

Michele Strohl

MARY FOLTZ: Okay. My name is Mary Foltz, and I'm here with Michele Strohl to talk about her life and experiences in LGBT organizations in the Lehigh Valley. This is a part of the Lehigh Valley LGBT Community Oral History Project. Our project has funding from the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium. And Michele and I are meeting on Zoom because there is a global pandemic, and today is June 5, 2020. So first I'll just say thank you so much, Michele, for joining me today for this interview.

MICHELE STROHL: You're very welcome.

MF: And to start, could you please state your full name and spell it for me?

MS: My name is Michele, middle name is Victoria, and the last name is Strohl. My first name is spelled M-I-C-H-E-L-E, just one L. Middle name is Victoria, V-I-C-T-O-R-I-A, [00:01:00] and the last name is Strohl, S-T-R-O-H-L.

MF: And will you please share your birth date?

MS: 8-31-1958.

MF: And previously, we had talked about the consent for this interview. Do you consent to this interview today?

MS: I do.

MF: Do you consent to having this interview being transcribed, digitized, and made publicly available online?

MS: I do.

MF: Do you consent to the LGBT Archive using your interview for educational purposes in other formats, including articles, websites, presentations, films, or other formats?

MS: Yes, I do.

MF: And do you understand that you will have thirty days after the electronic delivery of the transcript to review the interview, identify parts that you'd like to have deleted, or withdraw the interview from the project?

MS: Yes, I do.

MF: [00:02:00] Great. Okay, so let's go ahead and start. And Michele, maybe let's begin, could you tell me a little bit about your childhood?

MS: Well, I was raised in a blended family, so I was raised by my mother and my stepfather, who actually adopted me. So, he gave me his last name when I was about five or six. So I do have a number of brothers and sisters. I have -- I grew up with three brothers and three sisters, so there were seven of us, and later in life, around the age of forty, I met my other brother, who was a half-sibling of mine that I had known about since I was about seven or eight, but we had never met. So that's kind of my family. My mother is still alive. She's eighty-one.

[00:03:00] And my father -- and I call him my father even though he's my adopted father -- he's deceased, and he died in 2016. Let's see. What else would you like to know? Being in a blended family and lots of kids around all the time, we had lots of chores that we had to do, and I would say that my parents started out kind of traditionally asking the girls to do the girl chores and the boys to do the boy chores. I didn't like that so much. Kind of fought against that because I wasn't liking the cooking and the cleaning. I'd rather be outside cutting the grass or maybe helping my dad chop wood. So my dad and my grandpop had a sideline logging business, and so my dad was a logger part-time, and I would beg him to take me logging with him, so through that process, I learned how to skid logs and [00:04:00] use a chainsaw, cut down trees, split wood, kind of help out in that area.

My dad taught me to run a lot of different pieces of equipment. He was a crane operator, so we had bulldozers and cherry pickers, and I was able to learn forklifts, learn how to drive those kinds of pieces of equipment. So I was kind of the unusual girl on the block. People would walk by, and I might be with my dad up on a lift, a forklift, while we're building our chimney, or we might be painting the house with the bulldozer, and he'd be in the bucket, and I'd be moving it around the side

of the house. Or we might be cutting trees in the side yard, and he'd bring the cherry picker up, and we'd be up in the bucket cutting trees. So as time went on, my parents realized that I was not their typical little girl, and they did allow me to experiment with lots of different types of work [00:05:00] and ways of being. So I would say ultimately, I got to be raised unisex. I could do boy things. I could do girl things, and I happened to like the boy things better. So that's how that kind of went, which takes me to when I got ready to go to college. I guess I should back up a little bit. I was always kind of known as a tomboy. I used to fight a lot in the neighborhood with all the neighborhood boys, play a lot of sports with the neighborhood boys. Probably had more boyfriends than girlfriends to start. Later on developed a good circle of girlfriends. But the boys had baseball, and we didn't have much in the way of sports at that time. This was before women's sports became pretty popular. That wasn't happening in my childhood. [00:06:00] So I wanted to play baseball with the boys, and they wouldn't let me play, so my dad, he worked pretty much six days a week when I was growing up, but my dad got together with a couple other men in the community, and he said, my daughter wants to play softball, so they organized a softball league, and they developed -- I think we had between four and six teams at the time. And so there was a lot of girls in town

that wanted to play softball, so my dad helped organize that, and I got to play softball, not baseball, but softball. And of course, to make it acceptable during those times, it was called the Pony Tail League. Not exactly what we wanted it to be called, but that's what they called it. So that's a little bit about early childhood. High school, I was a pretty shy girl, studious, athletic. I played three sports in high school, basketball, softball, and volleyball. [00:07:00] Didn't really get the whole dating thing that was going on in my teen years. I mean, certainly there was a lot of my girlfriends talking about boys, wanting to date boys. I wasn't feeling that. Ever since I was twelve, I kind of knew I was attracted to girls. Didn't really know why, didn't know what that was called. Just knew that I preferred their company once I got to be pre-teen and teen, and kind of thought I was weird. I thought, well, maybe I'm a slow bloomer, and maybe I'll catch onto this boy thing that everybody's talking about. Not so. Did not happen for me. I grew up in Northeastern Pennsylvania, very rural town, farming, logging, and you were expected to date boys. You were expected to be lady-like. I had to wear dresses to school [00:08:00] or skirts. Pants were not allowed. I'd change into my pants or shorts as soon as I got home. Hated dresses. So by the time I was in seventh grade, they changed that rule in junior high, and we were able to wear pants, and I was so

delighted. And I have to say, Mary, very seldom from that time on have I ever worn a dress. Hate them. Feel very odd and uncomfortable in them, but if the situation arises that I have to wear one, I can, but that just was not my uniform of choice.

So through high school, I did date boys even though that was not where my heart was, and just didn't get it, what the girls were saying about these boys. I found them obnoxious and kind of jerky and you know, just didn't have much in common with them.

[00:09:00] I did kind of have a first experience with some girls at age twelve, which was somewhat sexual exploration, and that stuck in my mind as I started dating. I thought, wow, this is what I remember kind of playing around with these girls, and of course, they said, this was in preparation for dating boys, and I thought, well, I kind of like this with the girls. Didn't really dare speak about that. Heard a lot of negative language about homosexuals. That was the word at the time. Didn't know what that meant. Didn't know that that might apply to me. So I just kind of tried to do what everybody else did and was not, of course, very successful at it. Went off to college only after begging my father to allow me to because at the time in high school I was dating a boy that liked me very much, and my father liked him very much, and my dad was like, I don't understand [00:10:00] why you want to go to college. Mary, I had always

gotten really good grades in school. I had always been telling my parents that I would never marry. I would support myself, and if I had my way, I would have been born a boy because boys had more power. Boys had more opportunities, and I wanted to be a boy. Now, that does not mean I'm trans, and I know a lot of people now have that opportunity to be who they feel they are in their heart. I think if someone would have heard me speak like this, and I were living now, I might have been taken to counseling for some trans counseling. That is not what was going on with me. What was going on with me, I believe now, looking back, was [00:11:00] I liked the privileges that men had, and I didn't understand that as a nine, ten -- and this was young -- nine, ten, eleven years old. I didn't understand. I just knew that they got to do a lot of neat stuff and girls weren't supposed to. And they got to date the girls, which I wasn't supposed to. So that upset my mother very much to hear me speak like this. She did not want to hear that I wanted to be a boy, although she did allow me to cut my hair short and wear my hair short. She was a beautician by trade, so up until probably fifth grade, my mother would try all her new hairdos on myself and my sister, and I would go and wash my hair out because I didn't like bologna curls. I had long hair, and I would just ruin her hairdos. So finally she cut my hair short. So these were some of the things that were happening as I was growing up,

[00:12:00] so by the time I got ready to graduate, I said to my father, "I want to go to college, and if I can't go to college, then I want to be an oiler for your crane because you taught me all of this stuff about heavy equipment, machinery, and I want to go do bridge jobs with you and work with you," and he said, "Oh, no, no. We can't do that." I said, "why not?" "Because you're a girl." And I said, "Well, I don't understand. All my life, you've let me do everything that I've asked to do. You've taught me how to do all these boy-like things, and now you're saying, I can't do this, and I don't understand why." And he said, "Well, when we go out on these jobs, there's no bathrooms." I said, "Okay. Where do you go to the bathroom? He said, well, we go to a tree." I said, "Well, then I can go behind a tree, too." He said, "Oh, I'm not going to let any of my men [00:13:00] see my daughter's *hand gestures*." I said, "Oh." He said, "So you can't do it." He said, "I thought you'd outgrow this. I thought you would outgrow this sooner than this." I said, "Outgrow what?" "Being a tomboy. Being a tomboy. Why can't you just start to do some of the things like the other girls are doing, you know? And why don't you just marry Robby," who happened to be the boy I was dating in high school that my father liked, and I said, "I don't want to marry Robby. Yeah, he's a nice guy. He's a friend. I don't want to marry Robby." So I said, "Well, if you're not going to send me

-- let me be your oiler, then you need to send me to college because I need to be able to take care of myself, dad. I'm not marrying Robby." So after a few discussions with my parents, they did allow me to go to college, which they did help me pay for. [00:14:00] And it wasn't until I got to college that I knew there was a name for women like me. I went to East Stroudsburg University, got my undergraduate psychology degree there. I was in a dormitory named Lenape Hall, which later we called Lesbian Hall because a lot of the lesbians lived in Lenape. I was fortunate enough very early in my freshman year to meet other women like me. Quite a few of them lived on my floor or the floor above or a couple floors above me. And I did meet my first girlfriend my freshman year of college, and she was Mennonite, which is kind of unusual. And I did not go after her. She came after me, which also surprised me because she was raised Mennonite. [00:15:00] But as soon as she and I got together, then I realized what those girls were talking about in high school when they were dating boys because all the things they said that was wonderful and they felt when they were with their boyfriend, I felt with my girlfriend, Shirley. It was kind of like all of a sudden, something turned on, and I now felt like a sexual being as opposed to just a person in the world, and it was pretty wonderful. Also pretty frightening because we weren't out at that time yet. Some people were

starting to come out, but this is 1976, and up until 1973, this psychiatric diagnostic manual still said that being gay was a mental illness. You could still be hospitalized for that.

