

Michelle Pelletier  
SOC 301  
12/12/2019

<p>Michelle: Alright, so today is the second of December and we are at the Glickman Library at the University of Southern Maine campus. My name is Michelle Pelletier, M-I-C-H-E-L-L-E P-E-L-L-E-T-I-E-R.</p>	Introduction: date/location
<p>Skylar: My name is Skylar Hebert. S-K-Y-L-A-R H-E-B-E-R-T.</p>	Introduction, Interviewer: Michelle
<p>Susan: And I'm Susan Koen. S-U-S-A-N K-O-E-N.</p>	Introduction, Interviewer: Skylar
<p>Michelle: Alrighty, and we are going to remind you that you can refuse to answer any question that you'd like. If you'd like to stop the interview at any time you are more than welcome to do so, and if after the 90 minutes are up and we haven't gotten to the end of the interview we can always schedule another interview for another time or we can stop here. Um. How old are you?</p>	Introduction, Narrator: Susan
<p>Susan: I am 67.</p>	Introduction, Consent
<p>Michelle: Alright. So we're going to start with some background questions. Where did you grow up?</p>	Question: Age
<p>Susan: Well that's an interesting question. I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, moved to Birmingham, Alabama when I was two. And then when I was four, moved to New Jersey and Pennsylvania for six years. When I was ten, I moved to New Orleans, and that's really where I would say I grew up.</p>	Answer: Age
<p>Michelle: What was your childhood experience like?</p>	Question: Childhood, Background
<p>Susan: It was great, it was wonderful. I was a tomboy. That didn't seem to be a problem in my family. In fact, my father put up a basketball hoop for me, and he didn't have any boys, so I helped him out quite a lot. We got along really well, at least during my childhood. And, um, I have a very extended family, cousins and so forth that I was also</p>	Answer: Childhood, Background
	Question: Childhood
	Answer: Childhood, tomboy

very close to growing up. So it was a great childhood.

Michelle: What is your sexual orientation and gender identity?

Susan: I identify as a woman, a lesbian woman. And, growing up because my hair was always short as a kid, people would always say to me: are you a boy or a girl? Which always surprised me because I did always identify as a girl.

Skylar: Who did you first come out to?

Susan: I came out in many different times and ways. My first relationship with a woman was in college--my college roommate. And the first person that I came out too is actually a little vague to me. She and I were not out during the time we were together. Because we were roommates it was convenient to not have to share that with anybody. But the second--she actually got married. And the second woman I was involved with was a much more "out" experience because she was a part of a group of lesbians at the University. So I feel like getting involved with her was kind of a community coming out. The first time I ever told anyone, as opposed to just emerging into the lesbian community was one of my sisters. And, um, only because I observed her with one of her really close friends and had an intuition that they were together as well. So, again, it was a safe kind of situation, where we sort of revealed to each other. Of course, we were at Pat O'Brien's in New Orleans and a little drunk when we did it, but nevertheless we came out to each other. We had an older sister who, um, neither of us came out to for awhile. But ironically, I guess you could say that she got involved also with a woman. So, all three of us were involved with women eventually. In fact, she's married to a woman. And, um, so, probably what I would consider the true coming out was when I told my aunt. That was my mother's youngest sister and someone I was particularly close to. And that didn't happen until, um, after my parents had rejected me. Ironically, I didn't, well, I guess you could say that I came out to

Question: Gender Identity/Sexual Orientation

Answer: Gender Identity/Sexual Orientation  
Lesbian Woman

Question: Coming Out

Answer: Coming Out

First Lesbian Relationship

Second Lesbian Relationship  
"Community Coming Out"

Coming Out, Sister

Coming Out, Aunt

Parental Rejection

them. They more or less asked me, and I said yes. My father disowned me. And so, it was a matter of looking for-- and I should say my mother as well, for about a year. So that was both of them rejecting me initially. And my father had written me this-- I had a feeling this was going to happen because my father had written me this.. how should I call it, warning letter? Where he very cryptically-- 'Cause I used to write both of my parents and often they would write back to me separately when I was away at college and graduate school. This was-- By the time this happened I was.. So I had my first relationship at seventeen and this was my early thirties. So, I was out to, by then, to all my friends. Not my work situation, even though by that time I owned my own business. But it still-- growing up in the South as a lesbian in the early 1970s was not, it sort of instilled a real sense of protection, shall I say. And I guess I always knew that my father would react the way he did. Partly because his father had disowned one of his sisters because she married an older man, or an older person, older guy. So he kind of had that experience as somewhat normal. Although it's not, I want to register that. But anyway, I came out to my aunt really to test the waters to see if I was losing my whole family. And, fortunately, my parents were the only ones that were assholes about it. My aunt said "Well, we've always known that and we love you". My cousins made a big deal of reaching out to me and letting it be known that they loved me. So it was really a great experience, to tell you the truth, despite my parents. Yeah.

