminology

David Bowie
Rod Stewart

Butch

Bobby Riggs

Penobscot Maine

Transgender

Sports

Lack of trans visibility

understand I grew up in a time where we did not even have VCR's, we did not have cable television. We had, like, three TV stations and two radio stations, or three depending on which way the wind was blowing. So, you know, I had "Our Bodies Ourselves," um, so there was a little bit of exposure to that. But that was again maybe when I was around eleven years old, when I kinda — "Oh yeah, okay." You know, that, the word that came to me at the time was bisexual. So that was the word that stuck with me until 1996.

Ysanne: Who was Bobby Riggs?

Susan: Well, he played Billie Jean King in Tennis. And that was, um, kinda what brought my awareness to the idea of, um, the fact that, "Okay, this is a man playing a woman in tennis, to kind of stomp on notions of gender equality." But it opened my mind also to the fact that [pause], more about transgender issues in sports. Because when I was ten, Babe Didrikson, there was a TV show about Babe Didrikson, and she became a real icon to me. And some people wonder if she had a bit of a trans identity. I don't think she did, I think she identified — if she had the words for it then, and that's where I go back to this, um, probably if she had the freedom of words for it, she may have been more butch. She's certainly a, you know, and this is another subculture. The woman who got into golf at the time. I went to a musical about Babe Didrikson and a bunch of elderly lesbians showed up to the musical in a bus, you know. The Dinah Shore golf event was taken over by lesbians and Dinah wasn't happy about it at first [soft laughter]. But, um, these were old golfers who came up admiring Babe Didrikson and it was an affirmation for them to see this kinda butch woman out there golfing. So I guess that's the thing, I think it's

Billie Jean King
Tennis

Babe Didrikson

Transgender

Butch

Older lesbians

Dinah Shore

good to have this awareness of people, you know, in the community who — you know, this isn't our first fricken rodeo. Um, we're here we're queer, [laughs] you know. And a lot of people reject the term queer too, so. You know, whatevs.

Awareness

Ysanne: So, we have around twenty minutes left. Is there any specific topic you wanna hone in on for the last few minutes?

Susan: Okay, um. [Long pause] Okay, so Portland Lesbian Coffee House and Seacoast Sapphos. Chosen family. [Long pause] And these corporations. So these women who met in the 1940s through these corporations, I think there is no mistaking the fact that they were chosen family. They had, like I said, bought houses together, pets together, traveled together. They were — they left there estates to one another in their wills. They were spouses. The woman who was, who I met at the St. Patrick's Day dance — most of her relationships lasted 12 years. [Long pause] Their back up person in their wills would tend to be an ex. Their best friends would tend to be exes and their new partners. And again, there wasn't that toxic weirdness, generally, because they were generally — I think, I really do truly believe, it's the strong social support and money that helps take away those psychosocial stressors of alienation and poverty. And uh, you have a good health plan, you can get therapy, a lot of these people used therapy, and they had that outlet of having healthy social lives and activities. Um [pause], one set of women, one couple, left industry and became — maybe I shouldn't go there. Okay, I'll say it this was so they can't be identified, they became members of another industry in Maine that is very well regarded. And they became successful in it, and they were a first in York

Portland Lesbian Coffee House
Seacoast Sapphos
Chosen family.

1940s

Chosen family
Lived together

St. Patrick's Day dance

Stay friends with exes

Social support
Psychosocial stressors
Poverty
Good healthcare

York County

County. So, um — and that gave a whole other subset of lesbian friendships. And, within that group, led to another group of super high achieving lesbians who were the first in their field to do, uh, venture. [Laughs] That lesbians are known to do in, you know, across the world. And was a first in York County and has a large subculture. So, there are all these overlapping subcultures, I've named three in York County, that have these strong social groups that are all interconnected. And these women are all older. And, you know, people may talk about farts and TERFS (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) and all that stuff, but, [sighs] these relationships began organically. So it's not about that, they've known each other for decades, and I don't know what to say. You know, it's chosen family because they were working together, you know. And then that would turn into a barbecue, or a game night, or rafting trip, a hike, a potluck, a Christmas, you know, uh, Thanksgiving, Fourth of July party. These are all things that I've done with these women. And in Seacoast Sapphos and Portland Lesbian Coffee House, for the people who are more around my age, in their 50s, their have been a bunch of marriages. The person who first started Portland Lesbian Coffee House, back in the 90s, went out to California for a couple years and when she came back I said, "Hey, do you know that a whole bunch of women who went to your events got married?" You know? And that group has started up again and they're super busy, they've got things going on all the time. That was another group that said, "Open to all stripes of the tribe." So, you know, and none of these groups were exclusive, so you could go and it didn't matter if you were any spectrum of your sexuality or gender. You were welcome. We didn't exclude anyone. So that was never an issue.

Lesbian friendships

Successful lesbians

York County

Subcultures

TERFS

Chosen family

Group outings/gatherings

Seacoast Sapphos

Portland Lesbian Coffee House

Marriages

All-inclusive groups

Ysanne: Do you go to any of the events that they have now?