[00:16:00] So it was kind of scary to realize that now that what I am is a lesbian, and in society's terms at that time, a homosexual, which was a dirty word, and kind of felt shameful about that. That was the flip side of the feeling excited. I also felt shameful, like what'll I do with this? How do I reconcile this not just with myself but with my family? I was raised in a somewhat religious family. Did go to church ever since I was a little girl, was active in my church, in youth group, taught Sunday school, so I had to grapple with a lot of feelings once I realized who I was and that I now had this girlfriend that I very much loved. So I had [00:17:00] a little bit of a rough time trying to reconcile that, and I would say that process took time. I can remember going home to my mother, and I would be talking about Shirley and talking about other women that I was spending time with. I also happened to have a very close friend from high school that I later found out was gay, actually three friends from high school that I later found out were gay, and there was one I played a lot of tennis with, and I talked about her a lot, and my mother did not like this. I wasn't talking about boys. It's all girls. And my father heard me on the phone one night telling one of my friends that I

loved them, and he got angry after I got off the phone, and said, telling a girlfriend that I loved her was unacceptable, that you only loved your family and the man that you will marry. [00:18:00] So my dad was pretty upset that I had said I love you on the phone. My mother started giving me all kinds of negative messages through my freshman year about those weird gay people and things she would hear about on TV and what's wrong with them and a lot of negativity, a lot of not real hateful words, but I could tell my mom was not liking people like me. So finally after hearing it several times when I'd come home to visit, I was alone with my mother, and I said to her, "Enough of this. I can't listen to you talk about gay people like this. This is very hurtful to me." And she said, "I don't understand why," and I said, "Because I am one of them, mom. I am a lesbian." So then I came out to my mom. I was eighteen. [00:19:00] And she and I then sat and talked for about two hours. And she had lots of questions, and she also wondered, did I do something to make you gay? Are you gay because I wasn't married to your father? Because my mother got pregnant with me when she was at beauty school and never married my dad. And I said, no, mom, it's not something you did. It's just, I think, who I am and how I feel inside. I think I've always been like this. And I said, I remember feeling this way very early and all the way back to when I wanted to be a boy. That was like very young,

seven, eight, nine years old. And when I was twelve, I realized I liked girls. And she just couldn't quite wrap her head around it, but of course, she loved me and she said that [00:20:00] there was not any chance that she was going to not have me in the family or throw me out. She just didn't understand. It might take some time to understand. But she asked me not to tell my dad. "Please don't tell your dad." And of course, from my early situation with the phone call, I thought, no, I'm not going to tell dad. And of course, I had younger siblings, and my mother said to me, "Do not tell your siblings because we don't want you influencing them. They're young. They don't know who they are yet. They look up to you. We don't want you influencing them." My siblings were pretty upset later in life because I didn't really tell them until they were in their late twenties, almost thirty, and they were really angry, particularly my one brother. Why was this kept from us?

[00:21:00] And it doesn't matter. It did matter to my parents at the time. I did bring girlfriends home. My mother and father did allow me to bring girlfriends home, which was nice because I would have been devastated if I couldn't, and they always welcomed them as if they were family. That was not an issue until I got serious about someone, and that someone is Jane, and Jane is my wife now of almost -- well, it was six years legal yesterday on June 4, but we had been together it'll be

thirty-seven years this August. So when I first brought Jane home, that went well, [00:22:00] and they liked her. Jane's a little older than I am. She's eight years older. A lot of my other girlfriends were very near my same age, within a year or two, so it was a little different to have an older woman in the home with me. My father apparently knew about me now because he talked with me after I had brought Jane home and said, "What are you doing with this older woman?" And I said, "Well, I'm with her because I love her and I care about her." And at that time, we had just started living together, and he said to me, "Are you sure you're not being kept?" Yeah. Old school words, right? Are you sure you're not being kept? I said, "What do you mean by being kept, dad?" [00:23:00] "Well, she's an older woman. She's established. She has a career. She has a house, and you've moved in with her, and I just want to make sure you're not taking the easy way out." Which really was hurtful to me because I had a college education. I had a job. I had been working in my field. Wasn't a great paying job. And he thought I was looking to be cared for by someone else. Yes, I was looking for someone to be cared for and to be loved by, but not to be taken care of in the way he meant. I certainly -- He had paid for an education, right? I certainly would be using my education to support myself and contribute to the household, so that's what I told him. That made me pretty angry, and of

course, I had a conversation with my mother and said, "I thought dad didn't know," and of course, she said, "Your father and I share everything, and I told him [00:24:00] over the years," so he knew. Then we fast-forward to Thanksgiving holiday, and my parents have a big -- well, my parents had because we've taken that over now, but my parents used to have a big spread on Thanksgiving, and my grandparents would be there, and all the family would be there, and lots of good food. So I was going to bring Jane home for Thanksgiving dinner, and when I was speaking to my mom, trying to find out when they were holding it and when I could arrange for us to travel from the Lehigh Valley up to my home town in Pennsylvania, my mother said, "Oh, you're bringing Jane?" And I said, "Well, yes. I'm bringing Jane. Is that a problem?" And she said, "Well, can't she go to her family? Doesn't she have a family?" [00:25:00] And I said, "Well, of course she has a family, but I would like her to come and meet mine. And we always have a big gathering, and anybody's welcome, right?" And my mother persisted with the, "I really think it would be best if Jane would go and have Thanksgiving with her family. I don't want to deprive her family of having their daughter with them." And I said, "Mom, Jane's parents usually go south for the winter, and they're on their way to Florida and then on to Texas. They're not having a Thanksgiving dinner. I want her to come home with me." And my mother again

persisted with, "I don't think that's a good idea." Now this is early on when my siblings are still young. This is early on when everybody didn't know. [00:26:00] And all I could figure is my mom was trying to figure out, how do I explain this? So I said to my mom -- and this was very frightening for me to take this stand early on. I think I was twenty-six or twenty-seven, around that time, and I said to my mother, "If Jane does not come home with me to this holiday gathering, I will not be home for any other holiday gatherings going forward. If she is not welcome, we are not coming. I'll go someplace else for Thanksgiving and Christmas and every other holiday." You have to understand, my mom is all about family. I knew this would really get her. If I was going to have any chance of getting Jane home, this would be it, but I also knew if she wasn't on board, and if she wasn't accepting totally of me, as she has said she would, [00:27:00] I would be out of home to go home to for holidays. Luckily, my mother said, "Oh, well of course you can bring her." So Jane went home with me for Thanksgiving and met the family. Jane comes from a very, very small family, mom, dad, and older sister. Jane comes from a family that was educated. Her dad was a doctor in I believe it was chemistry, so he worked for Merck Sharp & Dohme and was a doctor, and her mother had a masters in library science, and my mother's a beautician and my father's a crane operator. And Jane was born

in Philadelphia and grew up in the suburbs outside of Philadelphia, and I grew up in rural Northeastern Pennsylvania in the sticks. [00:28:00] So bringing Jane home to my family was also kind of a risk because, like okay, we're a big, loud bunch, and Jane's used to some sophistication, but my family welcomed her. She had a good time, and she's been home with me ever since. So that's kind of how that part progressed. What else can I tell you? I don't know. I just kind of -- I feel like I'm rambling.

MF: You're not rambling. This is wonderful. I have some questions about what it was like to be out at East Stroudsburg University in that period prior to meeting Jane. I'm just curious about what college life was like for people that were out in East Stroudsburg.

MS: I would say I was out [00:29:00] to my crowd, out to the other lesbians. I didn't consider myself to be out, loud, and proud like some people were starting to do. I don't really feel that I was as much a part of that until maybe later, until I got closer to maybe my senior year of college. But I was lucky enough to meet a lot of lesbians very early on, and a lot of life at that time was parties off campus, older women that lived in a community that once went to college there. Alumni that were in town would host parties. Some upperclassmen who were lesbian who lived off campus would host parties, and so we would

go there. There was also a bar in East Stroudsburg [00:30:00] called the Blue Bugle. And so a lot of us would -- I had a fake ID at that time, so that we could get into the gay bar, and so we would go to the Blue Bugle. I went to college before Rainbow Mountain was there, so that was not an option. We would travel to Allentown, get a car load of us, and go to the Stonewall. That was one of the places that was available to us. And there was a bar in Easton at the time called the Musical because -- I don't know if that word means anything to you, musical? No?

MF: No.

MS: Being gay in the '70s, because a lot of people weren't out, you had to have ways to find each other, [00:31:00] recognize each other. Musical was a word that was used for gay people. Are you musical? Particularly used more for gay men, but if you were musical, then you might be invited to a party. And the bar in Easton was called the Musical, and so we knew it was a gay bar. You could go there. So these were the highlights of college life was to go to the Stonewall, to go to the Musical. We would travel into New York City. My parents had told me, don't go to New York City. You'll get killed, maimed, raped. Something bad will happen to you. I had a car on campus. I drove my friends to New York City. So we would go into the city and go to Greenwich Village. We'd go to the Duchess. It was during the disco era. I love disco. I'm a disco queen, so we'd

go in to dance. We'd drive uptown and go to Dapper and Friends. After hours, [00:32:00] we'd drive out to Long Island and go to the Swamp, which is another gay bar out on the island. So this was how we spent a lot of our social life. While my straight counterparts were going to frat parties, my gay friends and I were going out of town to the gay bars or to local kind of underground house parties. So that's kind of what it was like there. You looked for people that were wearing lambda necklaces because the lambda signal -- symbol -- was a symbol of being a lesbian, and we all joked about the lesbian uniform, flannel shirts and jeans and shit-kicker boots, short haircuts. You looked for women that looked like you. There wasn't very many feminine-looking lesbians at that time that I could see.