Skylar: So have you-- were you ever able to reconnect with your parents?

Susan: Yes. Um, my mother-- my parents were both very independent. My mother, in fact, always did all of the money side of the household. So she was-- even though she didn't work outside of the home after she had kids, she was very independent. But, I think she was also somewhat naive and when this all happened, my father was so adamant-- and he would literally not even speak my name. But as, actually in the last question as I started to tell you, he had

Question: Parental Reconciliation

Answer: Parental Reconciliation

written me a warning letter saying “there’s some things I don’t need to know.” This very cryptic sort of statement. And I knew what he was talking about, but, um, it just felt increasingly uncomfortable to me. So I had a conversation with my mother about why I had to tell them the truth. And she eventually- - we started talking on the phone. She started calling me, or she started answering when I called, I can’t remember. But, eventually she said “You’re my daughter and I’m your mother and we’re gonna have a relationship.” So she came up here, by this time I was living up here, and she came up here and I would see her at family things with her side of the family. My father-- ironically, my mother had an aneurysm surgery so I went down there and at that time, both of my sisters were involved with women but not out to my parents. And my younger sister was with a woman who my parents had sort of adopted as a fourth daughter, which was ironic because she was living in the same town. And all four of us are in the hospital room, and my father is not talking to me, but is talking to the others. So you could imagine that was bizarre to say the least. And also really hurtful ‘cause my sisters were not-- I don’t know, I wouldn’t use the word “brave” enough to stand up to my parents, even though there’s, you know.. They would have had a hard time rejecting all three of us. But by that time, my mother insisted that I be-- we were back connected and insisted that I be in the hospital room. My father did not come around until literally he was on his deathbed. He was, um, he had been sick my whole life. He had a rare blood disease. In and out of hospitals my whole life, even though he worked and kept his job until he was retired. But he, about 10 years after he retired, all the medications he’d had to take and everything kind of caught up with him and he was really ill. I had called my mother one weekend, and he got on the phone and he said, “Susan, I’d like you to come down.” And by the time I got there, which was literally two days later, he was in the hospital and kind of going in and out of awareness. But, when I got to the hospital room and I said that I was here, he actually let go--he passed away. He wanted me to know that, you know, he was, in his own way, wrong.

Reconciliation with Mother

Reconciliation with Father

Skylar: Sounds like a really big coming out experience for you.

Susan: Yeah.

Skylar: Well, switching gears now.

Susan: Yeah.

Michelle: So, we're gonna move on just a little bit. Um, you noted political activism as a topic that you were interested in speaking of.

Susan: Yes.

Michelle: Um, so what has influenced your involvement in political activism the most?

Susan: Well, really, my political activism started because I am a member of the baby boomer generation, and I went to college in the fall of 1969, and immediately got involved in anti-war activities. Which only accelerated after Kent State in the spring of 1970, I believe it was, it might have been the following year, I can't remember. So I was a big activist in the peace movement, really from the get go. And then, I got very involved in the anti-nuclear movement as well. And, um, was part of a group of women. By this time I had graduated both-- I'm sort of fast-forwarding, I had got my undergraduate and my master's degree from the University of Texas at Austin, and gone-- moved up to New Hampshire, and was living in what was called the Upper Valley. New Hampshire, Vermont, the upper Connecticut valley. And I was part of a group called WAND, Women Against Nuclear Development. And along with a friend of mine and I, I was also, at the time, very involved in women's music and the emerging second wave of feminism activities. So it was kind of an intersection of feminist and anti-nuclear work, and Holly Near was a big influence on me. You guys are too young to know this, but she wrote a song called "Ain't Nowhere We Can Run", that was an anti-nuclear song. And I had the opportunity to meet her, right at the time I was working with a

Topic: Political Activism

Question: Influences on Political Activism

Answer: Baby Boomer Generation

Anti-War/Peace Movement

Anti-Nuclear Movement

Holly Near

friend of mine on a book that she gave us permission to call *Ain't Nowhere We Can Run: A Handbook for Women on the Nuclear Mentality*.

Michelle: [whispers] Wow.

