

BARBARA BRENNER

Interviewed by

ZAYLIA A. PLUSS

April 20, 24, 27, 29, and May 4, 2012

San Francisco, CA

Narrator

Barbara Brenner was born on October 7, 1951 in Baltimore, MD. One of seven children, she was independent and opinionated from an early age. She took inspiration during her youth from her uncle Richard, a lawyer who passed away when she was six. Brenner also remembers Ellen Kanner, a teacher at her high school, who influenced her to attend Smith College. Brenner's family practiced reformed Judaism, and she was Confirmed at her synagogue. Later in life, Brenner has become more active in practicing Judaism and studying Torah.

Brenner attended Smith College for her undergraduate studies from 1969-1973. There, she participated in anti-Vietnam war activism and was part of shutting down the college during the spring of 1970. Later, she attended the Princeton University Woodrow School of Public and International Affairs, where she came out as a lesbian and met her partner Susie Lampert. Brenner remembers Princeton to be a very hostile climate for LGBTQ people in 1974-1975, an experience which radicalized her politically.

After moving to California with Susie, Brenner earned her law degree from Boalt Hall School of Law at UC Berkeley in 1981. After clerkships with the ACLU and Justice Thelton Henderson, Brenner worked with Joe Remcho, Robin Johansen and Kathleen Purcell, who became the lawyers for the Democrats of the California Assembly. During her law career, Brenner worked with the ACLU of Northern California and became a board member of both that affiliate and the national ACLU.

At the age of 42, Brenner was diagnosed with breast cancer and took a leave from her law career. Shortly thereafter, Brenner became the Executive Director of Breast Cancer Action, which grew steadily under her direction for 15 years. BCA became known for its Think Before You Pink campaign, which directed public attention to the ways companies used breast cancer to raise money, and exposed how some products that raised money for breast cancer research were at the same time contributing to the breast cancer epidemic. BCA also became the first breast cancer organization that did not take funding from any companies or entities that were profiting from cancer or contributing to cancer by polluting the environment.

In 2010, Brenner was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), and retired from her role as ED of BCA. She continues her health justice activism through her blog, Healthy Barbs (barbarabrenner.net).

Interviewer

Zaylia Pluss (b. 1986) is a Smith College graduate originally from Denver, CO, working in community health and HIV/AIDS. As a queer white woman, she is committed to anti-racist organizing and is interested in practicing oral history as a tool to document and ground social justice movements.

Abstract

In this oral history, Barbara Brenner discusses growing up in a large family in Baltimore, MD, during the 1950s and 1960s, including her early introductions to social justice movements. She discusses her experiences at Smith College, with an emphasis on anti-Vietnam war activism and issues of class, race, and sexuality among students. She shares about her law career, including her work with the ACLU. The majority of the interview focuses on Brenner's breast cancer activism and the 15 years she spent as Executive Director of Breast Cancer Action, a "national, feminist grassroots education and advocacy organization" in San Francisco, CA. Brenner also discusses living with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), with which she was diagnosed in 2010, her continued health justice activism since retiring from BCA, and her 37 year partnership with Susie Lampert.

Restrictions

None.

Technical Notes

Interview recorded on miniDV using a Canon Vixia Camcorder. Nine 60-minute tapes.

Because ALS has robbed Brenner of her speaking voice, she uses text-to-speech technology called NeoSpeech, a free download for the iPad.

Transcript

Transcribed by Zaylia Pluss. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Zaylia Pluss. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Barbara Brenner.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Brenner, Barbara. Interview by Zaylia Pluss. Video recording, April 20, 24, 27, 29, May 4, 2012. Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote example:** Barbara Brenner interview by Zaylia Pluss, video recording, April 20, 24, 27, 29, May 4, 2012, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Brenner, Barbara. Interview by Zaylia Pluss. Transcript of video recording, April 20, 24, 27, 29, May 4, 2012. Smith Collection. **Footnote example:** Barbara Brenner interview by Zaylia Pluss, transcript of video recording, April 20, 24, 27, 29, May 4, 2012, Sophia Smith Collection, p. 31.

Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted April 20, 24, 27, 29, and May 4, 2012, with:

BARBARA BRENNER

in: San Francisco, CA

by: ZAYLIA A. PLUSS

PLUSS: So, my name is Zaylia Pluss, and we are here with Barbara Brenner today, it's April 20, 2012, and we are in San Francisco. So, Barbara, firstly tell me about your family growing up. You were one of seven children I know, how was that?

BRENNER: It was a bit of a madhouse. We were divided essentially into the older and younger kids, with one in the middle. The older kids ran the show. My parents didn't get along very well, so we spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to get their attention and avoid them at the same time.

I was very close as a little kid to my next older brother Joe. My oldest sister, Ruth, was born in 1948 and was really a different generation from me. Though she was only 3 years older, we never had much in common. But she died of ALS, so I guess we had more in common than we knew.

I was a pretty opinionated kid—no surprise there really—and I often told my mother what I would be doing, rather than asking. This was a big issue when I was getting ready for high school because she wanted me to attend the all-girls academic high school, but I wanted to go where my friends were, and I did.

The thing about growing up with a lot of siblings is that, at least for me, it gave me a chance to find myself, to not be so driven by what my parents wanted for me. Their attentions were divided.

Like all kids, I had dreams of what I wanted to be when I grew up: a singer, the owner of a horse farm, an astronaut. It was also as a kid that I got the idea that I might like to be a lawyer. My dad had a brother who was a lawyer who helped create the International Monetary Fund. He died of cancer when I was six.

I guess the other thing about my childhood that I should say is it gave me my foundation in Judaism. Both my parents were Reform Jews, and we went to synagogue on the high holidays and to Sunday school. My brothers were Bar Mitzvahed, but they weren't Bat Mitzvahing girls at my synagogue then. There were enough boys around that there was no economic incentive to do it. So I did not have a Bat Mitzvah, though I was Confirmed. I am remembering now that I sang a solo at the Confirmation.

The senior rabbi at my synagogue was a guy named Morris Lieberman. He was committed to social justice, and that was very important to me.

The other great influence on me in my high school years was a woman named Ellen Kanner. She taught Spanish at my high school. I never took Spanish, but she was the faculty advisor for the bridge club I was part of. She had gone to Smith and suggested it might be a good place for me. We stayed in touch for quite a while after I left high school, and then lost contact until she called me at the BCA office one day after seeing my picture in Newsweek. She came to Rally Day. It was sweet. She called me that day because two of her sisters had had breast cancer and she was in a drug trial that BCA was monitoring. I got some of the inside story about the trial, but I guess we're past my childhood now.

I'm not sure I have much more to say about my childhood, though you may have specific questions.

PLUSS: Yeah, I was going to ask you about growing up – specifically, you grew up in Baltimore in the '50s and '60s. What do you remember about the social atmosphere, the Civil Rights Movement?

BRENNER: I really didn't like Baltimore. It pretends to be a northern city but has—or had then—a southern mentality. Segregation of blacks was intense. There was, thank goodness, an active civil rights movement; my mother was involved with it. She took me to my first civil rights march when I was about 10. That's where I first saw Martin Luther King.

After King was murdered, and the cities erupted, Baltimore was affected. It was my junior or senior year in high school. We had our prom that year with armed guards on the roof of the place where it was, and you could see fires burning. I'll never forget it. I haven't really thought about this before, but I imagine that my views about social justice are intensely formed by growing up in a city like Baltimore.

PLUSS: And what were the demographics of your neighborhood, your school, your social circles?

BRENNER: We lived in Northwest, which was essentially a self-imposed Jewish ghetto. It was middle class, white. My friends were Jews. Though there were blacks in my high school, we were tracked, so we weren't in each other's classes.

I've spent a fair amount of time thinking about the things that keep us apart from people who are not like us. I think our social structures help drive that phenomenon.

PLUSS: Do you remember students at your school being involved in protests and organizing around that time?

BRENNER: In high school most of the activity was around civil rights and the war in Vietnam. I don't recall the specifics of the civil rights activism, but there were student-organized teach-ins during Vietnam. There were faculty who supported the students on Vietnam, which made the school administration very unhappy. They fired one teacher and the students led an unsuccessful effort to get him his job back.