[00:33:00] The first gay bar I went to, I was eighteen, and actually it wasn't at college. It was in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I had an older friend -- and remember I was dating a Mennonite girl as well that was from Intercourse, Pennsylvania. So the first gay bar we went to, I was with Shirley. I was a freshman in college, but my high school girlfriend who was gay lived in Lancaster, and she invited the two of us to come down and visit her and her girlfriend for the weekend, so that we would have a place to be ourselves. That was a big thing then. Go someplace where you could be yourself. So we drove to Lancaster and stayed with Pam and Lori, and they

took us to the Sundown, the name of the bar, in Lancaster. And this was an eye-opener. I had never been to a gay bar before -- neither had Shirley -- [00:34:00] and we walked in, and it was smokey and dark, and there was a lot of pumping disco music playing. Of course, Shirley didn't dance, being Mennonite, and we were met at the door by a big dykey woman, and she wanted to know, "What are you?" "What do you mean, what are we? We're gay." "No. No, no, no. What are you? I know you're gay. You wouldn't be here if you weren't gay. What are you? You butch or you femme? Are you butch or are you femme?" 1976, right? So we're neither. "Well, you've got to be one or the other," is what this big old dyke said. "You've got to figure that out. You've got to be one or the other. [00:35:00] You two look like dykes to me. You look like you're butch. Kind of soft butch, but butches over there, femmes over there." And we said, "On the opposite sides of the room?" I mean, that sounded like high school dances with heterosexual people. She said, "That's just the way it is here." And I spoke up and said, "Well, we're not butch or femme, and we're together." And she said, "No, no, no, butches can't be together. Butches are with femmes," and she kind of directed us to the butch side of the room. And the two friends we were with, they were more traditional that way. My friend Pam was very butch. Her girlfriend Lori was very feminine. She had long, dark hair and

wore more feminine clothing, and my friend Pam looked like a young man. [00:36:00] And they just kind of shrugged their shoulders and took us with them, you know? And we kind of just looked around wide-eyed and got a drink, and I did manage to get my girlfriend to dance with me because, you know, nobody's going to know. "No one from your church is here, right, to know that you're dancing with me." Which is another phrase they used at that time. Do you go to our church? Are you musical? Do you go to our church? Are you a friend of Dorothy? These are all phrases that you would hear when people were trying to find out, are you gay? Are you lesbian? In college, I had one woman come up to me in the laundry room, and she said, "Are you in the life?" And I said, "What is in the life, you know?" She said, "You know, in the life. You look like one of those people." So apparently, [00:37:00] this was also another phrase that I learned was "in the life." This was a woman from, I think, New York City at the time, a black woman. I had never heard that before, and that was what she asked me. So very interesting. There were pinky rings you'd look for. Is that person wearing a pinky ring? There were handkerchiefs in the pockets, mostly the gay men wore those to indicate what kind of sexual things they were into. So you had to kind of be careful who you talked to. You tried to find out who's who, so you didn't get hurt. There was a lot of concern about getting hurt at that time, which, you

know, I was chased. I'd been chased at East Stroudsburg by people who apparently surmised that I was gay, and [00:38:00] I remember having to run a few times to get away from someone who was, I think, going to hurt me if they caught me. My car was vandalized when I was in college by some frat boys. They ripped the mirror off my car, and I remember going home very angry because I had to tell my parents that my car had to be repaired and why. And at the time, when I was a freshman in college, I looked more like a younger boy. I was very androgynous, more boyish looking. And I really wanted to get back at these people, these guys, that had vandalized my car, and my mother talked me out of it. And that was not the only time that my car was vandalized. [00:39:00] I used to go to a bar called Rosemary's in Allentown, Bethlehem area. It was on the border of Allentown and Bethlehem line, kind of on a triangle. And I was there one night and went out to leave, and not just one but two of my tires were flattened. Somebody had stuck a knife through them. Not only were my tires flattened, but a friend of mine who was parked near me, her tires were flattened, too. I didn't realize both of them were until I had changed one. I got the tire out of my car and put one tire on only to release the jack and realize, there's another tire flat, and I only have one tire. So the two of us went back into the bar, talked to the bartender that we knew, and AJ had to take us home because we

couldn't drive our cars. The next day, a friend of mine that I worked with drove me back to get my car, [00:40:00] and there was a tire place up the street called Joe's Battery and Tire. And she said, "Let's go there. We'll get the guys to get a couple tires and go down and get your car and get it fixed." So I went in there and said that I needed two tires and that my car's tires had been slashed the night before, and would they be able to sell them to me? And the guy started laughing, and he said, "Oh. Where was your car parked that you got your tires slashed?" And I didn't want to say because again, at that time, you tried to be low key. This would have been 1980 - 1981, I think. So I didn't want to say where my car was, and right away, he piped up and said, "Was it down there in that parking lot across from that gay bar?" He knew where my car was, which made me wonder [00:41:00] if they knew something about or had something to do with our tires being slashed, being a tire store that sells tires, right? Again, I was pretty angry that somebody had done this to myself and my friend, and I'm not proud of this, Mary, but what I did the next time I went to the gay bar was I took a tire iron, and I laid in wait by my car for hours with a tire iron while my friends were in the gay bar to see if anybody was going to come around the parking lot to bother our cars. Because if they were that night, I was prepared to fight. Now I'm not generally a fighter, but I was

very angry. And luckily after a couple hours, one of my friends came out and said that, you know, this is not a good idea. You really shouldn't be out there. Why don't you come in and join us for the party? Which I did, [00:42:00] but that's how angry I was. I was at that bar another night when we had a bomb threat, and they had to evacuate the whole bar because someone had threatened to bomb the gay place. I'm a little bit too young for raids, but I had heard about them from older lesbians and older gay men, so this bomb threat was really scary, as was knowing somebody's out there cutting tires. So there was a number of things that were happening at that time that were kind of scary for gay people. I know people who had been beaten up. I know people who have been stabbed. I know people who have been killed because they were gay. I think a lot of young people today don't realize that that was not that long ago. [00:43:00] I'm sixty-one, and I'll soon be sixty-two, but it was not that long ago when you couldn't just be out and proud without some pretty major consequences. So at East Stroudsburg, you had asked me about what it was like there. A lot of that was kind of like on the QT. As we got closer to -- you know, my group got closer to being seniors, there was movements afoot for women's rights. There was movements afoot for gay rights. So I did participate in some marches and demonstrations. At East Stroudsburg, there was a women's center. There was a women's

annual convention -- I can't remember what it was called -- where they brought in speakers to speak to women about women issues and GLBT was included in that as well. [00:44:00] So I did participate in that. I did participate in a sport when I was in college, in intramurals. I did participate in student government. I ran a coffee house when I was in the college and brought in musical acts and singers, so that we had entertainment. And that was a big part as well of trying to find out our culture was women's music. Cris Williamson, Tret Fure, Ferron, Holly Near, there was all these women singers that made us feel good about who we were, so we try to pass that music around, that information around. There were books that you wanted to read. Rita Mae Brown was big, and everybody wanted to read *Rubyfruit Jungle* and *Southern Comfort*. [00:45:00] You know, later on, there was some really bad lesbian films. Tigress Productions put out some lesbian films. Some of them weren't so good, but anything that we could identify with, we wanted to access it. We wanted to share it. So we'd get together, and we'd watch these things together, or we'd pass these books around. There was gay newspapers, Village Voice out of Greenwich Village. There was a Philadelphia paper. You know we would eat all that stuff up just to be able to hear about other people like us. Coming to poets, Adrienne Rich, May Sarton, any literature material that we could get our hands on.

So that was kind of what it was like in my early college years [00:46:00] being lesbian.

MF: I'm interested in that period leading up to when you meet Jane. What happened after college? How did you transition into your career?

MS: Well, after college, I came back to Bradford County, Northeastern Pennsylvania, because this is where I lived, and so I moved back in with my parents for a brief period of time and started looking for work, and I got a job at a program called Step By Step Incorporated. It was designed out of Wilkes-Barre to help people who were coming out of the mental institutions, state hospitals. I don't know if you remember this or if you're a little bit too young. A lot of people were institutionalized for long, long [00:47:00] periods of time if they had mental illness, particularly a lot of women who men wanted to get rid of. If their husbands wanted to get rid of their wife, they could easily sign them in to a mental hospital, after a period of time divorce them, and move on to marry another woman. So there was women, and there were men, too, that were hospitalized for twenty-five, thirty years in mental institutions, and they were able to live in the world. I mean, they were not that mentally ill, right? So there was a movement at that time to bring people out of the state hospitals and to help them get reacclimated to living in the world. So Step By Step was a

residential program that was designed to take people out of the state hospitals into a full-care facility that's twenty-four hours staffed, teach them skills [00:48:00] that they would need to live on their own, and then moved them to a sixteen-hour residential apartment. And then from that sixteen-hour staffed apartment, if they did well, moved them into their own apartment with only appointment-only staff to check on them. So my first job was with Step By Step as a mental health worker, and I worked in the full-care facility, stayed overnight, worked with the mentally ill that came out of state hospitals. I was at home probably three months doing this job and living with my parents and feeling pretty isolated because I'd just come from this very rich college environment, where I had a lot of gay friends and a lot of opportunities and a lot of activism and a lot of things going on, back to my hometown that was very rural, and I didn't know any gay people except a couple of friends from high school. [00:49:00] So I worked for three months with this program, and my director said, "We're opening some new programs down in the Allentown area, and we'd like to promote you to a supervisory role, and we'd like to know if you'd be willing to move to that area and help set this program up." So I talked to my parents. I'd only been home three months, and my mother said to me, "I think you should go." And I said, "Really? You feel like confident in me? I just started working, you know?" And she