Susan: So it's a book essentially connecting feminist thought and the nuclear industry. And basically how patriarchal the nuclear industry is. Of course, it grew out of the military, so of course it is. And around that same time, we were working on it from, like, 1978 on and off 'cause we all of us working. But my friend Nina and I were the writers. At the same time, in 1979, I was involved as the-- part of the coordinating committee for the Women's Pentagon Action. Which was a large gathering of women against nuclear-- both nuclear in the military, and nuclear power. And in the electrical generation side of things. And that was a really interesting experience because it was also right at the time-- right around the time when radical lesbian feminism was growing strong. And because we would hold our organizing meetings in New York City, which was a hotbed of radical lesbian feminism, along with DC, there was a real tension that grew in the organizing committee between lesbians and particularly the self-identified radical lesbians. And a lot of the women who were older peace movement, Quaker, really unfamiliar, uncomfortable, I should say, even. And, as with all women's groups at that time, we were using a shared-leadership model. And I happened to be facilitating the meeting when we had a big discussion that day on, um, how we were going to handle the folks that were going to do civil disobedience and get arrested and how we were gonna have observers and legal people on hand and so forth. And there was just an assumption with part of the group that we would call on lawyers who were mostly men at the time. Hard to believe now, since things have shifted significantly, but at the time there were very few women lawyers, and we-- the radical lesbian feminist groups said "No, this is a women's action, everyone has to be a woman". Which actually lead to one of the best reconciliations that the group ever had around the

Feminist Thought & Nuclear Industry

Women's Pentagon Action  
Organizing Committee

Radical Lesbian Feminism

different factions that were involved because the peace women, I'll just use that label for them, really finally understood that these women were-- the radical lesbians were right, that they had not even thought about that because they were so immersed in their historically patriarchal world and thinking. And it was a real breakthrough for those women to understand what feminism really could be. Which is not anti-male, but is strongly pro-female, and understanding that we can do pretty much everything ourselves, if we get creative. So one of the things that happened was people started brainstorming, who were good observers. Because all lawyers need is documentation. So they called on-- put out the word that women who were in, you know, journalism and who worked in courthouses, and, you know, were around the law and got more than enough of what we called the legal observers, who were all women. So the Women's Pentagon Action was the first all-female activist activity, political activism, that has ever occurred.

Michelle: Alright. So you also mentioned the LGBT Marches on Washington.

Susan: Right.

Michelle: Would you like to talk about that?

Susan: So the first one I went to-- So the very first one was in 1979, but I was not up in the-- well, I had just-- I was in the Northeast but I was not-- I was running a school at that time. I was a school principal. And so, um, I was a little bit concerned about my job and how that would be received. But, I went to the second and the third, which the second one was in 1987, and by then I owned my own business, which was a consulting and training business. And I-- also by then I had quite a lot of friends all over the Northeast because I had written my dissertation, which is a dissertation on feminist workplaces, so I had studied with, um, well, I had done a-- It's called "Feminist Workplaces: Alternative Models for the Organization of Work". And it was studying-- it was five different, and I narrowed it eventually into the writing that I did,

Question: LGBT Marches on Washington

1987 LGBT March on Washington

Dissertation

three different self-identified feminist workplaces. And one of them was Off Our Backs, which was a feminist newspaper in Washington, DC. The New Hampshire Feminist Health Center and Bloodroot, the restaurant and bookstore were the other two. So I had quite a lot of friends, including with all three of those places, lesbian friends. And we joined up at the 1987 March on Washington. And then, I also went with my current partner. We've been together for, let's see, 36 years. So we had gotten together in '83. And um, she came and we also both went with friends from up here, and we were living in Maine by now in 1993. And those were the two that we attended. And that was quite something. And, again, as always been, at least in the time that I'd say I've been involved in the LGBTQ community... quite a diverse gathering of people. Lots of, I guess-- If I thought there was conflict within the feminist community, within the LGBTQ community at that time there was a huge amount of conflict. A lot of challenges with regard to how lesbians perceived, you know, groups that were there with man boy love. You know, there was just a lot of conflict, but at the same time of excitement around this emerging civil rights movement.

Michelle: Can you tell us more about the Off Our Backs newspaper?

Susan: Sure.

Michelle: I'd love to hear about it.