Susan:[Nods].

Ysanne: Yeah?

Susan: Yeah, so that's a — I mean, it's super exciting, and I don't get enough of it because I'm working a lot of the times when they're happening. But again, it's, you know, chosen family because a lot of the stuff was before marriage equality. So, now you've got your legally sanctioned families. But a lot of this was pre-baby boom, so a lot — you know, people had pets who were super important in their lives. There were a couple of women who had been married to men before, but for the most part not, so there were some children in these groups but not very many. I don't know of anyone in the Bell Telephone family. Pretty much all of those women met really early on, so like in the 40s and 50s, and none of the ones I know were married to men. In the group from the industries down in York County, a couple of those women were married and had kids, but have been together for decades. So who they really, they really identify with both women, as being like, you know, one of them being a stepmom type of thing. So that's more sort of chosen family.

Chosen family

Marriage equality

Bell Telephone

1940s,1950s

York County

Chosen family

Ysanne: Is there a wide age range in the group, like, now, or is it?

Susan: Now there's more of a wide age range, Portland Lesbian Coffee House was more of a wide age range. And some of those people have gone, because that was like — we had more local musicians then, who have gone on to seek their fortune elsewhere, who were more central to that. That was very connected also with um, oh I mentioned it

Portland Lesbian Coffee House

earlier, North Star Café. Which kind of really filled in the gap when the bars were closing down. I mean, one of the things that also came out of Seacoast Sapphos was the tea dances, down at Main Street in Ogunquit. This was definitely pre-Facebook, I sent tons of emails to women's groups, around Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine. To different universities and stuff. For one of our first tea dances down there, 300 women showed up. It was unheard of for Maine Street, so they started having regular tea dances down there, Sunday afternoons.

Ysanne: What are tea dances?

Susan: An afternoon dance.

Ysanne: Oh, okay.

Susan: So, that's an historic thing also with, kind of a lesbian thing, because the men were the ones that were known to kind of drink more, of course. You know, physiological type of thing. But, um, and spend more money. Because they were typically more monied than the women. Anyway. But a lot of these women being older wanted quieter music, earlier in the day, and so that's what — DJ Jodi was one of the major DJs down there. J-O-D-I. And she still DJs a lot of women's dances down there too, and with Seacoast Sapphos, but down at Main Street at Ogunquit. But she's around, like, Northern Massachusetts too. But, you know, they'll play music — at those — typically a lot from the late 70s, or disco period. Music that can be kind of ambiguous in terms of sexuality, and, you know, Frankie Valli "Oh What A Night." Kind of music that you would sing to your female lover. And "We Are Family." Kind of these LGBTQ iconic songs. The dances, much like the ones at the VFW for

North Star Café
Bars closing

Seacoast Sapphos

Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine

Tea dance

Older lesbians

DJ Jodie

Seacoast Sapphos

Musically ambiguous music

Seacoast Sapphos that DJ Jodi would play. You know, and then they'd move it on [pause] chronologically and you'd get some more Cher. And then it [laughs] would get a little louder as the night went on. Or, you know, the afternoon to the evening. And then they'd kind of open it up. Let's say it started at 3 or 4, and then, you know, later in the evening the guys would start coming in and it would get loud. Boom, boom, boom. You know? And it was the same with the dances at the VFW, the younger women would come later on, like 9 o'clock or something. But, um, earlier on in the night it would be Etta James and Nat king Cole, you know, and Billie Holiday. Um, [thinking] Sarah Vaughan. [Thinking] Doris day. But Portland Lesbian Coffee House was more outdoorsy, um, Seacoast Sapphos was more laid back. You know, it was more like [laughs], I mean there was some kayaking and stuff but it was not like — it was an older group. I mean it still is, you know. Portland Lesbian Coffee House tended to be more athletic. Now there are just um, I don't know, not as many [pause] hardcore athletic events as there were in the 90s. [Phone is vibrating].

Men come later in the evening

Etta James
Nat King Cole
Doris Day

Seacoast Sapphos

Portland Lesbian Coffee House

Ysanne: You mentioned awhile back that coming back to Maine after D.C. was hard, because there weren't as many groups, did this help? Like going to this, or was this a little later on?