said, "Well, more for the reason that because you're a lesbian, I think you should go." I said, "What?" She said, "If you stay here, I'm afraid you'll get hurt. If you stay here, I don't think you'll be happy. If you stay here, you might bring [00:50:00] attention to our family and the younger siblings. I think you should go. And be -- you liked it there. There are people like you there. I think you'd have a better life there." So that's not exactly what I wanted to hear from my mom, you know. I would have liked a little bit more pride in the "I'd like you to go there because you're getting this new job," which I think she was excited about, but there was more of a push for "You should go there for these reasons." So I did. I took the job and went to the Allentown area. Lived on Sixth Street -- I mean, I'm sorry, didn't live on Sixth Street -- The house that I supervised for Step By Step was on Sixth Street between, what was it, Gordon and Chew? Not a good neighborhood really, right? So when I went to training in Wilkes-Barre, because that's where the main headquarters were for Step By Step, [00:51:01] they told me I had a few weeks. This was before Christmas, 1981. And it was a few weeks before Christmas, and they said, "We'd like you down there" -- I think it was like the seventeenth of December -- "so we could get started." Two weeks of training, and I'm supposed to be there if I want this job. I didn't have a place to live. So I had met a woman during the training who

lived in Allentown who was going to be one of my coworkers, and Maggie said to me, "Why don't you come live at my place, and you live with me until you find a place to live?" So that's what I did. She was a little bit older than I was, and I moved in with her and left home and took a job in Allentown. Maggie helped me find a suitable apartment. I started looking at places in really bad neighborhoods, and she said, oh no, you're not from here. [00:52:00] She said, you can't live there. So she went with me on her lunch hour several times until we found a place that she thought would be safe for me to live. So that's how I moved from where I lived in Towanda to the Allentown-Bethlehem area, and did not meet Jane until I lost that job. I did have a couple girlfriends ahead of Jane, a couple significant relationships before I was with Jane, but none of them were longer than a year. There was a woman that, when I worked at Step By Step, that I fell in love with, and she was straight, and I thought, well, this is not going to work. [00:53:00] But she over time developed feelings for me, and she actually approached me, so I thought, oh. So she and I ended up being together for a while. Being that she was newly then out because she had been with a man before she was with me, and she was attending Moravian College and was in her senior year and worked at my site. She was -- I was twenty-one, and I think she was nineteen or twenty, so she left her boyfriend and was with me.

When she got ready to graduate from college, she broke up with me, which was devastating to me because I really loved this girl, and the reason that she broke up with me, she said, was "I don't know if I'm really gay. [00:54:00] I really love you, and I really wish I could stay with you and be with you, but I want children, and I can't have children with you." 1981, "I can't have children with you." There wasn't any movement yet for lesbians to adopt children or to inseminate, or -- If you had children, it's because you got pregnant by some boy in high school or college, and you later found out you were gay, or you later came out and knew you were gay before but later came out, or you had a good friend, good male friend, that would impregnate you, so that you could have children, but you didn't have children because you got inseminated or you adopted them. And so I didn't know how to answer this question for my girlfriend at that time. I begged her to please stay, that maybe in time things would change, and she said, [00:55:00] "I'm not strong enough. I'm not as strong as you." And she went back to her boyfriend, and she did say to me at that time, "I want you to stay in my life. I would like you to know my children." And I thought, well, this is something, right? So I said, "Sure, that would be fine." So at some later date, and only a few months, I called her to try and stay in touch, and she answered the phone, and she was very angry with me. "Don't call here.

Don't call here again. What are you doing calling me here?"

And I said, "Well, I'm calling you because you wanted to stay in touch. You wanted to stay friends." And I knew she had married her boyfriend, and she said, "What if he had answered the phone? Don't ever call here again." [00:56:00] So that was very hurtful. After her, I met another woman. Her name was Lori, and Lori was lesbian through and through, had been ever since she was a young girl, so I thought good, not a straight woman that thinks she's gay. It's someone who's lesbian and knows she's lesbian, so I was with her for about a year, and she cheated on me with the girl that lived downstairs. We were in the apartment upstairs. She was downstairs. I was working a lot of hours, supervisor of the Step By Step program, a lot of responsibilities for a young person, and she was a party girl, and she just couldn't be alone for very much. [00:57:00] So that ended. That didn't end very well. She was also, I found out later, using some drugs because I came home and found drugs in the house and people partying, and that didn't set well with me. And at the time that that was going on, that she was doing drugs and partying -- this was just before we broke up -- I had decided -- been working for Step By Step for a while, didn't pay a lot of money. My second degree, my minor degree, was in criminal justice, so I had applied for Allentown City Police, and I was being investigated. People were checking me out, and

I was sitting for the exam, and here's my girlfriend doing drugs in my house. So I had a talk with her about that, and said, "I can't believe you're doing this. You know, I'm trying to become a cop. You're going to jeopardize this opportunity for me."

[00:58:00] We got into an argument, and it's the very first time that anyone ever beat me up. So this girlfriend, I believe at the time and I didn't understand, but -- I mean, I knew she was doing drugs, but I believe she was under the influence of drugs, and she beat me up because I asked her to stop these activities while I was trying to become an officer. So that was pretty devastating. That was the end of that relationship. I was not going to be with somebody that would harm me. She is the one person that I was with that we tried to get an apartment before the apartment we were in, that we were discriminated against by a landlord, and they would not rent to us, so she was the one girlfriend that I had that we were denied housing because we were lesbian. [00:59:00] The landlord said, we would fight, one of us would break up with the other, and somebody wouldn't be able to pay rent, so he wouldn't rent to us. But the person that rented to us in the apartment where she beat me happened to be the landlord of the girl she was cheating with on me. So that relationship ended. I called friends in New Jersey, asked them to come and pick me up because I was afraid to stay in that house. So that relationship ended, and it was after that

relationship that I met Jane. So I had taken a break from working at Step by Step. That job, [01:00:00] there were some things that happened there that didn't go too well, so stopped working there. There was a situation at Step By Step where I had interviewed someone for a job under me who was a black woman. I had also interviewed a white man, long-haired fellow, and I hired him instead of her, and so there was now a lawsuit that was going to be brought against the company because the black woman, who also was a lesbian, claimed that I had discriminated against her because she was gay and black and that she was going to sue us. I was the one that interviewed her. I had not discriminated against her. I chose the white hippie guy because he was better qualified for the job. This blew up into a really big thing. The company I worked for wanted me to come out as a gay woman because clearly I didn't discriminate against her for that because I'm also a lesbian. I got a lot of pressure from the company's lawyer to come out publicly. This was going to be in court -- It would be in open court. Would I do this, so that the company would be able to survive being sued, and I said, I didn't discriminate against her on either count, but I'm not willing to come out publicly for this company. So I kind of lost my job, so I no longer worked there, so I was working at a dental office -- I think Jane might have gotten this a little backwards -- and there was a woman that

came in for services, and her name was Gay, which was very apropos, [01:02:00] and since Lori and I had just broken up, and Lori had moved out and left me with an apartment that I could not afford on my own and left me with a bunch of bills that I also couldn't afford at the time, I needed to downsize and move someplace else. So I was talking to this patient that came in, and at the time, I was not working in my field. I'd left Step By Step. I was working as a receptionist at this dental office. So this woman, Gay, said to me, oh, I know this woman. She's looking for somebody to rent a room in her house, and you guys would probably get along great. She had met her at an organization called Women's Inc. which was a women's organization in downtown Allentown that was kind of an activist organization. Jane was a member there. Dixie White was a member there. There was a number of women that were movers and shakers in town that [01:03:00] belonged to Women's Inc. So Gay gave me Jane's number, and so I called Jane and arranged to have an appointment to see her house because she was going to rent a room in her house, and that seemed to be what I could afford at the time. So I went to meet her and didn't really know anything about her other than she said, "I drive a big truck, van thing." I said, "Okay." And she said, "I'm a mechanic. I work at PPL, so when you see me, I'll be in my uniform, and oh, I have longer hair." I said, "Okay." So I got to her house first. Jane's

always late. So I got to her house first, and this woman pulls up in this big van, hops out, and she's this little, short, five-foot-two, pretty little lady with curly hair down to her shoulders, and she's wearing a blue mechanic's uniform [01:04:00] that says Jane. And I thought, wow. How cute is she, you know? So she invites me in, shows me around the house, shows me the room that would be mine if I choose to rent from her, asked me if I'd like a drink. Sure, I'd like a drink. I was very nervous. So I had a drink. I drank that pretty fast, and she said, do you want another? And I -- "Sure." Ah. And she said, "Oh, do you drink a lot? And I said, "Well, no, not really." She said, "Well, that's two drinks pretty quick there," and I said, "Well, I'm a little nervous," and I lit up a cigarette. And Jane said, "Oh, you smoke? No one smoked in my house for a number of years." Now I want to put it out cause I'm like -- but she didn't have an ash tray or anything, so I'm blowing this big time. I'm just really not going to be renting this house at all. And so she got talking to me a little bit, and she said, "Why do you need to move?" [01:05:00] I said, "Well, my girlfriend broke up with me, and I can't afford the rent." And I kind of wondered if Jane was gay. She was very feminine-looking, but she was a mechanic, and she said, "Oh. My girlfriend left me, too, a while back, and that's why I need to rent the house, someone to share expenses," because she had a

couple loans that she had taken out with her girlfriend, and when her girlfriend left her, she couldn't afford these loans. So I was like, ah. And then Jane kind of interviewed me pretty hard because she owned the house, and she thought I was a party girl, and she's like, "You know, if you're going to live here, you can't be partying, carrying on, because I own the house." And I said, "I'm not really a party girl." And she said, and, "You know, you're gay, and I'm gay, and it would be strictly business. There would be no, you know, chance of anything here." [01:06:00] So I don't know if I was giving off some, I think you're cute, but she quickly set me straight about that. So she said, "What do you think? You want to rent the room?" I said, "No, I don't want to rent the room." She said, "Why?" I said, "Because I'd like to take you out. Would you go out with me? I can't date you if you're my landlord, right?" She said, "No, you can't date me if I'm--" "-- so I don't want the room. I'd rather go out with you." So she said, yes, she would go out on a date with me, and our first date was to the Bronx Zoo in New York City. I drove, which if you were to know us today, Jane does all the driving. I don't. I mean, I drive sometimes, but she likes to be the in control and she drives. But our first date, I drove to the city, and she showed up with a picnic lunch, roasted chicken, some good salads, some wonderful foods. I had a bottle of wine and a loaf of bread and some cheese.

