

ELLIE SPARKS 7/6/99

Madeleine Winter (MW): This is July 6, 1999 and I'm here with Ellie Sparks.

Ellie Sparks (ES): I'm Ellie Sparks and I came, I'm a social worker. I work with people with HIV and AIDS in the central Maine area. I came out during the mid seventies, basically at the bar, at Roland's which was the first and only gay bar at the time in Maine. And ah, but soon after that I went to the Third Gay Symposium which was some time in the mid eighties, I don't remember which date (chuckles). And I met up with several of the other women who interviewed here (laughs). Nan and Diane and Siev and some others. Ah, and we formed the Maine Lesbian ah Fem -- Feminists. And started setting up get-togethers once a month. And ah, they were at that time -- there were several women that kept joining, you know, more and more. And we got a mailing list and then soon after Jean Stickney took over our newsletter and, so we had a way to, to post events and ah, mostly, it was mostly a, a newsletter of events. I don't think there was any stories in it from what I recall. But we would travel far and wide to go one, one of these meetings. And sometimes we would have a really big one where you would discuss where we wanted to go as an organization and we would break down into certain groups. Ah, and I was, I was at the time I was not all that political. I was kind of, I was actually it was maybe another, a, a year or two after I joined MLF that I actually got involved with the anti-nuclear movement which was more up my alley at the time. And, soon after I joined the Maine Women for a Nuclear Free Future and was invol -- I was actively involved with that group. Ah, but was also part of MLF and I did a workshop at Symposium on, on the referendum, the very first one and --

MW: That was the one that closed Maine Yankee?

ES: That closed Maine Yankee yeah, yeah. And ah, so that was really more of what my interest was at the time. And ah, but I went to M -- MLF meetings for the social interaction more than anything. And ah, there were, MLF was, was such an interesting

organization at the time. It was during the seventies, things were different. There were a lot of -- there was a lot of separatist energy in the air. Ah, I was ah, I personally was kind of in between I nev -- I was, I never considered myself as a separatist but ah, I definitely enjoyed the -- preferred the company of women -- so that's how it worked out. So I, I would ah, I would ah, we would get together and do these, have these get-togethers and ah, I met a lot of great women there. A lot of women who were very politically active and ah, really, I think those were the ah, the early, also the early days but ah, some, some of the gay and lesbian ah, both were working on the civil rights bill ah, in the -- like what, I don't know, the late seventies or something. And I was always on the fringes of that. I wasn't really involved in it. Ah, so that, and MLF was, was really a, a turning point for me because I was coming out, I needed to have a social group and ah, there were so many talented women that were part of that and ah, dedicated and, we had some good times. We had some ah, arguments too. We, there were some disagreements about child care and, you know, alcohol, whether or not to have alcohol at the meetings. And ah, some other things -- personality conflicts. But all in all I'd say we were a pretty tight group and we really enjoyed each other's company and we worked pretty well together. The women who came just for the social time we, we ended up -- after a while we split the, the meetings up so that we could have sort of a political meeting or active meeting in the morning and or in the early part of the day and then have the social part at night. And ah, so we worked out a lot of those issues and stuff. And, I, I think as ah, time went on ah, the community started, started changing. I got involved in the Portland Women's Community ah, in the, I think it was the early eighties actually. Ah, and ah, we, we had meetings and I was involved more in the newsletter end of things. I was really interested in graphic arts so I was ah, very much ah, ah, I was sometimes single handedly laying the thing out, pasting it up.

MW: For Portland?

ES: Portland Women's Community Newsletter.

MW: Oh that was the name of the group in Portland?

ES: Portland Women's Community was the name of it and the newsletter was Portland Women's Community Newsletter, initially. And so I did that for a couple of years and that was really great. I, I ah, got a lot out of that. I was in the printing field and it just was you know a way for me to have fun with graphic arts and be a part of the women's community and, ah, and I would ah, hold workshops on how, how to do paste-up and ah. And then ah, I'm trying to think. Then I kind of burned out on that and sort of left it to some other women they, they, some other, a couple other women took over the newsletter and called it Common Scold, that was --

MW: Oh, okay.

ES: --the final version of it. And then, I'm not, that didn't last very, I don't think they put out too many more issues after the name change. And ah, so, but that was that kind of period of time. So.

MW: And was that group, turn into something else or did it just end?