PLUSS: So let's jump to your time at Smith College. Tell me about that.

BRENNER: My introduction to Smith was through Ellen Kanner, but I contacted the college to get their materials. They sent a big fat green book with course listings, no pictures. Every course looked interesting to me, except maybe classical Greek. I applied early decision and got in, with a generous scholarship that made it possible for me to go to Smith. I was assigned to Emerson house. I had a roommate and a big sister assigned from Washington, D.C. It upset my liberal mother that both my roommate and my big sister were black women.

My first semester was a big adjustment. I had been in a co-ed high school, and many of my friends at home were guys (who turned out mostly to be gay). The social setting at Smith was a challenge for me. There was a lot of focus on mixers and finding guys to date, and there was a significant part of the student body that came from a social class that was not in my experience.

The seniors had a little ditty they taught us: "oh why, oh why is Smith seven miles from Amherst instead of seven miles from Yale." (I just erased that, so it won't be in the word document. Sorry.) Both Amherst and Yale were all male at the time.

I came very close to applying to transfer to Johns Hopkins after my first semester. But then spring came with the Vietnam moratorium, and everything changed. I was very involved in anti-Vietnam activity on campus.

PLUSS: So it's about noon. We can also pick up here next time if you want. Ya? Ok. Any last things before I turn it off? No, ok.

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2 April 24, 2012

PLUSS: Ok. This is the second oral history interview with Barbara Brenner, interviewed by Zaylia Pluss, and we are in San Francisco, California, in Barbara's home, and it is April 24, 2012. So, starting off, you mentioned that there was something else about your childhood you wanted to mention in the interview?

BRENNER: I didn't mention and maybe should have that my dad was an alcoholic. So there's also that thing that kids in those settings do to get attention in a good way and to take care of themselves. I certainly didn't realize at the time that that was how I was behaving, but in retrospect it makes perfect sense to me.

PLUSS: When we left off last time, you were talking about Vietnam War activism you were doing at Smith starting your first year, and that you actually didn't transfer because of that. So what did that activism look like and what roles were you playing?

BRENNER: The campus [I think I meant to say "country" not campus here] was pretty much in an uproar. There were things going on at almost every college in the country. Students organizing teach-ins, calling to shut down the campuses, organizing demonstrations in Washington. At Smith, I was involved in organizing teach-ins about the war and its connection to colonialism, and I went to the second big Washington DC march with a busload of students from the 5 college area.

That was quite an experience. The District was mobbed with college students and police. People were marching, shouting, making a lot of noise, and the cops got nervous. They started throwing tear gas. I caught a little of that. It was very, very unpleasant.

Seeing the police go after people who were exercising their constitutional rights to demonstrate was a real wake-up call for me. When I got back to Smith, I joined the students calling for the campus to shut down until there was movement toward ending the war.

The campus did shut down. Classes were cancelled. Exams were not held that spring.

I think it's a little hard to imagine now what it was like then. The whole country was on one side or the other of the debate about the war, and the opponents of the war were gaining the upper hand. The students built their power and used it to change the course of history.

And, like a lot of people who were engaged in that effort, I think I took it as a lesson in what social change could look like.

PLUSS: Did that lead or dovetail into any activism in other arenas, or areas, or other movements for you at Smith?

BRENNER: That's a very good question. I did get involved in student government for a while when I got back to campus for sophomore year. But I did my junior year abroad, which certainly wasn't a place where I was engaged in activism. Nothing really comes to mind except that work with student government.

PLUSS: And did you – do you remember lessons that you learned either during the Vietnam activism or in the student government about organizing, about working with people across difference?

BRENNER: I'm sure I learned then that a lot of organizing is very hard, not glorious work.

It involves talking to people—often one on one—and listening to them, and addressing their concerns.

There was not a lot of activity across class or racial differences in the anti-war movement. College campuses were composed mostly of middle or upper class students, mostly white, and they drove the movement. The bigger issues then were about sexism, the domination of the movement by men.

Because the men were not open to having women in leadership, women created their own anti-war groups and efforts. We worked with the men's groups, but tended not to be part of them.