[01:07:00] You know, not much contribution to the meal. But we ended up eating our picnic lunch in traffic because one of the Yankee games was playing at the time we were traveling through and got stuck in traffic from the ball game, so we ate our lunch in the car. By the time we got to the Bronx Zoo, it was open for half an hour before it closed, and that was our first date. And we dated for maybe three to five months before she asked me to move in with her. I lived in a really crappy area of Allentown down on Fifth Street. Somebody had shot through my neighbor's front window while I was living there. So after -- you know and Jane would stay at my house sometimes, and we'd stay at her house sometimes, but after a couple of these events in downtown Allentown, she said, "I don't think it's safe where you live. [01:08:00] I'd really like you to move in with me." So I did, and we have been together ever since. So that's kind of how I met Jane. What else can I tell you, Mary?

MF: Okay, so you met Jane, you moved in with Jane. What's happening with your career? You mentioned you were looking into being an Allentown police officer. You just moved from Step By Step, so what's happening with your career at this point in your life after you met Jane?

MS: The Allentown police thing, I did pass the test, the physical agility test. I did pass the exam. I was placed on the list for academy. You're on that list for two years, and

they pull people off that list when there are positions that come available. So during that time, [01:09:00] they were getting ready to hire four to six new officers, so I thought, surely I would be one of them, and I had scored pretty high on the tests, and all of a sudden, it comes out in the newspaper, pictures of the new officers that had been hired, and I wasn't called. So I was pretty upset about this, and I called up and asked. "Hey, I scored really high. I didn't even get an interview. What happened here? I was on the academy list." And they said, "Oh, we had to select from a minority list this time because there was affirmative action, and we had to be picking officers that were minorities," and I said, "Aren't I a minority?" And they said, "No. Why would you be a minority?" I said, "Well, I'm a woman," and they said, "Women are no longer [01:10:00] considered a minority in police work, and you're a white woman." So they had hired women and men of color. I had seen the pictures in the paper. It didn't even occur to me that that's what that was. I mean, I just didn't see that it was people of color. So I was told that I'd have to wait another two years to reapply, at which point I decided to go back to school to further my degree in psychology, mainly at Jane's urging because she said, "You know, you're really smart. Why don't you go back to the school?" And the time that I was with Jane, I was working as a security guard up at Bethlehem Steel at the

research center, so that was my job at that time. So I did. I went back to school at Kutztown University, and Jane said, [01:11:00] don't worry about the extra income, not a problem. So she was pretty good about that while I had this crap job and went to college. And I had gotten a job after the security job back in my field down in Pottsville and worked at a clinic that was called Turning Point on Center Street in Pottsville. And so I did group therapy there, individual family therapy there. I guess I didn't go back to college until I got the next job, which was I got a job at the Allentown hospital in the adolescent psychiatric unit when they first opened that up, so correcting my memory here. I did not go back to college until I was in the hospital position, [01:12:00] and once I was in the hospital position, they offered two-thirds tuition if you were to get a degree in the field that would help you with your current job. So since I was in psychiatry, I was going to get a mental health degree. As long as I did A or B, they were willing to give me two-thirds of my tuition back, so that's how I got my next degree was through while working at the hospital, and luckily they rearranged my schedule from days or thirds or seconds, so that I could go to college whatever course was offered. I also did my internship there under the direction of the psychologist at that time and then later went on to become a psychologist, again, at Jane's urging. "Why don't you do that?"

Because I could still be licensed at the masters level at that time up until 1986, if you were in a program, [01:13:00] so I went on and did that as well, did my final internship up at Northeast Counseling in Hazleton and traveled one hundred and ten miles a day, commuted back and forth to that job for three years while I did my licensing internship, all the while being supported by Jane, so I could get that next degree and start my career as a psychologist. So that's kind of how my career progressed. And you know I lived in her house, I lived in her house in Catasauqua after moving in from that crap place in Allentown. I felt a little uneasy after a few years that Jane owned the house, and I really didn't have any part in that, and I was feeling a little insecure about that, [01:14:00] and Jane had been through that very bad breakup with her girlfriend prior to me and before that a breakup with a girlfriend who almost took her house from her, so she didn't really want to put me on the deed, and at that time, we couldn't be married and own property together, so it had to be a more business arrangement. So it took until our fifteenth year together, and on our fifteenth anniversary, Jane gave me a card, and the deed, my name was now on the deed to the house. So it took a little while for Jane to feel comfortable that I was going to stay, and she could share her property with me. I told her I understood, you know. I felt a little insecure about it, but I understood

that she had been hurt before, and I wasn't going anywhere, so fifteen years later, she put me on the deed. [01:15:00] Now, let's see, what is it, 2020 now? 2005, we built a house together up in my home area, so, and then we truly had our place. It became our place.

MF: So while you and Jane are living together and your career is progressing, you're going to, you know, get advanced degrees, how are you engaging with the LGBT community in the Lehigh Valley? What kinds of organizations were you involved in or social groups were you involved in during that, during that time period?

MS: The bar scene was a pretty big deal back in the '70s, '80s, [01:16:00] even into the '90s. So Jane was not really a bar person. Jane was more of a stay-at-home, low-key person. I kind of grew up as a baby gay East Stroudsburg and lots of activities and going to the city, and I liked night life, so I liked to go to the gay bars, and so I would drag Jane out with me to the gay bars, and she was not a dancer either, but I was a dancing fool, and I taught her to dance and made her dance with me. So we'd go to Rosemary's. We'd go to the Stonewall. We'd go down to the Silhouette in Easton. We'd, you know, go to different places, down to Philadelphia. Giovanni's Room was a big thing at the time, go down to the bookstore, get some books, see who was in the gay-borhood down in Philly. Go to Judy's

Café. [01:17:00] Try to go places like that, and that's where you would hear about what's happening out in our world, what's happening that we need to march for, what's happening that we need to be involved with. I'm a super voter. Been a super voter since I could vote, so there was a PA-GALA. We put out a voter's guide every year. Steve Black was really instrumental in getting that started, and then Liz and Trish kind of took that over later on, Liz Bradbury and Trish Sullivan. I believe they met up with Steve Black at some point and then took that over. So we would try to educate ourselves. I met Liz and Trish first time at their house down on Turner Street when they had Charlie Dent and some other officials over to their house for a meet and greet, so we would go to things like that.

[01:18:00] Jane had gotten involved with AIDS Outreach during the AIDS epidemic. That started in 1983. I had moved to the Lehigh Valley in 1980, so pretty quickly after moving there, that became a big deal. That was very scary. I can remember being pretty frightened about, oh my gosh, you know, are we going to get AIDS? And trying to be educated about who gets AIDS, how do you get AIDS, how do you be gay and sexual and not get AIDS? Because there was a lot of myths at that time about how you got this disease. And there was a lot of hatred at that time about gay people, particularly males, and AIDS. So here was this big backlash coming at us again about being gay.

[01:19:00] So I can remember that we started to hear about different people who were getting sick, and it was a pretty scary time. Jane wanted to do something about that, so she got involved with a group called AIDS Outreach that was down on Sixth Street, I believe it was, in Allentown, and she became a buddy for the buddy system, and they would partner a person with someone who had HIV or AIDS to help them with things, help them with doctor's appointments, picking up groceries, cooking, cleaning their place, just company sometimes. And after she was involved with that for a while, they were in great need of people to help [01:20:00] counsel folks who were being newly diagnosed, families who had members of their families who are HIV positive or dying from AIDS, and I had just gotten my license to practice psychology, so Jane said, "Why don't you approach them and see if you can like help in some way? Maybe they can help you get a start, and you can help them." So I did. I went and talked to Linda Lobach at AIDS Outreach, and they were very happy to bring me onboard. They did have a psychologist there. Let me see, what was his name? Gerry Machado. He was a psychologist that they had hired, and I spoke with Gerry, and he said, "Yeah, that'd be great. We'd love to have you onboard." They gave me an office to practice out of in the upstairs of [01:21:00] AIDS Outreach, and they said, "As long as you can see the people we refer to you, you may use this

office and see other people and build your practice." So it was a wonderful opportunity. So I started seeing people who the hospital - the Lehigh Valley Hospital AIDS Net would refer people to AIDS Outreach, and they would refer people to me, and I started seeing people who were newly diagnosed, meeting with them, meeting with their families. I ran a support group with other people from the hospital, and we ran an HIV/AIDS support group for many, many years. I think we stopped that -- see I started doing that '95 and stopped doing that somewhere around [01:22:00] 2010, I think, something like that. In the beginning, we started counseling people how to die right, how to die right, how to get ready for death because people were not surviving this illness, and how to get things in order, how to reconnect with family that maybe had kicked them out, ostracized them. And as the protease inhibitors started to be made available and people were starting to be able to live with HIV -- because at first they just had AZT, and AZT caused all kinds of problems for people. Once the protease inhibitors came onboard, we had to start counseling people how to live with HIV, and there weren't so many people dying of AIDS anymore. People would die of natural causes, so it transitioned during my work there. [01:23:00] And I also helped AIDS Outreach run buddy program training, so I was part of the team to help caretakers take care of themselves, so that they would know how to cope