ES: It ended. Yeah. And I'm not, I know that the, that, that group, I'm pretty sure that -- and by that time MLF had ended. So, I think in my mind, but maybe there was some overlap. I just, I, I, I know for a fact -- and you talked to Jean about this -- that the MLF newsletter went on way beyond when the, the group stopped meeting (chuckles). I mean years we're talking.

MW: Oh really?

ES: Yes.

MW: Is that when it turned into Fruits of Our Labor?

ES: Yeah, right exactly, Yeah. She turned it in to, to that. Umhum. So that was going, on I'm pretty sure right, at the same time that I was working on the Portland Women's Community newsletter. But I don't think that time we were, MLF was still meeting. I don't think so. And ah, so you know there was, for me there was that transition and I was, was sort of evolving I think in some ways. And ah, MLF, I think, served a huge purpose at the -- in you know, in its early years. And I have a lot of fond memories and so do, you know, a lot of women. It was kind of the first of its kind and very exciting and ah, and there was a lot of feminist energy there, separatist too, but for me not so much (chuckles).

MW: Well that's interesting because I saw mention of MLF in some materials I have from Midcoast Gay Men and they were talking about setting up a network, a self-defense network when hate crimes were happening and they made a mention of MLF, saying that their -- we want to be networked the way MLF already is because it's so organized.

ES: Oh, wow.

MW: So your reputation spread.

ES: Yes, yeah, yeah. They had a lot of, a lot of plans. I mean that group ah, there were a few women who wanted to do some speaking, you know, and wanted to educate the community about gay and lesbian issues you know, way back then. I'm not really sure that that ever happened but there, you know, at least there was some ah, interest in that and you know, that was, I think unbelievable for the -- like I say was coinciding with the beginning of working on the civil rights bill. So ah, quite a few women from MLF worked on that bill, the very first one.

MW: Well, so you mentioned that you were coming out in the bars, at Roland's particularly, could you talk a little about that?

ES: Oh sure.

MW: Like the first time you went there, what that was like?

ES: Oh yeah it was very exciting. It was a total dive (laughter). It was on the corner of Forest Avenue (laughs) and ah, Forest Avenue and Cumberland Avenue. And ah, yeah it was ah, it was dark, it was smoky, there were drunk people there. Ah, they had ah (laughs), pieces of mirror tacked on the, the wall, that was the decoration in there. Big old disco ball stuck in the middle. And ah, oh good, I was there every single Friday, Saturday and Wednesday nights. Wednesday that was dollar beer night. For a, I would say a good couple, three years and then ah, the Phoenix opened up and started going there. There were several bars that burned down (laughs). So and that was, it was definitely the disco era. And I was, I loved disco music. I still love the old disco music because it reminds me of coming out. So it's, that's the relationship there I think. But it's also good dancing music and some of my friends and I used to really get down. And we had some great times dancing and we drank a lot (laughs). Gave us ah you know, I don't know what you'd call it permission to be out of our minds I guess (laughs), I don't know. But ah, you know I had some good memories of that, those times. Ah, I would say after the Phoenix ah, burned I sort of got loose -- lost interest a little bit in the bars. I went to the Underground occasionally but you know was becoming more interested in the women's community, doing less at the bars and so. But Roland's was the, was the real slice of life for me. It was where I, I met some of my first gay people you know and lesbians in particular. Yeah, we would make out in the bathroom and I mean we were just nuts (laughs). You di -- and I was, I was 25 that was more like my, my second adolescence you know. Because I, I actually might have even been more like my first one because I didn't really have a first adolescence you know in some ways -- I didn't get to explore my sexuality at an early age. So it was actually kind of my first. There

was ah, it was a lot of -- I, I learned a lot about ah, the bar culture. And I knew inherently that that wasn't who I was and I've always felt on the outskirts of, of the bar scene in some ways. I mean I was, I was there but yet I was there were my friends. I didn't feel like I was a bar fly per se. I didn't hang out there like ah, some of the other women _____. Like I'm not ...

MW: It's a phase.

ES: Right, right, I don't need this place, I'd just like to come here.

MW: Yeah right. You mentioned that you went to the third Symposium, the one that Maine Gay Task Force sponsored?

ES: Yes, yes.

MW: Could you talk about that a little bit? Your experience with that?