PLUSS: In terms of social dynamics and experiences actually on the campus at Smith, were students discussing differences they had in experiences, and social dynamics related to class, race, age, sexuality, gender, ability, all those things?

BRENNER: As I remember it, the biggest discussions on campus were about racial differences. Class was a word you heard only in government and history classes. There was very little discussion of gender politics per se, though sexism was a hot topic, and activity around sexuality was almost but not quite non-existent.

The African-American (that's what they called themselves then) students on campus were very organized and working to advance their particular concerns on campus. They had some allies among white women, but not many.

As I recall, after we got back to campus sophomore year, after the strike, the administration was more receptive to the concerns of black students than it had been before.

Class was an interesting thing at Smith, at least for me, because I was from a middle-class family, and there were quite a few women at Smith who came from wealth and much more privilege. Everyone knew it, but no one talked about it much.

Students did talk about sexism, and its implications for their plans. Many of us were aware that there were significant barriers that stood in

our way if we wanted careers other than teaching. Many of us studied the writings of the second wave feminists.

I think in a way, for women in college in the early 1970's, their antenna were up on sexism, issues that they thought would inhibit their growth and development.

On gender issues, there was pretty much silence. But there were a couple of women in my house at Emerson who were pushing issues of non-heterosexuality. These were two straight women who were roommates. Sometime during the strike spring they started telling people that they were each others lovers, just to see what the reaction would be. I thought it was incredibly brave and creative of them to do this dance, and I think it may have opened some peoples' minds. I thought about it a lot later when I got involved in a sexual relationship with another Smith student when I was a sophomore.

PLUSS: How had you thought of your sexuality up until that point, and then at Smith?

BRENNER: I had thought I was heterosexual, you know, the default norm. I had had boyfriends in high school, and I dated a little bit guys from other schools when I was at smith. When I fell in love with a student I'll call Kathy, I didn't think I was a lesbian, I just thought I was in love with a woman. I also didn't think of myself as bi-sexual. I just thought I was a straight woman who loved this person. My next relationship after that was with a guy.

And it certainly wasn't my sense in 1971 at Smith that it was a safe place to be queer.

PLUSS: Did you have the sense that there were queer students and they were closeted, or there just wasn't talk about that at all?

BRENNER: I had no sense of it. I really don't know. Among my friends, it was never mentioned.

PLUSS: And how have your thoughts and ideas about sexuality in general, and your own sexuality, changed and grown since then?

BRENNER: That's a very big question. I guess my understanding of sexuality now is that it's a spectrum, and there are people all along it who don't behave like I do, and that's good. As for myself, I came out as a lesbian in a decidedly hostile environment at Princeton. It radicalized me in many ways.

At Princeton, where I was a graduate student, undergrads were seeking out and doing violence to gay male undergrads. That reality, combined with my feminist proclivities, made me a fierce defender of my life choices.

We're way beyond Smith now.

PLUSS: That's fine. Is there anything else you did want to mention about Smith? Those were all my questions.

BRENNER: Smith taught me to be a critical thinker, and I will be forever grateful for that. I made some great friends, had some fabulous teachers, and learned that anything is possible if you're persistent and strategic. It was a great education.

PLUSS: Ok. So, going back to Princeton, and coming out as a lesbian – you said it radicalized you to be there? What was that like on a daily basis? What do you mean by “it radicalized” you?

BRENNER: Because I knew that there were people on campus who didn't want me there, either as a woman or a lesbian, it made me see the institution as symbolic of a world that is hostile to people like me. I evaluated everything that happened through that lens. I think I was pretty obnoxious about it. The only thing I was happy about at Princeton was my lover and our relationship, and that was very threatening to the institution.

PLUSS: So you, I think, met Susie Lampert at Princeton, correct? And you've been together since 1975. This is gonna be a big question. (laughter) Um, tell me about your relationship, and what you've learned from being with Susie for 37 years?

I'm actually going to turn the tape off while you start typing and put in another tape.