with dealing with people that were this ill and also have the facts right, so that they knew that they weren't going to get HIV if they just help clean somebody's apartment or if they hugged them or if they cooked with them. So we did some training. So that was something that Jane and I did that was kind of an activist role. She was out being a buddy, and I was doing buddy training and counseling. Other things that we did, we went to Washington. We marched on Washington for GLBT rights, and I can remember going there with Jane and being very excited, I think FACT or Pride or Lehigh Valley organized that, and we all went down together, [01:24:00] and all of a sudden there's movie cameras and people being filmed, and I thought, oh my god, what if my mother or my siblings who are still young see me on TV? I didn't tell them I was going to be here. Oh no. So I was a little frightened that there were TV cameras, and Jane said to me, "Don't worry. They're not going to film us. We're too normal looking. They're going to get the dykes on bikes. They're going to get the trans people. They're not going to get us." So yeah, when it was on TV, of course, anybody that looked a little different was on the TV. The people that looked like us that weren't so different, they didn't have us on film. So it was fine, but yes, that was exciting. We marched in that. We went to Sister Fire outside of Washington D.C., went there a couple times to see all those

women sing wonderful, empowering women's music, meet other lesbians, all shapes and sizes and ages, [01:25:00] vendors, buy stuff that represents you, right? So we did that. I'm trying to think if there's other things. You know in college, I did Take Back the Night against rape and things like that. We went to the annual women's workshops at E-Berg for a couple years after I left college, and we went back to support the women's center there. Those kind of things. You know, we would support local bars, gay bingo, drag shows. There was a lot of drag shows that went on down at Rosemary's. Things that were a part of our culture at the time and a part that helped us celebrate who we were safely in our own communities. Yeah. [01:26:00] Those were the kind of things we were doing.

MF: I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit more about what it was like to live through those early years of the AIDS epidemic and to work so closely with people who had been diagnosed with HIV. Just for you personally, what was it like to live through that time?

MS: Well, it was sad, very sad, somewhat scary. It created some anger for me that at the time, we couldn't get President Reagan to pay attention to fund research to develop medications. It was difficult to find housing for people who were positive, [01:27:00] let alone somebody who's dying from AIDS. There was the Rainbow House down in Wernersville. Thankfully that's

someplace that people who were so ill that they couldn't live on their own, they could go there, and they could be there and be cared for. So we helped facilitate a lot of different needs for people at that time, anything from making sure they were fed. There was Los Manos De Dios, which was next door to AIDS Outreach. The Hands of God was a Hispanic church that partnered with AIDS Outreach to make food every week, and people would volunteer and come and package it up, and AIDS Outreach had a list of people that needed food because they were too ill to cook for themselves, and the buddies would take the food from Los Manos De Dios to these people with HIV and AIDS, so that they could eat. There was a lot of taboo. [01:28:00] People didn't want to touch them. People didn't want to have them around or in their presence. Family members turned away sometimes to people who were infected. It was kind of a sad time, and at first, people were dying, so you might know somebody or work with somebody, and they would pass away, and you'd have to go through the loss of someone that you had worked with and try to help. I know Jane experienced that several times with some of the people that she buddied with. One of her buddies went blind from HIV. Another one developed some dementia. I had to hospitalize him because he was hallucinating and not safe for himself, [01:29:00] and that was hard to have to put him in a hospital. And unfortunately, he was placed in

the psychiatric hospital, and then we had to advocate for him because that's not really where he belonged. This was part of his illness was affecting his brain. He wasn't psychiatrically ill, we just -- there just weren't places for people to go. And so sometimes they were placed in inappropriate settings. I mean, this man had to sit in groups and was on a behavioral program and was chastised for not being able to sit in a group for an hour. He was sick. He couldn't sit in a chair. He was almost bones. It hurt him to sit in a chair. So we had to try to advocate to get him out of those groups and let him lay in bed. Just feed him and keep him safe. So those were hard things to watch and try to navigate. [01:30:00] Watching -- no -- Going and seeing the quilts, and some of these quilts were people we knew. (long pause) That was hard. And to wonder who's going to be next and to realize that some of the male friends that we socialized with were diagnosed with HIV, and some of those men died, and having spent time with them, you know? It was a tough time. So we did the Washington march. We went down and saw the quilt, which was pretty awesome to watch them [01:31:00] lay it out across this large area down by the Capitol and walk through it. It's just many, many, many people who died. And then when they brought it to Muhlenberg, and they couldn't bring the whole quilt, you know but parts of it, we attended functions to support bringing the quilt to the Lehigh

Valley. We, um -- What else did we do? I don't know. I can tell you that the last groups that I ran with people who were HIV positive, my oldest client had been living with HIV for twenty-five years, so it was very heavy [01:32:00] to have members of my group who had longevity, who had survived it, who were still doing well and were going to die of old age. So that was kind of the upside as time went on, but the early years were very hard. It was very scary.

MF: Were there other organizations in the Lehigh Valley, maybe like the Gay and Lesbian Task Force or other organizations, that you felt were really valuable during this period?

MS: I was a board member of the Gay and Lesbian Task Force. That did not exist until we organized it. That was kind of in response to the Clinton's Don't Ask Don't Tell, and so there was a number of people, the ones that really got things started [01:33:00] were professors at Northampton Community College, and so Manny Gonzalez and Chris Boes were talking to me. I think we were at Rosemary's one night, and I think this might have been after some kind of demonstration or protest or something that had happened, and they said, "You know, we should really develop a task force. We should do something to try to further GLBT rights." And so a number of us were sitting there talking and drinking at the bar -- most things happen at the bar -- and decided to develop this task force, and they asked me if I'd be

a board member, so I said, sure. So this would have been 1994 into '95, and -- so I was part of that group for the early [01:34:00] of the task force, and we brought speakers in to speak. There was a woman. I can't remember her name -- I've been trying to remember her name for a while now -- that they brought in to speak about the Don't Ask Don't Tell because she was a ranking officer in the military. And one of our board members was ex-Navy and also had had some experiences with discrimination because of being a lesbian in the service. So we brought her in to speak and was one of the events in the Lehigh Valley that people could attend. Pretty shortly after I had become a board member, unfortunately, I suffered a stroke, so I had to step -- resign and step away from the organization as a board member [01:35:00] at that time. I still stayed active later as attending events that they put on, but at that time, I needed to recover and take care of myself. But one of the things we did at the task force was to help disseminate these voter guides when I was there. It was to make sure that all the bars and all the places that gay people frequented, they could get access to these voter guides, so that they knew what representatives in the valley would represent us and work to get our rights. And many of the members of the task force talked to people, talked to representatives, tried to get them to understand what we needed and why we needed it. Marriage

equality was -- that was kind of like an idea, but I never thought that would happen in my lifetime, but that was something [01:36:00] we hoped that maybe this newly formed task force someday would maybe get there, but we just wanted things like anti-discrimination. We just wanted fair housing, not to be able to worry that you'd lose your job. These were all things that could happen to you as a gay person at that time. You could be fired. You could be denied housing. Your children could be taken from you. We have a friend that lost her son in a custody battle because she was lesbian. We knew a couple women like that that lost their children. So it was very important. The task force had lots of different areas they wanted to look at from AIDS to anti-discrimination to maybe someday -- At that time, civil unions and marriage ceremonies were kind of like the only thing we could do aside from [01:37:00] developing your own legal protections, which Jane and I did very early in our relationship. I've had a will since I was twenty-eight, so very early we realized we didn't have these rights, and if something were to happen to one of us, we wouldn't be allowed in a hospital room with each other. We wouldn't be given time off work. We wouldn't have any of these rights. So we had a wonderful lawyer, Robert Brown in Allentown, and he's since deceased, but he drew up our papers for us, so we had wills and power of attorneys, health power of

attorneys, financial power of attorneys, because we did not want either of our families, if something should happen to us, to take what we built together or to deny the other the right to be in a hospital room. So we had those wills. I was twenty-eight years old, my first will and power of attorneys with Jane.

[01:38:00] And when I had my stroke, we needed those papers. We carried a copy -- well, it was later that we did this -- We had copies of them in a file at home. We had copies in a lock box, so I was thirty-six years old, and I had a stroke. Kind of a fluky thing. I had no idea that I had an underlying genetic disorder. That came later after the stroke to find out why I had it, but I had a terrible, terrible headache one night coming home from Hazleton. Working as my -- I was working for my psychologist licensure, and I was driving one hundred and ten miles a day commuting, under a lot of stress, and went to dinner that night with a friend, and I had been having headaches maybe for two or three weeks before. I don't usually get them,