ES: Sure ah, actually I, I have a funny story that led up to going to the Symposium. Ah, I was told -- I was living in Sanford at the time and I was coming out. I needed to be -- somebody told me that there were lesbians in Portland and the way, the place to find them would be ah, at the Women's Center which was on the third floor of the block, the very first block on ah, is it Free Street, I think it's Free Street, on the left. There used to be a restaurant downstairs, and then it was a bar. It's around the corner from the Nickelodeon.

MW: Oh.

ES: Is that Free Street? No Spring, Spring Street. It was that very, very block around the corner from --

MW: Oh, where the Maine Gay Task Force office was?

ES: Oh, okay that, that's probably -- see I wasn't all that connected to the Task Force but yeah that's, that's I'm sure that's it. The third floor.

MW: On Middle Street.

ES: Middle Street. And so I remember traveling into the big city, you know, I was really, really scared and excited at the same time. And ah, parked my car, walked up the three flights of stairs and I get up there and the door was locked.

MW: Oh no.

ES: And nobody was there. But there was this big poster that had a picture from the, the Symposium II of, you know, or actually it was advertising Symposium III but it was the, the folks that were at Symposium II. And there's Peter Prizer and Susan Henderson and some of the other ones in that picture. I think there were maybe 12, fif - don't know if you've seen this picture before. You, it, you should see, to get a hold of a copy of it. Ah, some of the early ah, activists. And ah, before I, I remember staring at that posture and I think, wow those are all gay people. Look at them all, look at them all you know! I was, (laughter) I said jeez you know, so and then, and then on the bottom it, it advertised Gay Symposium III at USM gymnasium at a certain time, certain place. So I wrote down all the information. I said to myself, I don't know what a symposium is but I'm going to be there (laughter)! So I went back to Sanford all inspired and I took a, another trip to, to USM. And ah, I remember walking into the gym -- oh no it was the auditorium I guess -- ah, for the first time. And there were, there must have been like 150 people in that room and I almost passed out. I couldn't believe it. It was just amazing. So I proceeded to get involved with my first woman that very night (laughter) I stepped right in and ah, and I, it was that. So that was ah, that was what stood out in

my mind about the third one aside from the MLF forming. Those two things were -- I mean a lot happened that time particularly.

MW: That's great. You're still going to Symposium now?

ES: I am. I ah, I have gone to most of them. Ah, I think I've missed 4, maybe 5 out of the whole, I don't know how many there were, 25? Then I ah, ended up ah -- back in eighty, I think it was eighty-one -- ah, I helped organize the, the one in Portland and that was the one where Gayside Story took place.

MW: Oh yeah. I've heard a lot about that.

ES: And I was you know, acting in that and ah, so that was, that was a big year for me. I mean there was a, that was a really exciting time. For, for both you know, helping to put this organi -- organize the Symposium which was a lot more involved than I thought it was, could ever be. But also being you know, getting to play one of the leads in Gayside Story was a real highlight. Really fantastic.

MW: That's great. So you said that when MLF started you weren't real political?

ES: No.

MW: Has that changed for you?

ES: Well. Ah, lately ah, the last few years I've ah, been wha -- I've been doing this, this social work and, I have not been interested in getting involved politically because I feel like my work is political and when I come home from work I'm wiped and I don't have the energy ah, really to, to be going to meetings or have meetings you know at my, I, I just, I had it. I don't have the energy for it. And I, I'm always there to pitch in if somebody needs a ride or somebody needs to do a mailing or you know, just hands, on

task oriented, short term things then I'm there. But I just can't get involved on a committee or anything like that, it's too much.

MW: Yeah it takes a lot of energy.

ES: Yeah and I you know, I have health issues too. So I, you know I want to really conserve my energy.

MW: So what kind of stands out in your mind about MLF. I know there's a lot of stuff that went on there and pull out some of the personal stories, or types of events, that kind of thing?

ES: Well they, they were ah, sometimes they were purely social, other times they, we, we were, we designed the meetings to be fairly political and they were broke down into committees and we'd meet you know in separate committees and, and, and but, but a lot, a lot of the committees were ah, they weren't ah, very action oriented. I mean looking back on it. Ah, it, it was just a lot of discussion. And, and you know, talking about you know what, what your poli -- political philosophy is and sharing it with everybody and um, seeing if we could come -- and, and consensus was hard you know, in terms of what is this group, where are we going with it? You know, everybody had sort of a different idea wha -- and had different needs for the group. And you know, we, we really wanted to respect everybody's ah, preference so, you know, for that. But, so I think in some ways MLF um, was so diverse that it, it couldn't be as unified as it needed to be ah, in order to really be ah, it's own ah, active -- activist unit. Or, or a politically active organization. There, there was too many interests that were coming into play and--

MW: So would you say it was more -- besides the social part -- that is was more of a consciousness raising group?