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

PLUSS: This is the third tape of an oral history interview with Barbara Brenner, interviewed by Zaylia Pluss in San Francisco, California, in her home, on April 24, 2012. And I just asked Barbara about her relationship with her partner of 37 years, Susie Lampert, and what she's learned from being with Susie.

BRENNER: I was 23 when I met Susie, she was 24. Our lives were in front of us, and though we committed to moving to California together, I don't think either of us knew what that commitment really was. We had no models for relationship, so we made it up as we went along. I learned that you have to pay attention, not ignore issues when they come up, and have a lot of fun whenever you can. Being in this relationship is the great joy of my life.

We have certainly been through a lot of changes in our lives and the way we live them, but we are conscious of what we are doing. We talk about it. Constant vigilance is required.

I have lived a very public life, and in many ways still do. It's not the life Susie leads, but she has been a great sport and supporter of my efforts.

When I got breast cancer, I was the one who was sick, but Susie had to deal with a lot of things because it was me, she was afraid I was going to die at 42. We travelled that road together in many ways.

PLUSS: If you have more thoughts later, we can come back. Um, my next question is—how have you identified in terms of gender throughout your life?

BRENNER: Gender is not an issue I spend much time thinking about. I have always thought of myself as female, with a large tomboy streak. It's also the case that in the butch/femme lexicon of the 1970's, I'm the butch in this relationship, or was for a long time.

PLUSS: Can you tell me more about that? You were for a long time and it's shifted, or?

BRENNER: I think it's shifted in two ways, one is that Susie has become more butch as she's gotten older. And, as I become able to do less with my current illness, it's a little hard to hold up my end of butchness.

PLUSS: Ok, I think we have time for at least one or two more questions before it's 9 o'clock. So, tell me about the decision to move to California, and about the move itself?

BRENNER: Susie was a year ahead of me at Princeton, so she was graduating and looking for work. I had decided to leave the Woodrow Wilson School. We have slightly different versions of the decision to go to Los Angeles, but Susie was from there, and was the first person I met who said it was a

great place to live. So I looked for a placement in a job there and got one at the ACLU of Southern California, in their women's rights project. I think they took me because I had done a year of law school right after Smith.

Susie found a job on a contract basis working on an environmental impact report, so we packed up my car and headed west. We drove from Princeton to Montreal, across Canada to Calgary, and then down through the western U.S. to L.A. We spent our first weeks there at Susie's parents house. Susie was not out to her folks then.

PLUSS: It's 9 o'clock now. Are there thoughts that you want to finish along this, or should we—?

BRENNER: Are you ok?

PLUSS: Oh, I'm good.

BRENNER: When we got to Susie's home, Susie wasn't feeling well. It was a Friday night, so she took to bed, and I had dinner with her folks and her brother who was still living there. It was weird. The TV was on all through dinner, turned up loud enough so her dad could hear it across two rooms, and no one said a word during dinner. Quite an introduction for me.

PLUSS: Wow. Do you want to continue at all, because I can stay if you're feeling up for it? No? Ok, let's turn the tape off.

END TAPE 3

TAPE 4 April 27, 2012

PLUSS: Alright, I am Zaylia Pluss, and this is the third interview with Barbara Brenner at her home in San Francisco. Today is April 27, 2012. So today, I want to start with law school and your law career. You've mentioned that your uncle had an influence on you growing up, and that kind of sparked your interest in law school. What—how did you ultimately decide to go back to law school and then practice as a lawyer?

BRENNER: I dropped out of law school the first time, in 1974, because the experience had convinced me that legal education had nothing to do with justice. When I left Princeton, which I attended after leaving Georgetown Law School, I got a job with the Women's Rights Project of the ACLU of Southern California. Working there was my first experience with using law to effect positive change.

One of the cases I worked on seems so silly now, but it was a case of first impression then. It had to do with whether a woman in California could keep her own name when she married. We won that case.

This makes me think about how those of us working for social change often don't recognize the shoulders on which we stand. My boss at the time, Jill Jakes, saw this as an important issue, and it was. Now we take it for granted, but it required people and organizations with vision and tenacity to make it happen.