Susan: So, Off Our Backs was-- is, the longest running feminist publication in this country. I'm going to say that, and in fact I happen to have my copy of my dissertation right here. I'm going to say that they were formed, it's been awhile since I really thought about it, but I can look it up. They were formed, I think, in the 1970s. Yeah, they started in 1969/70. And they actually, eventually, this was years after I was involved with them, became a magazine. And they only stopped publishing around 2014/2016, sometime around there. So extremely long history. They, um, I have a quote from one of the founders, who said, if you don't mind me

1993 LGBT March on Washington

Diversity

Question: Off Our Backs Newspaper

Answer: Off Our Backs Newspaper  
Longest running feminist publication

Name Origin of Newspaper  
(Quote from Founder)

quoting it: "The name "Off Our Backs" was chosen because it reflects our understanding of the dual nature of the women's movement. Women need to be free of men's domination to find their real identities, redefine their lives, and fight for the creation of a society in which they can lead decent lives as human beings. At the same time, women must be aware that there would be no oppressor without the oppressed. That we carry the responsibility for withdrawing the consent to be oppressed. And so we must strive,"-as it says here--"to get off our backs." So it was a very overtly political woman-identified, but also accepting the responsibility for the role that we play as women, or as anyone of the oppressed groups, and not to participate in that. So they were extremely influential, as you can imagine. Not just within Washington, DC, but actually, eventually internationally. And so, there was quite an experience. The way I did my dissertation was through a more immersive, um, approach to my research. So I actually worked with them for awhile, sort of as an ancillary collective member, and observed the ways that they, you know, worked together, made decisions, how they decided to-- what they were going to put in the paper every-- And they were weekly at that time, so it was very intense. And also, at the same time, they would-- because everything they wrote about was so influential, they were extremely responsible and took the time to make sure that there was consensus about every article. So it was quite an immersion into the early feminist movement.

Sylar: That's awesome.

Michelle: So in addition to that, you also listed the Maine Won't Discriminate campaign. Were you part of the committee?

Susan: I was, yes. So I was, for the 2005 campaign I was part of the organizing committee. And again, we all agreed to use more of a collective decision-making, in the early stages, before it geared up to a very intense political campaign. But in the early organizing phases. And part of that was we divided

Dissertation

Ancillary Collective Member

Question: Maine Won't Discriminate

2005 Campaign Organizing Committee

Maine Won't Discriminate: Allied Groups

up who would take sort of responsibility for what. And I was the point person for all of the allied groups. So in addition to being part of the organizing committee, I would hold regular organizing meetings with all of the allied organizations, such as the Maine Civil Liberties, the NAACP, the Maine Democratic Party; all of the groups that were very strong supporters in helping us pass the 2005 Maine Won't Discriminate Law.

Michelle: Alright, so, you also mention P-F-L-A-G.

Susan: P-FLAG.

Michelle: P-FLAG! Based out of Portland. Is that something that you're currently involved with?

Susan: Uh, no. So P-FLAG is Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, that's what it stands for. Because of my experience coming out and my parents rejecting me, when I first learned about P-FLAG, which I had learned about even before I had moved to Portland, when I was living in Connecticut. But I had not been in touch with the group. And when I moved up here I got involved with it for a number of years because I really wanted to... One of the sort of philosophies of the group, not to speak for them, because I'm not a representative, is to be a place where parents--and friends--but who had first found out about their children coming out to come and learn more, and you know, not sort of put all that on their children, but try to educate themselves. And part of making that work is to have out lesbians, gays, transgenders, who would talk to them. And so that's kind of the role I was in at the time, was to be able to talk to the parents who were coming to the organization. And I've always-- even though I only did that for a fairly short period of time, I've always been a supporter and contributor to them. So I'm a donor, but not involved actively.

Skylar: Did you find that people made use of it?

Susan: Yeah. And it's still very active. And in fact it's one of the organizations that's joined in with the

Question: P-FLAG

Answer: P-FLAG involvement

Representative

Not currently involved, supporter and contributor

Question: P-FLAG, use

Answer: P-FLAG, still very active

Topic: Culture & the Arts

Question: Women's Music Festival

Equality Community Center.

Skylar: Great. Awesome. As for culture as the arts, this is more of a fun topic.

Susan: Right.

Skylar: So, with the women's music festival, what exactly of this did you want to talk about?