[01:39:00] but I was having some pretty bad headaches. And I used to run, and I was running a few weeks before and kept feeling this pulsing in my neck when I was running, and I didn't know what that was. Later I knew what that was. So I went to dinner this one night after work with a friend, and I hugged her goodbye, and when I hugged her goodbye, I felt something snap in my neck. As I'm driving home from Hazleton to Allentown, I feel

like I'm drunk. The lines on the road are kind of wavy, and I'm having trouble staying on the road. I have this terrible, terrible headache, like the worst headache of my life, and I stopped and got gas, and I called Jane and said, "Something's wrong. I have a terrible headache, and I'm having trouble driving." So when I got home, she gave me some, I don't know, Tylenol, something, and I'll just go to bed, right? Got a headache, go to bed. [01:40:00] And she went to work the next day, and she said, "Why don't you call your doctor?" I said, okay. And off she went to work, and it was our habit to lock the door in the morning with whoever was left behind. You know, we lived in a fairly nice neighborhood, but we still locked our doors. So we lived in a townhouse, and I was upstairs, and she locked the door. She leaves. I get up to call my doctor. I fall in our den with the phone in my hand. I can't get up. I feel like my brain is shutting down like a computer, like, brrrr, and I just thought, "Oh no. Something's really wrong." I go to dial the phone, can't remember my doctor's number, can't remember to call off work. Get the phone book out, can't read the phone book, so now I'm thinking, I'm really in trouble. So the only number I can remember is Jane's number at work. I call Jane's number at work, and [01:41:00] she wasn't available immediately, and I got her coworker, and all I said to him was, "Have her call me." I could still speak at that time, and he

said, "Okay." And within a few minutes, I realized I was going to lose that ability, so I called back, and all I could get out at that time was, "I need help," and Davie, her coworker, got Jane on the phone, and said, as soon as she heard me trying to speak, said, "I'm sending an ambulance to the house. So I was locked in." They couldn't get upstairs to me. Her mom and dad lived next door to us at this time because we had moved them from where they lived -- they had lived in Bucks County and they were getting older -- we moved them up next to us, so luckily she called her dad, and her dad came with a key and let the ambulance in. Jane's on her way to the hospital to meet me with a couple neighbor ladies who drove her. Then she gets there, and I'm in the ER, [01:42:00] and they won't let her in because she's not family, and so they don't want to let her in. And one of my neighbors said to her, "Don't you have papers? Didn't you say you guys had papers?" So she told them that she had papers and that she was my medical power of attorney, and they said, "Unfortunately, if you don't have them with you, we can't let you in." So I am now starting to -- I mean, I could lose consciousness. I am having trouble advocating for myself. The neighbor lady drove her home. She got our papers out of the file, drove back, and presented them, and then they let her in. But that's what you had to do then. This was 1994, November 1994. And after that, I had to follow up with this doctor. I

had a temporary left-side paralysis, full facial droop on the left side, [01:43:00] affected speech, so I had two-and-a-half months of rehab. Luckily all of that was temporary. It all came back, and I made a full recovery, but I had to see this neurologist frequently, and I had to be a blood thinner, and I couldn't drive for two-and-a-half months, and I'm trying to do my psych internship to finish up for licensure, and he doesn't want to talk to Jane. I want her to come with me to my appointments because I need someone to help me make sense of everything that's happening. I've had a brain injury. I need a second set of ears, right? He was pretty disrespectful at first. He did not -- "Why does she need to be here? You are my patient. Who is she to you?" "She's my girlfriend. She's my partner." "She's not your family." So we had that to navigate. [01:44:00] I was pretty angry with my doctor at first, and so was Jane, and did a lot of crying. And eventually over working with him for a period of weeks to months, he and I came to an understanding, and I'm glad to say to this day, I count him as a friend. We kind of won him over. Yeah. And I credit him with saving my life that day. Luckily, I was able to recover fully. Did have some neuro-psych testing at my insistence because my doctor did not -- you know this is during my arguments and fights with him -- he did not want to have me tested for neuro-psych testing because he said, "You're fine." I said,

"I'm sitting for my psychology license to practice psychology, and I want to make sure my brain's okay because I really only get one or two chances to sit for this test, [01:45:00] and if I don't get it, I'm not going to get it." So I finally talked him into allowing me to do that. I think because of my tenacity and I kept at it with him that eventually he came to respect me, and he came to respect Jane, and pretty quickly, she started going to all my appointments with me. And if she didn't come, he would ask, "Where is Jane?" Yeah. So that is what took me out of working with the task force, to go back to that thread, but it didn't mean we didn't stay involved with being active in other things that were going on in the community. Trish and Liz -- Trish Sullivan, Liz Bradbury -- they kind of came along during the time that Jane and I were together. [01:46:00] They started doing things to be organizing and helping out the community, and I'm very thankful that they have since -- we left the Lehigh Valley before they developed the community center, but I will say, there was a community center in Allentown before the Bradbury and Sullivan LGBT Center. When I moved there in the '80s, in 1980, there was the Lambda Center that was on Hamilton Street in Allentown, and it was a place you could go if you wanted to play games or meet up with other gay people. It didn't last very long. They couldn't support it, pay the rent, so it dwindled pretty quickly, but you know, when Liz and Trish

came to town, and they met with Steve Black, and they were part of PA-GALA and getting people to know [01:47:00] who to vote, and then there started to be organizations like GLORA, the Gays and Lesbians of Reading and Allentown, and we went to GLORA events, and these were potlucks in people's homes and organized outings to plays and different events that were being done for socialization, so you could meet other gay people that weren't necessarily out, maybe didn't want to be out, but wanted to be connected. There was GLOSS. There was the Gay and Lesbians' sports group, and they played ping pong, and they played softball, and you know there were different groups that started to spring up. There was an educational group that tried to help out with schools and education. And there was a little newspaper, the Valley Press, the (inaudible) Valley Press put out, that would list a whole calendar of events of different things that were happening [01:48:00] in the gay and lesbian community that you could attend, that you could go to, and hopefully there would be something that spoke to you. So that was happening in the '80s, in the '90s, in the Lehigh Valley. So a lot of things were word-of-mouth and these small flyers that would get printed and put out. That was what was happening then.

MF: I'm curious what marriage equality has meant for you. You described this sort of harrowing experience having a stroke and

really advocating for your relationship, for that to be honored. I'm curious now what marriage equality has meant to you personally and how that has impacted your life.

MS: Oh, that's been huge. Jane and I, earlier on, had tried to do a [01:49:00] marriage ceremony, commitment ceremony I guess they were calling it at the time. We belonged to Quaker meeting in the Lehigh Valley, Lehigh Valley Friends. They knew we were a gay couple, and this was the forerunner to marriage equality and the marriage law being passed. So a lot of people were doing commitment ceremonies, civil unions, things like that, so we asked our meeting house if they would allow us to have that ceremony at our meeting, and we had two dear friends who were a straight couple that were having a recommitment ceremony for them. It was an anniversary for them -- and I'm sorry I don't remember which of their anniversaries it was, Barbara and Jim -- and so they said, how great would it be if -- Barbara was Quaker, too, and she said, how great would it be if they could do their recommitment ceremony, and Jane and I could have a civil commitment ceremony? The Quakers said, no. [01:50:00] They would not allow us to do it, even though we were members of this meetinghouse for a number of years, and Jane being a very active member on committees and such. So that was very hurtful that they would not allow it, and so our friends had their recommitment ceremony, and we did not get to be a part of it

with them. And later, they then asked us -- they were going to put a First Day School addition onto the meeting house, and they were raising money, and we were one of the first people that they came to to ask for money for this project because at the time, I was a now practicing psychologist, and Jane had a very good job at PPL, and they asked us if we could contribute ten thousand dollars towards this project. Yeah. In their little pyramid, that was their top number that they were looking for. They came to us as one of the first people and asked would we contribute this [01:51:00] for the children of First Day School. Oh, I was very angry. I said a few words, and then I had to go upstairs, and I left Jane to finish because I just would not be able to hold my temper. But I thought, how dare you ask us for this much money for a cause that we're not really as much a part of when you could not support us in our commitment ceremony? So we did not contribute towards that, mainly just because of hurt. Not because we didn't want the First Day School, not that we didn't want the addition, but I just was not in a place where I was going to be generous at that point. So by the time that marriage equality was coming around, I said to Jane, "People are going to other states. They're getting married in other states." "I don't want to go to another state. I don't want to go to Canada. If I'm going to be married to you, and I want to be married to you -- and I want to be married to you --

[01:52:00] I would like to be married in my home state, and I will be married when our state passes it." So in May of 2014, when it passed Supreme Court, we were at our new church, which is a unitarian universalist church of Athens and Sheshequin in Athens, Pennsylvania, which happened to be at the time we joined, about one-third GLBT, which is why we joined it. We were at the church at a function, and my mother called me on the phone, and Jane's brother-in-law texted her, and my mother said, "Hey, I don't know where you are right now, but I think the Supreme Court just said you guys can get married now, and I wanted you to know." So my mother's come a long way. She's come a long way. [01:53:00] And Jane's brother-in-law had texted her almost at the same time. "Hey, did you see the news? You have a marriage equality." So we told two of our friends at the church, Katie and Kris, that this had just happened, and oh my god, could this be real? And they were excited, too, because they're a lesbian couple, and they've been together a number of years, and they're like, "We can get married," and I said to Jane, "Do you want to get married?" And she said, "Yes." So then the question was, where to get married, and where do you go for your marriage license, right? We're here in Northeastern Pennsylvania, very conservative, Trump land big time, and it's my home area where I grew up, where my mother said to me, you should go to Allentown because you'll be safer there, and here I

am back in my home area working as a psychologist. Built a home here in 2005, and here it is, 2014, [01:54:00] and we're allowed to be married. So I said to Jane, "I'm not sure if I want to go to the courthouse in my hometown and ask for a marriage license" because at that time, when marriage equality came out, there were people that were denying them even though it was now the law of the land, and I was not sure if we would be met with trouble here. And she said, "Well, I understand that." She said, "We could go back to the Lehigh Valley, and we could get it there." I said, "Let me think about it," and she's like, "Well, okay." And our friends said, "We're going to go right down and get it here," the two friends that went to our church. They were going to go to the courthouse in Bradford County. They were the first gay couple in Bradford County to get their marriage license. It took me about three days. I wanted to think about it, and on the third day, I said, "Come on. Let's go down to the courthouse [01:55:00] here in my hometown, and let's get our marriage license." We were the third gay couple in Bradford County to get our marriage license. And when we went in, I was surprised because the clerk said, "It's about time." It was wonderful. So we were a little afraid that maybe the governor would appeal it, overturn it, so we were afraid that we should marry quickly -- because that was happening around the country, and so we decided pretty quickly after

getting our marriage license that we should marry as soon as we could, and we asked our minister at the UU church if she would do the ceremony, and we asked my parents if they would stand up for us. Unfortunately, Jane's parents had passed away years before this, so they did not get to be a part of our wedding, and unfortunately, her sister, her older sister [01:56:00] had also passed away, so they did not get to see us marry, but my parents said yes, including my dad, who was still alive at the time. And they went with us to the UU church. Our friends Katie and Kris were married the same day, minutes apart from us, by the same minister, and we were married on a Wednesday afternoon. I took off the afternoon from work. We got married that Wednesday afternoon, and I was going to go back to work, and Jane said, "You're not going back to work. It's our wedding day." (laughs) So we then went out to dinner and celebrated with our friends and my parents and the couple that had stood up for them. Shortly thereafter, within days, my sisters found out that we had gotten married on a Wednesday afternoon, and they weren't a part of it, and they were very upset, and they said, [01:57:00] "What the heck? You've been waiting all these years, and you can finally get married. We thought there was going to be a big wedding, and you snuck off and got married in the middle of the week. We want a celebration." So Jane and I decided to have a do-over wedding ceremony in September of 2014,