Susie and I left Los Angeles because Susie couldn't find more work there, and she got a job in the San Francisco Bay Area. We came up here. I did a variety of jobs, and then started thinking about my future. Susie had an older cousin who was a lawyer who had been involved in international peace efforts. Talking to him made me think I could use a legal degree to bring people together. It was very naive.

But I held on to that naive idea, and applied to two law schools in the Bay Area. I was accepted and attended Boalt Hall, now called cleverly the Berkeley Law School, for the next three years. There was a very active women's group at the law school, with which I was quite involved, and during my first year at Boalt, George Moscone and Harvey Milk were murdered. That event affected in many ways the rest of my law school career.

My summer job after my first year was as a law clerk for the ACLU of Northern California. That's a job usually reserved for more advanced students, but my work at the Southern California ACLU affiliate helped, as did the fact that the director of the Northern California office was someone who had been at the Southern California office when I was there. Thinking about that now, I realize that relationships with people have always been important in getting me to the places I need to be. I'm pretty good at not burning bridges.

I worked on a lot of different things at the ACLU that summer. I wrote legal memos summarizing the law in various areas, some of which I'm told

are still relied on at that office. And I worked developing the factual record for a case involving California funding of teenage abortions. It was a pretty exciting time. The lawyer in charge of the abortion case was a woman named Maggie Crosby, who is probably the leading legal theorist on reproductive choice issues. It was a great privilege to work with her.

The summer after my second year at law school, I took a job as a summer clerk at a firm called Rosen, Remcho and Henderson. Rosen and Remcho had both been very involved with the ACLU, and Henderson was the first black lawyer to be assigned to cover voting rights issues in the south for the Justice Department in the 1960s. I took that job because I thought it was a firm that was doing the kind of work I wanted to do, influencing public policy, and in a direction that would let me sleep at night.

The firm was small, so I had lots of opportunities to work directly with the lawyers and do meaningful work. It was a great experience. During that summer, Thelton Henderson, the 3rd named partner, was appointed as a federal judge. The day he was confirmed, he walked into the library where I was working and asked me if I wanted to clerk for him after I finished law school. I couldn't imagine a greater opportunity, so I said yes.

The firm invited me to return to work with them as a lawyer when I finished my clerkship, so I felt I was in a good position to set off in my legal career. After I finished law school, I took the California bar exam, and then Susie and I took a great 1-month vacation in Alaska. I started my clerkship when we got back.

Working for Judge Henderson was like being a judge in training. He was committed to justice, and used his clerks to help him get the information he needed to advance that cause. It was an honor and enormous privilege to do that work, plus Judge Henderson is fun. We're still friends.

I also learned from the Judge about humility. He is the most humble person you could ever meet, and has done such ground breaking work. There's a film about him, called *Soul of Justice*, that lets people see him in ways he would never talk about himself.

As my clerkship year was ending, I got a call from Joe Remcho, one of the partners at the firm, inviting me to lunch. Turned out that the firm was splitting up: Rosen was creating a firm and Remcho and Robin Johansen and Kathleen Purcell were creating another firm. The Remcho crowd, which I came to call RJP, wanted me to work for them, but they only had one case at the time, so job security was scanty. Sandy Rosen also offered me a job, but I liked the RJP folks much better, so I took my chances and went to work with them.

The one case they had was a big one, defending the system used to finance California's public schools. Working on that case was not only an education in the finance system, but I also learned how an effective legal team worked, and the importance of presenting legal papers that were as

close to perfect as they could possibly be, no matter how time consuming that effort was.

PLUSS: So just a time check – we have about 35 minutes left today, and I do want to at least start on Breast Cancer Action. So, maybe if we can focus especially on some of the highlights of your whole law career for the next few minutes, um, with the limited time?

BRENNER: RJP became the lawyers for the Democrats of the California Assembly. And that meant we did big cases, the kinds of cases that courts needed to decide, when the executive and the legislative branches disagreed about power. We also challenged on behalf of the Assembly many initiatives that the voters of California passed, and we represented the Assembly in lawsuits involving redistricting.

While I was at RJP, I got involved with ACLU as a board member, both in Northern California and ultimately the national board. The firm had a commitment to the ACLU and supported my work with the organization. I learned a lot about how organizations run at the ACLU, which came in handy later.