ES: Yeah I think so. I, I, there was a lot of discussion on that (laughs) I remember that. Lots and lots of process I guess.

MW: Yeah.

ES: Yeah. Which was fine. I mean, I think some women, although I, I do think that some women who are, who are much more ah, action oriented were frustrated by that. And ah, would really try and hammer out a, you know a, a mission statement and try and hammer out consensus on this or that. And it yeah I, I really think that you, it just wasn't the right group at the right time for -- and so you know, eventually things moved in a different direction and, and there were different groups that formed after MLF designed ah, dissolved. And so it's, it was pretty ah, vital at the time.

MW: Sort of a foremother of groups?

ES: Yes, yeah definitely. Is there anything else? Any other questions (chuckles)?

MW: I'm trying to think. So you came out into the bar, went to Symposium where MLF was formed. You were involved with that. Any other things that you were doing at that time or near that time?

ES: No. I had said the ah, the Maine Women for a Nuclear-free Future. That was kind of a neat group. Ah, were you around? Were you in Maine?

MW: No.

ES: I didn't think so, but Naomi was. She, she probably could tell you a little about it.

MW: She was here one summer for a visit, but she hasn't lived in Maine before. We moved here in '91.

ES: Oh. That's right too. I don't know, I, for some reason I thought she --

MW: She seems like she's always been around here.

ES: I know (chuckles) It's you know, and I knew her before and we were involved politically before when she was, she was out of state, I was in Maine.

MW: Oh, she was involved with Seabrook.

ES: Yes, yes and, and so, so that's where we sort of met up and, but I was, I was part of the Maine Women for a Nuclear-free Future and the way that, that ah, group started was. Ah, a few women, not much, I didn't even, I wasn't even there for the form -- formation of it. But ah, a few women got together and wanted to split from the Maine ah, Referendum Committee, from the Portland Referendum Committee actually. Ah, and make their own woman's group and address more feminist ah, anti-nuclear issues on a, with a feminist bent to it. And ah, so and I was still really involved in the, the referendum committee and I didn't want to leave at that time. So ah, so there were, there was a handful of women anyhow they got together 800 signatures of people who ah, wanted to ah, put out a, a, they took out an ad on, in the Press Herald, or the Sunday Telegram I guess it was. Um, and the 800 signatures were to ah, in support of um, Maine Women for a Nuclear Free Future. And um, you know they, they basically wanted to put sort of a, a, a feminist face on the issue in the paper. And they got so much, so many great responses and a lot of money. These people were giving money like oh you know. So there, the, the -- the organizers of, of the, of the group thought well what are we going to do with this money? Do we, what do we want to do with it? So they decided ah, to start putting out a newsletter and try and pull in you know, more, more ah, individuals in the group to support our work and make the decision as, in terms of what you know, what are you, do you want to be an active group? What, what are we going to do? And that, and that's when I jumped in. At that point, and my main

interest was the newsletter (laughs) and so I ended up ah, pasting up those three issues. Three, there were only three of them. They're called Aurora, A U R O R A. And at that time ah, also, I went down to the ah, Penta -- Women's Pentagon Action. Yeah, and ah, that was pretty exciting and took a bunch of women down there. And then, then I was all, we were, we went as a group, _____ down there. So that was, that was one more kind of little blip (chuckles) in that era. But other than that, yeah, I was in, sort of in some ways in the fringes of all kinds of groups. When I was living in Portland you know, I was in the fringes of MLF, I was sort of in the fringes of the bar scene and I was in the fringes of the women's community, and was never really, really in there. I think I was probably the most involved in the Portland's, in the nuclear referendum. Because I was like out there getting signatures. I got the most number of signatures. I got thousands (laughs). I was like driven. I think it was such a huge challenge for me that I was, I really wanted to prove it to myself that I could do it. So that was an exciting time for that too.

MW: Ok, thanks a lot.

ES: Yeah I hope that's helpful.

MW: Yeah,

ES: I hope there's some information there that nobody else has come up with.