and we invited one hundred and fifty people. I told Jane, if I was going to have a wedding celebration, I wanted everything. I wanted it to be big. So we had friends and family and people from our church and coworkers from the thirty-one years that we were together at that time, and it was hard to select who got to come, but we tried to pick people who had kind of been supportive of us through the years. And the people that stood up for us were the people that had known us as a couple the longest, [01:58:00] thirty years for Barbara and Jim, the couple that had wanted us to marry at Quaker Meeting. My dear friend that I grew up with from high school, we were best friends from fifteen to sixteen years old, playing sports together, and she's also a lesbian, her and her girlfriend came up from Philadelphia and stood up with us. Jane and my dear friend from Quaker meeting who had moved to Alaska and we had known for twenty-five years and had always been supportive of our relationship, she and her boyfriend TJ, Debbie and TJ came from Alaska to stand up with us. So we had many, many people come to this wedding. We were married in the historic church of the UU church here in our home area. The minister that married us that Wednesday did the do-over recommitment of our marriage that September. [01:59:00] My father and mother were part of the ceremony, and all of my siblings got to come and some of their children. So we had a great service at the old historic church. A good friend of

ours, the photographer, she took some wonderful pictures. We had a big celebration with a DJ and all the traditional throwing the bouquet. Yes, I carried flowers. Jane did not carry flowers, but she wore a flower. And we danced in the church on the way out, and we went to a local hall that you could rent that is owned and operated by two gay men, and we had our reception there. Started out upstairs in the dining room. My niece and her partner had a catering business, [02:00:00] and they catered our wedding for us, so we had a cocktail hour, and we had a nice, sit-down meal, and then we moved downstairs to the cabaret bar and stage where they had a DJ, and we had dancing until late in the night, so it was wonderful.

And what did it mean to me? When I got to say to Jane the vows that I had written, and she got to say what she had to say to me, I felt legitimate. I felt whole. I felt like we counted, like everybody else, and it was a wonderful feeling, and I'm not really sure how else to describe it, but something shifted and changed for me that day. It was great.

MF: [02:01:00] Wow, what a wedding story. I wish I could have seen that one hundred and fifty people ceremony. Thank you for sharing that story. Michele, we're getting towards the end of the interview. You know, I'd like to give you an opportunity. Is there something that we haven't talked about today that you

really feel the need to share, something that we missed in our conversation?

MS: One of the areas that I worked in that has been pretty important to me is working with trans people. I came by this pretty accidentally, actually, but when I worked at Step By Step, I had an individual who lived in our residential program, a gentleman who was [02:02:00] very tortured. He wanted to be female. He felt that he was female, and here I am in my early twenties in charge of this program, and this man is one of our residents, and he can't get anybody to listen to him about being wrong-gendered. I was on -- I used to take call, and I can remember that when this call came in, this gentleman was so distressed by being in the wrong body that he cut his testicles off over a bucket at one of our programs, and the call came in that he was in danger of bleeding to death and needed to be taken to the hospital. So of course, we got him emergency services, and he was taken to the hospital, and we thought for sure, Lehigh Valley Hospital would make him right. They did not. They did surgery, and they fixed him up, and now he was a man with a penis and no testicles. Terrible, terrible story. Terrible story. Could not get someone to help him get his body fixed. So here I am, twenty-one, twenty-two years old, and this is my first experience with a person who needs to have sexual reassignment surgery. I didn't know what this was. I mean, I

had heard of transsexuals. The only thing I knew about transsexuals were the men that dressed up in women's clothing and *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, right? I didn't know much else beyond that. Now I have a person in my program who's very clearly distressed over his gender and wants to be female and knows that all his life, [02:04:00] he's been female, and we can't get him what he needs. So that was one reason that I wanted to start helping folks who were trans. The second one was when I did my psych internship up at Northeastern Counseling in Hazleton. Again, we had a gentleman who was distressed about his gender. He wasn't as open as the other fellow was at Step By Step, so it wasn't known to us until he had his situation occur, and again, an on-call situation where we got a call that this gentleman had cut his penis off at his home, and we sent emergency services to his home to get him and his penis and take him to the hospital, and before [02:05:00] emergency personnel could get into the bathroom to him, he flushed it down the toilet, so they could not reattach his penis. This is how distressed he was. So again, I'm thinking, here I'm in my thirties now, and I'm thinking, surely they will fix him and do the surgery now. No. They did not. They again sewed him up. He now has a small stub that they fixed, so he can urinate out of it, but he still has testicles and a small stub to urinate from. Can you imagine the psychological distress this person

was now in? And we didn't have resources, and we couldn't find a way to help him. So then I'm working at Northampton Mental Health and Mental Retardation in the Lehigh Valley as a young psychologist there seeing patients, [02:06:00] and I have a young trans man come in, and he is in between. Still has some feminine characteristics, starting to grow a beard, voice is changing, still has breasts, and is very distressed about his situation and needing to find services to get gender right and very angry because "Where do I fit now? I'm stuck in between. What can you do to help me?" Again, I'm a thirty-something, new psychologist working in the Lehigh Valley, and I don't know, and this person had every right to be angry at me because coming to me for services, and you don't know? "Who can help me?" I said, "I'll find out. I'll find out." So I started asking around, and there was PK Counseling in the Lehigh Valley, and she had been doing [02:07:00] some work with trans people, and she came and met with me and brought me some of her books. She was an older woman getting ready to retire, and she passed her books onto me, and she said, "I'll help you learn what you need to learn if you will take over this type of work." So I did. I didn't know what I was doing. She mentored me. I talked to some people down in Philadelphia and got some mentoring there. There was a couple psychologists down there that were associated with -- it's going right out of my head. The center down in

Philadelphia, I can't think of it right now. And I know it, and I should be able to tell you. Maybe it will come to me, (The Mazzone Center). But at any rate, word got out, and I started seeing people who were transgender, [02:08:00] people that would have gone to PK Counseling she was referring to me because she was retiring, and that became a part of my practice in Bethlehem, and I became known as one of the few people in the Lehigh Valley that would see trans people and help them with sexual reassignment surgery. The first person that became gender-right under my care went to Thailand to have her surgery done, and I coordinated care with a doctor in Thailand through an interpreter. So since then, we were able to develop more local resources, different people that we could count on for hormone therapy and gender reassignment. Dr. Christine McGinn down in Doylestown area for sexual reassignment surgery, Dr. Sherman Leis down in Philadelphia for sexual reassignment surgery. [02:09:00] There was a doctor that we met at the trans conference in Philadelphia. I went to the health trans conference when I was newly starting this work, so that I could learn, and met a lot of physicians and psychologists who were working in this field, and that was a pretty wonderful experience. Talk about feeling like a minority, to be in a hotel in Philadelphia at the trans health conference and being one of the only people walking around who's not trans. Pretty

interesting. So I began that work and have had a number of people transition under my care since, and I continue to see people who are trans in my practice now. So that's one of my subspecialties as is GLBT issues. [02:10:00] Back long ago when Liz Bradbury was doing her photo exhibit and wanting to photograph couples, she asked me if Jane and I would be in her couples photograph series, and I said, "Not yet. Not yet." And she's like, "Why not? Why not? Everybody knows you're gay. You're out." I said, "Well, I'm not really out out, shouting-it-from-the-rooftops out. I'm not sure I want my pictures out there yet. I'm practicing in the valley, and I'm seeing a lot of young GLBT people, and I think I can do more good if I just stay kind of behind the scenes because GLBT people need a safe place to go and a counselor they can talk to, and some of these kids' parents would not have let them see me if they had known I was a lesbian." So I know that was not what Liz wanted to hear at that time, but that's why [02:11:00] I did that, and that's why I didn't have our pictures taken earlier, so that I could do more good, as I thought, by kind of keeping that under the wraps. I knew people knew, but I wasn't going to put it out there and maybe exclude someone who needed services. Jane and I used to run annual holiday open houses at our home in Bethlehem because we knew people who had been kicked out of their homes, who had been disowned by families, and had no place

to go for holidays, so we used to have Thanksgiving dinners for GLBT people. We used to have an annual Christmas party where people came and helped dress our tree and have a cup of cheer and be able to sit around and talk with everybody. I wanted to do that in my practice, too. I wanted to have a safe place for people to come, so that even though the parent might be sending them to see me because we don't really want them to be gay, [02:12:00] they could come to me, and that kid could sit in my office without a parent sitting in the office and say, "How do I get my parents to accept that I'm gay? They don't want me to be gay. They're sending me to you because they want you to change me. Can you help me change them?" That's why we didn't have our pictures taken. When we got ready to leave the Lehigh Valley, I said to Liz, "You know, you can have our pictures now, and we did finally get our photos taken, so that we could be a part of her photo display of GLBT couples in the Lehigh Valley." The one thing I do wish, and I hope she's done it since, it would be nice if there would be some way of being able to know on those photographs how many of us have been together for how long and whether or not we ever married because those pictures were taken before gay marriage, and now we're married. So it would be nice if that could be [02:13:00] reflected in that photograph project as well. But yeah, that's another thing that I just thought would be worth mentioning.

MF: Thank you so much, Michele. It's just been such a pleasure to talk with you today. I am so grateful that you took the time.

MS: Well, thank you for interviewing me and asking all the right questions. I appreciate that. It made it easier to talk about things.

MF: Thank you.

END OF AUDIO FILE