After a number of years at RJP, I left the firm to start a small legal practice with Donna Hitchens, the founder of the Lesbian Rights Project, now called the National Center for Lesbian Rights. We did a general legal practice until Donna was elected to a judgeship, after which I went back to RJP.

I was happily practicing law and still working with ACLU when I discovered a lump in my breast in the late summer of 1993. It turned out to be breast cancer. I took disability leave, and was out of work for 11 months dealing with treatment and recovering from that.

PLUSS: I'm going to turn off this tape while you finish.

END TAPE 4

TAPE 5

PLUSS: This is the second tape of the third interview with Barbara Brenner at her house in San Francisco, California, on April 27, 2012, and my name is Zaylia Pluss. Well, why don't you go ahead?

BRENNER: (Shakes head)

PLUSS: Did it loose it?

BRENNER: Yeah.

PLUSS: Oh. Technology.

BRENNER: Two things happened to me while I was in treatment that changed the course of my life. One is that, like everyone, I didn't know how much time I had left on the planet, but I was more aware of it than other people my age (I was 42). So I started thinking about ways to get involved in women's health. The other is that I wrote a letter about breast cancer that was published in the San Francisco Chronicle and seen by Nancy Evans, who was then president of the board of Breast Cancer Action.

Breast Cancer Action was about 4 years old at the time. Nancy called the editorial page editor, who called me and gave me her number. I called her. They were looking for people to get involved in BCA. I wasn't ready to make a big commitment, but I did agree to write for the BCA newsletter.

BCA at the time had a half time Executive Director, but the work was really done by the board. Everyone on the board had some issue they cared about, and worked on it in BCA's name. The board was meeting every two weeks. Nancy again asked me to consider the board, and invited me to a board meeting. I agreed to check it out.

So I went to that board meeting. My hair was very short because I had just finished treatment, I was dressed in blue jeans and a shirt and Timberland boots. I participated in the meeting as seemed appropriate, and then was appalled to see that at the end of the meeting they were setting the next board meeting by looking at their calendars. They didn't have a set schedule.

When I got home from that meeting, I told Susie that if I went on that board I would be president within 3 months and get it in shape or I would be gone from the organization.

A couple of days after that meeting, I got a call from the board president, a woman named Jackie Hicks. She asked me how I felt about the meeting, and then told me that one of the board members, a woman named Susan Claymon who was a founder of the BCA, had issues because I was a lesbian, or she assumed I was because of the way I was dressed. Jackie told me she pushed Susan on this, pointing out that my hair was

short because of treatment. Susan was concerned about having lesbians in the organization, which prompted Jackie to come out to her. The person most identified with the founding of BCA was a woman named Elenore Pred, who had died in 1991, was a lesbian, but she was not out. Nancy Evans, who was still on the board, was a lesbian, but she wasn't out either.

PLUSS: So we have a few minutes. Maybe we could finish this thread on lesbians and Breast Cancer Action and then start off next time?

BRENNER: I think lesbians have been drawn over time to BCA because they are used to being social outliers. They are not part of the mainstream; they think about issues in ways that are not mainstream, and they are used to being criticized. Because BCA takes positions that other organizations are afraid to take, this foundation in the lesbian culture is very useful.

There are still lesbians on the board and staff, and the current board chair is a lesbian. I hope the culture of bucking trends is so ingrained now at BCA that it will not matter if the leaders of the future are queer.

PLUSS: That's it? All right, I'll turn off the tape.

END TAPE 5

TAPE 6 April 29, 2012

PLUSS: Ok, this is the fourth interview with Barbara Brenner. My name is Zaylia Pluss, and we are at her home in San Francisco, California, United States, and it's April 29, 2012. Um, so the first question for Barbara this morning, which I actually already told her and she prepared her answer, is: in your breast cancer activism, and at BCA in particular, what have you been working for and what have you been working against?

BRENNER: My work in breast cancer, both at BCA and since, has been to make sure that people understand where we are in dealing with the disease so they will work to change the current realities, which has many facets. That involved working against corporate domination of breast cancer and oversimplified messages.