Susan: This was a little later on, but when I first came back there was a shop called "Drop Me A Line" up on Congress street. And um, Wendy knows this shop very well they're friends of hers that owned it. So two men owned it, oh gosh I'm blanking this is so horrible. Roger mayo and [ahhh] I think his former partner is in Philadelphia now. Oh this is embarrassing. It was kind of a gift shop but they had a bulletin in the back and, you know,

Drop Me A Line

this is kinda pre — not really pre-internet, but not everybody had a computer. So you go to the bulletin board and newsletters and little newspapers to find out what was going on. And I'd go in there. I was almost in tears because I was so lonely and didn't know what the hell was going on and look at the bulletin board and newsletters and stuff. And try to get oriented, "like where can I go, what's going on?" There's nothing to do — not that there's nothing to do, there's always something to do but you just gotta find it. And then there's the barbershop next door, it had the old school barber pole. And the owner there [pause], I don't know if he had full-blown AIDS at the time but he had HIV, and I'd go there to get my haircuts. But out front one day — I was sitting in the barber chair crying because this song came on that was just moving to me and was feeling lonely. You know, I was kinda going to the two places to kinda get my little fix of community. And you know, D.C. I could go to bookstores on a quiet day. Lesbian feminist queer bookstores. But up pulls Andy Rezosa, you know, this guy that I've known since Orono. When I was up at Orono, I went to one of these fraternity houses that was like a hippy agricultural fraternity and I'm looking at the photos there and there's this guy with a big grin. And a bowtie, and I'm like, "Who is that?" [Laughs] And, um, I got to know that, okay, we have this out gay guy in a fraternity at Maine in the 80s. My sister had dated his brother back in the day, back in the 80s, back, you know, in the Old Port in Portland at \$3 Dewey's. So I hadn't seen him in a long time, maybe 15 years or more. I'm sitting in the barber chair and I see him pull up. That's like the best thing I had read in one of the small alternative papers that his brother had died and he was putting together a CD of his work. And it was a labor of love, it was very difficult. He pulls

Pre-internet

Lonely

Missing a community

AIDS and HIV

Old friend

University of Maine Orono

Fraternity

Openly gay, 1980s

Old Port in Portland

out in his little car and I run up to see him. He had the CDs in his car, so he gave me two — one for me and one for my sister. It was the best thing to connect with him. So that was another thing, it was just kind of reconnecting with people. Andy's gay, I officiated his wedding to his husband. So, yeah that was after marriage became legal. So that was, you know, that was another thing. Officiating weddings when marriage became legal in Maine, there was a couple who came out from Oregon because it wasn't — Portland, Oregon — it hadn't become legal there yet. And they asked me to officiate their marriage here.

Officiated a wedding

Gay marriage legal in Maine

Portland, Oregon

Ysanne: Have you done that for a lot of people?

Susan: Yeah. So, one of the couples who met through Portland Lesbian Coffee House, um, [long pause] and some others I dog sat for them while they go married [laughs]. But I know of others too, so it's kinda cool.

Portland Lesbian Coffee House

Ysanne: What was that like?

Susan: The weddings?

Ysanne: Yeah.

Susan: Oh, [long pause] it's more special because it feels like cousins. It feels like going to a cousins wedding. So it's more of that, more of that chosen family stuff. You know? I'm closer to these women than I am to my cousins.

LGBTQ weddings

Chosen Family

Ysanne: We have two minutes left, is there anything else you want to say? [Long pause] And if it's longer than two minutes we can make more room.

Susan:[Long pause] I guess I'd like younger people to keep an open mind and uh, and before they jump to conclusions [pause] about thinking that they [pause] are the first to discover something, or that they're seeing something for the first time in Maine, understand that they're not necessarily. I heard one of our, so-called, you know, experts talk about multiculturalism in Maine. It's like, "Hellooo!" You know, you've got all these tribes in Maine, five or six tribes, you know, Maine was covered with brown people and they're still here. I don't know, it's just frustrating. Even before that we got Gerald Talbott's book about visible black history in Maine, and if you go even deeper into that too, you can look at sexuality. So people haven't even really thought about that much. I mean another intergenerational friendship, and, you know, chosen family, you could look at Donna Loring — one of our tribal representatives — who got Squaw taken off landmarks in Maine. The word squaw, she with the help of Gerald Talbott, who got the n-word taken off geographical landmarks in Maine when they were in the legislature. She and her partner got married, and she, you know, is a Penobscot woman, a Penobscot elder. I think that when you're looking at intergenerational friendships and chosen family, and all of that, you know, don't forget [long pause] the Native people in Maine. Don't forget the Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Maliseet — well, Maliseet's got a new name now but um. I think young people think they're discovering things for the first time a lot of the times, and just realize there are some cultures you may not know about. There's history you may not know about. [Pause] Do you have anything? Any questions or comments about all of that?

Younger generation
Open-mind

Multiculturalism

Maine's Indigenous peoples

Gerald Talbott

Donna Loring

LGBTQ marriage

Intergenerational friendships
Chosen family

Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Maliseet

Ysanne: This has just been really interesting, talking with you, I, um, definitely learned a lot. There's a lot of history here, I'm excited to — that we did this and other people are going to have access and to talk to my friends about it. Um, and I think you ended on a good note. Yeah, I think young people do have to, like, listen more. I think there's an issue of kids feeling like they're never listened to, like as really small [children]. But we, we have a lot to learn from each other.

Susan: Yeah.

Ysanne: It was really nice, like, talking with you.

Susan: Thank you.

Ysanne: And, we'll end it right here.

Susan: Thanks so much. I appreciate you inviting me to do this.

Ysanne: Yes, of course.