Susan: So, The Michigan Women's Music Festival was really, hearkens back to - and they even spelled women "W-O-M-Y-N" in order to leave men out all together, intentionally. This was really started by radical lesbians out of the mid-west. Ann Arbor, Michigan being a hot bed of radical feminist activities as well as the big cities of the Northeast. They were - I mean, it was a phenomenon. That is the best way to describe it at that time. And I attended, again, right around that '78, '79, '80, time period and I actually went with my sister and a friend, my older sister. I think because of that it was really an exciting experience. I wasn't with a partner at the time and it was probably the best way that my older sister and I bonded over being lesbians and one of my still-best-friends who is bisexual. It was because I was extremely involved in women's music and I went to the big concert at Carnegie Hall with all the women performers at the time and all of that - it was a real - what I remember is just an open spirit kind of experience. I have a lot of young cousins who go to Burning Man, and when I hear them talk about it I feel the same kind of identification of that sort of open community trying to figure itself out, but also trying to have a space away from society and all of its pressures. For most of the women there, they were lesbians, although not all. I think particularly that, because lesbianism was so new, trans was not even part of the discussion at that time because lesbianism was only being spoken out loud for the first time during that era. I'm sure there were trans women there, but it wasn't spoken about. And then things started to get weird a little bit later on when people, there was a backlash, and I don't really know what happened, at one of the events. There was a backlash against trans-women in subsequent

Answer: Women's Music Festival

Origin

Attendance, late 70s/early 80s

Involvement in Women's Music

Mostly lesbians, discussion of trans exclusion

Backlash from trans exclusion

Trans Exclusion

years. But in the early years it was completely open and fluid and really just fun. At the time I was a big camper so you know, it was also fun in that regard. I used to do a lot of backpacking and camping, so you know, being at a festival in a tent was probably the best of both things.

Skylar: Yeah, I was going to ask what your thoughts were on the trans-excluding piece because when I was doing my research on this festival, that's what I did find, there were big stories on that.

Susan: Yeah, it happened after I was there.

Skylar: Sounds like it was towards the end.

Susan: So I don't really know that much about what occurred or what brought it on, it surprised me because you know, I actually - a trans woman that I know in Boston had been to the festival not the same year that I was there so that's how I know that there had been trans women there. But, to the degree that they were certainly not "out" as trans women, I guess that's the best way I can say it, during that time.

Skylar: Alright - so you've also listed Sweet Honey in the Rock -

Susan: Yeah, my favorite.

Skylar: Yeah, from our research we learned that this music combined singing with sign language. So what about this group did you want to talk about?

Susan: So, all of the, and mostly lesbian, but feminist music at the time had signing at their concerts. But the difference with Sweet Honey in the Rock, the woman who, first of all, just for the record, Sweet Honey in the Rock is all African American, and the woman who signed also sang. So that was one of the things that made it unique. Sweet Honey in the Rock is one of the, one of my favorite groups of all time mostly because they, probably half of them were teachers, professors, even. So, their songs really were celebrating particularly

Trans Exclusion

Question: Sweet Honey in the Rock

Answer: Sweet Honey in the Rock  
Feminist Music  
Sign Language

African-American

Celebration of African-American  
Women

Question: Sisterfire Festival

African American women. So they had a song, for example, about Harriet Tubman, who is now a big deal because of the movie Harriet but this was back in the '70s and '80s that they were singing about her and trying to bring awareness about African American history into the culture through music- besides their voices are just fantastic.

Skylar: The Sisterfire Festival showcases groups like Sweet Honey in the Rock, the relationships and themes with this group and the festival seems to bring multicultural women to the light, can you talk a bit about this festival and its importance to you?

Susan: Yeah, so, during the early '80s, somewhat the late '70s but definitely the early '80s and this was when I was doing my dissertation as well. There was an emerging consciousness about the challenges of women of color in the feminist community. Probably because I grew up in New Orleans, I never understood the lack of awareness of women of color among white women. New Orleans is unique as a southern city because it's always been one of the most integrated cities and I went to an integrated high school. It was, I had always had African American friends so it was always something that I challenged, like for example with "Off Our Backs" I would often challenge them. They were aware, and some groups were. So for example. "Off Our Backs" because of their awareness, they invited, and they had some challenges come to them as well, but they were open enough to, and they were in DC, so again I guess the closer to the South the more there is an active experience of this - but they, for example, opened up a number of editions to women of color but they couldn't ever get women of color into their collective which was a challenge. Again, something that I never really understood. But parallel at that same time that I interviewed and studied called "Kitchen Table Press" which was women of color doing their own publication, or publications, they were a publishing house. And, so, the same thing was happening in the music world. Much as there had been things like the Women's Music Festival, and even though I think Sweet Honey performed there, there were very few women of color AT the

Answer: Sisterfire Festival

Women of Color

New Orleans

"Off Our Backs" Newspaper, Women of Color

"Kitchen Table Press" Publishing House

Women's Music Festival

Anti-Racist Activist

festival. Maybe it's because it was in Michigan, I don't know. Seems like there still would have been women of color, but there was still a big challenge. So one of the things that has always been, I've been an anti-racist activist also for a long time, I should have said that, in some ways that was some of my first political activism when I was a teenager. It had always been a part of my life, and because I followed a path that took me to New England where there are so many fewer people of color, I took every opportunity when I moved up here to do things that were multicultural, multiracial. And Sisterfire was one of the things that I always did because of that. It was by far the best concert and cultural event series because it was multiracial and multicultural.

Skylar: Awesome.

Susan: Yeah, it's funny because I don't really think about the anti-racism stuff as the first political activism because it's been something I've done since I was literally twelve years old. So it's more of a way of "Being" for me than an external activism.

Skylar: Yeah, it seems consistent throughout - never really ending. You've also listed the New York City Feminist Art Collective as something you'd like to talk about. Can you tell us about that?

Susan: Yeah, so again this was, I did a short internship with them as part of my dissertation study and I forced myself to do this because art and the arts, I write - but other than that, the other sort of painting, sculpting area of the arts is something that is not familiar to me. There was this collective in New York City that formed around the same time, in the mid-seventies, by the time I was involved with them I think it was seven or eight years along. And they were a group of artists in New York City, including some now famous ones, who were getting together in a collective to support each other and fight the patriarchy of not just the art world in general but really trying to break through to even the exhibited. They created an exhibit space that they set up for women artists, so women artists were

Anti-Racist Activist

Question: NYC Feminist Art Collective

Answer: NYC Feminist Art Collective

Dissertation Study

Featured Women Artists

Workshops, business side of art

Patriarchy

coming from all over the country to spend time doing workshops and so forth about how, the business side of art, how to break through the patriarchy, and sort of a political side of art, if you will. It was quite exciting, I just apprenticed this as an office person to be observing and participating in their meetings and so forth. It was really exciting and I know it helped a number of women break through in those early years. There's still way too much patriarchy in the art world, especially with owners of galleries and so forth but its not nearly as bad as it was then.

Skylar: Was there a particular artist or piece of art that spoke to most in the collective?

Susan: You know, what I found, actually no. I found the art making, just the process itself, I'm a process person. So I found that interesting, and the ways in which the women as intended in this collective would seek advice but artists being much more individualistic, I'm using the word advice as probably more what you would call input because they were going to decide whether to take it or not. But the ways in which they really manifested the collective concept is what was really interesting to me so it was influencing, it was seeing that influence their work. I am an organizational psychologist so that's the way I see the world is how people's interaction in groups influence their behavior. That was really what was most interesting to me about that collective.

Skylar: Who is Meg Christiansen? Hope I didn't butcher that - at Carnegie Hall?

Susan: So, yes, at the time that we are talking about, so again this all centers around the late seventies early eighties, there was a large women's music, there were actually some publishers, or promoters of women's music, and one of the first early women singers that broke through and helped form these promotion companies was Meg Christiansen and she was a lesbian. Holly Near came after her, Sweet Honey came after her, so she was really one of the early pioneers. The thing that was great about the

Question: NYC Feminist Art Collective

Artwork was individualistic

Interactions influencing artwork

Question: Meg Christiansen/Carnegie Hall

Meg Christiansen

Women of Color

Concert at Carnegie Hall

music scene, was unlike some of the other feminists scenes, it was always a mixture of people of color, women of color, I should say, and white women. Including some groups that were mixed race groups, not that many, but some. At their concerts, it was always multicultural, multiracial. I think that's one of the reasons I gravitated to women's music so much, besides of course they were speaking of things that were all in the whole coming out and whole feminist coming out as well movement. There was one night, pretty sure it was one night, there was one night of a concert at Carnegie Hall with all of the big names in women's music at the time and it was a much sought after ticket and my partner at the time, different than my life partner, and I were, we came down from Maine, I was living in Brunswick at the time, with a group of friends, and it was a place you wanted to be to celebrate the high point I guess I'd say of the women's music scene. It was also coincided with the high point of the Second Wave of feminism. I don't remember the date, I'm thinking it was '82, somewhere around there. Singing a lot about the strength of women and seeing a whole Carnegie Hall filled with all women was just really a peak of the success of what I had been doing for a number of years by then.

Skylar: Yeah, that sounds magical.

Susan: It was, magical is the word.

Michelle: So we are going to move on to commerce, another section that you listed on the sheet. Can I ask first, what field did you get your degree in? I think you mentioned it..

Susan: Yes, so my degree is in Organizational Psychology and I did my doctoral work at the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities, now called the Union Institute and so it's an accredited program but it was a conglomeration of universities and colleges that started it and my sponsoring university was Boston University. It was drawing on, I had professors from Duke and a number of other places because you could pull from anywhere. My minor, if you will, was in Women's Studies.

Magical

Topic: Commerce

Question: Degree

Answer: organizational psychology

Union Institute

Minor: Women's Studies

Question: New Hampshire Feminist Health Center

Answer: dissertation

Study of self-identified feminist organizations

Focus of Dissertation

Michelle: So you listed your dissertation that we've talked about a little bit on Feminist Workplaces: Alternative Models for the Organization of Work. Can you tell us a little bit more about the New Hampshire Feminist Health Center?

Susan: Sure. So, let me set the stage by saying the focus of my dissertation was looking at, trying to discern, by doing an immersive study of self-identified feminist organizations. So they had to use feminist in either their direct title or their subtitle of their company. "was there a common set of organizing principles, really a model of work organization that was different than a patriarchal model?" So that was the question that I was seeking to answer through my dissertation. So because I was living in, I have lived in New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, Maine, in the years that I've been living up north. I was aware of a lot of different organizations but one of the things I wanted to do was study a really broad array of organizations and particular, I also studied a law collective in DC and so forth but I really focused on just a few organizations in depth and one of the Feminist Health Center because at the time I was living in New Hampshire and I knew a lot about them. I was particularly interested in, you know when you get into the arena of health you're dealing with very different levels of training and it's one thing to have a collective that's more of a consciousness raising where everybody is equal but what happens when you're in a collective where you're actually having to produce something whether it's a good or a service. You need differential skill sets, are you still applying the same type of feminist principals of equality and equity and what does that look like? So the New Hampshire Feminist Health Center provided a way to look at that kind of differential. It was also a follow along to the very famous our bodies, our selves, concept of well women health care for the first time so I was also interested in it for that reason as well. Their goal was interesting because they were focused on making sure women had accurate health information so they could make intelligent decisions about their own healthcare. And

New Hampshire Feminist Health Center

Goal: accurate health information for women

Example: Mother

while that sounds kind of simple, you have to keep it in the context of, at the time, women, I'll use my mother as an example. My mother had a massive heart attack at the age of 50 and she knew that she had signs and she was completely ignored. It was fortunate that she lived, but she could've easily died, it was very serious. But the doctor didn't take her serious about her particular, what she was feeling, this was in the, right in the early '70s, didn't take her at all seriously because they didn't know or understand that women could have these types of symptoms that were similar to men, or different than men. They just didn't understand it enough because they had never studied women. All of the studies about health were done on men. This collective was really focused on well-care, whole-women's health but of course they were also very much in the forefront of the abortion rights movement. They provided, they had as part of their well-women health care they had an abortion clinic. They were performing about six abortions a week and that was very controversial in the community. Concord is a very small community. So there was, for them, unlike a lot of the other groups I studied, there was also this whole issue of external, internal, and the politics of their business if you will. But they were extremely strongly supported by the community of women. It was a very positive place, and a real focus on, again, extremely responsible women's health care all the way around.

Michelle: Can you tell us a little bit more about Bloodroot, a restaurant and bookstore that was owned by an all-lesbian collective that you also studied in your dissertation?

Susan: Yes, so Bloodroot, I actually ended up after I studied them, I bought a house around the corner from them and my current partner I met by interviewing her during this time. So, and, just so you know in the politics of today, I keep referring to her as my partner even though we've been together for 36 years because we have chosen never to get married, so it's our choice. But Bloodroot was a collective that began in 1975 and it was Bloodroot: A Feminist Restaurant and Bookstore, it was

Health studies focused on women

Controversy: Abortions

Question: Bloodroot: A Restaurant and Bookstore

Answer: Bloodroot

Partner, choice to not get married

Bloodroot, collective

Lesbian-owned, vegetarian food

Consciousness Raising Group

Founders

seasonal vegetarian food. So they were lesbians doing all vegetarian food back in 1975 when it was definitely not the trend. It was started - one woman had split from her husband after 17 years who had started consciousness raising in her home in Fairfield County, Connecticut and I think she was living at the time, well it doesn't matter. But anyway, the very ritzy suburbs, in Fairfield County, she started this consciousness raising group and out of this consciousness raising group she started doing dinners on Wednesday nights out of her home. They, women started coming and gathering there on Wednesday nights and finally there were enough of them who said let's do this as a business. I think there were four of them initially, they have had over the years, they are still an active restaurant and so they have been, they were able to create what you would call gourmet vegetarian food. They have written I think three cookbooks, published three cookbooks over the years. And have just really been considered one of the founding mothers of both the vegetarian movement and of lesbian businesses. In fact, two of the women who really started the foodie trend here in Portland, when they opened up their first restaurant in Boston, went to Bloodroot to learn about how they are doing it and started a restaurant in Boston, based on Bloodroot and eventually moved up here and started a very high-end restaurant that began the foodie movement here. So Bloodroot has had a really big impact and the reason that I chose to study them was that they were not just feminist, but also lesbian collective, intentionally. That created some challenges, because there were some sexual relations that got kind of in the way of some things for them as an organization along the way. In fact, it ended up that out of the four founding members only two continued over the duration. As I said, it is still thriving and still providing good food.

Michelle: I have a question, you don't have to answer it if you don't want to, but you mentioned that you and your partner chose not to get married. I'm very curious what your reasoning as to why you don't want to get married?

Lesbian Collective, sexual relations

Question: not getting married

Answer: political choice

Feminist theory

Choice to not have children

Susan: Sure, it's a political choice. It really harkens back to how deeply immersed I am in particular, I'd have to say both of us, me only because it was my doctoral work, but how immersed we both are in feminist theory and the role of wives in traditional marriage. So for us, it kind of just causes a visceral reaction and this is not a negative comment to anyone else and everyone has their own choice to make, but the thought of calling each other wife, we just have a horrible visceral reaction to that. We don't, either of us, have never felt the need, but we don't have children, I think it's different when you have children. We chose not to have children, we had a business together and that was enough to work together and live together for so long. Ironically though, you can't escape the context of marriage in society from a legal perspective. We are fortunate enough that our families, in her case her parents as well as her siblings and cousins, but in my case my parents have passed away so my extended family and my sisters, there will not be any legal issues for us either. Because we live in Maine, we moved our business up here in 1990, we've never had an issue anywhere. We have never had an issue in the hospitals or anywhere, even before the 2005 anti-discrimination law went into place. So we just have never had a context in which we've had a driving external need. The irony that I started to speak about, is that as we are getting older we are having a conversation about how my social security is about \$500 more than hers a month, and we are having a conversation about whether we should get married for that reason and may, we don't know. But it's not something that if we do, we probably will not even tell anyone because we don't want people making the assumption, and I don't mean we will hide it but it's not something, we won't do a whole wedding thing, I mean it's very much transactional.

Michelle: Yeah, like a legal formality.

Susan: Like a legal formality, exactly. But it's just not, we just come from the generation that did too much political analysis of the institution or we did a lot. So it's just not something that we think is a necessary way to have a family.

No issues/legal issues

Considering getting married as a legal formality

Reverse Prejudice in LGBTQ community

Michelle: Thank you for sharing.

Susan: And I should add, I've gotten into some pretty serious arguments with political friends over that issue during the marriage campaign. Because I had been extremely active in so much of the things going on, both in the democratic party and in the LGBTQ community and so forth and chose to sit out the marriage battle not because I didn't want to lend support to people who so much wanted it, and like I said I support that I feel it's everyone's choice as with all things, but I was really not welcomed with the opinion that I have. So there's a reverse prejudice in the LGBTQ community about people who don't embrace marriage which I think is unfortunate.

Michelle: Yeah, definitely.

Skylar: Are you doing anything now politically?

Susan: Well I just retired, sold my business a couple years ago and had to work to train the new buyers and I just retired so I'm getting involved I have done some early work on some anti-racist things here in Maine. As I said that's always been an ongoing thread for me, I'm very involved with the Southern Poverty Law Center and have always been so that thread continues, but I'm just thinking about how I want to use my time now so I'm debating a number of things that I want to do, but it's nice to be retired and have the freedom to do that.

Skylar: That's great. So, we are out of questions. Is there anything else you want to talk about?

Susan: No, I think we've covered everything. You guys did a great job with questions.

Skylar: We will send you an electronic copy of the audio by email, and the transcribed interview when we have finished it which will be soon - and thank you for sharing your story.

Michelle: Thank you so much.

Question: current political activism

Answer: Anti-Racist Activism

Involvement in Southern Poverty Law Center

Question: Anything Else?

Answer: no

Thank yous

Susan: I'm so glad that you found it interesting.

Michelle: Oh definitely, thank you.

Susan: Thank you.

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