PLUSS: Ok, um, along and with that, in the film *Pink Ribbons, Inc.*, you talk a little bit about your views on how capitalism has shaped both breast cancer prevalence and treatment options for people dealing with breast cancer, and the whole mainstream breast cancer movement. Can you talk a little bit about that?

BRENNER: That's a big topic, but I guess I would say that in a health care system that is driven primarily by private profit, most of which goes to corporations, the needs and views of individuals with and at risk for disease are overwhelmed by a framing of the public messages about breast cancer that serves profits, not people. There are many examples of this, but maybe the one that people can most easily understand is the messaging around mammography screening.

Mammograms are a means of detecting breast cancer. Like all medical interventions, it is far from perfect. It works well for some things and not for others, but the dominant message about mammography urges women to get mammograms because it will save your life. That message is so oversimplified as to be in many ways dishonest. Mammograms can only be life saving if they find a cancer that is treatable, and if the woman gets treatment in a timely way.

The messages the public gets about mammography are largely driven by the businesses and non-profit organizations that profit from screening, either by selling products used for screening, or taking money from the businesses that profit from screening. As a result, the science that has been emerging for years that says mammography should be used less is ignored or discounted by the big players.

If you look critically at the breast cancer news, you will see this pattern in all areas, regarding treatments that work or don't, and evidence about environmental links to breast cancer.

On the environmental side, one of the known causes of breast cancer is ionizing radiation, the kind you get from medical x-rays. Not everybody

exposed gets breast cancer, but it increases the risk. Several years ago I was at a meeting with the then CEO of the Komen Foundation, a woman named Hala Moldemogg who used to work in the fast food industry. She had had breast cancer too, and, like me, mammography had missed her tumor. When I suggested that Komen and BCA work together on a public education campaign about radiation, Moldemogg quickly said no, because it would deter women from getting mammograms. That's what we're up against.

In treatment, it's sometimes very obvious. There's a drug called Avastin, made by Genentech, that got fast track approval for breast cancer. BCA opposed the approval because there was no evidence that the drug extends life, and its side effects were bad. 3 years later, the FDA held a hearing to withdraw approval of the drug for breast cancer. The cancer organizations that got funding from Genentech were silent at that hearing.

If you follow the money, you can pretty much tell what positions people and organizations will take on breast cancer issues.

I can talk about BCA's policy on corporate funding. But do you want me to do that here or take your other questions first?

PLUSS: That sounds good.

BRENNER: When I started at BCA as the ED, in September 1995, the budget was \$154,000, most of which came from a grant that was running out from the Junior League of all places. So there was a concern about where we were going to get money. The board and I spent a lot of time thinking about this, and thought it was important to say that BCA couldn't be bought, no matter who gave us money. So we adopted that as our fundraising policy.

Several years later, I think it was 1998, there was a controversy in the Bay Area about Chevron giving money to the Breast Cancer Fund, another organization here. As a result of that controversy, Sandra Steingraber wrote a letter to the Fund, which she shared with me, explaining her view that silence is the sound of money talking. That controversy and that letter prompted BCA to take another look at corporate contributions. The board ultimately adopted a written policy rejecting any funding from companies or entities that were profiting from cancer or contributing to cancer by polluting the environment. This was a first in breast cancer. It was so surprising to some people that the National Cancer Institute published an article about it in their journal. That policy has distinguished BCA for years, and enables it to do and say things other organizations can't because it might jeopardize their funding.

I should explain who Sandra Steingraber is. She's a cancer survivor, and poet, and author and a biologist. She wrote *Living Downstream*, looking at the connection between cancer and the environment. To environmental health folks, Sandra is a hero.

PLUSS: So just briefly, a lot of organizations think, “Well, if we don’t take this money, we can’t survive,” especially since, in my experience, companies like Chevron are very—uh, they just hand over the money very easily, you don’t have to go through a lot of processes. So how did—what was BCA’s fundraising strategy and how did they make that work?

BRENNER: BCA's fundraising strategy under my tenure and to this day is based on the principle that if individuals think you are doing important work, they will fund it. So we asked people to give. For a while we asked for donations to receive the BCA Newsletter, but now that's free online. So we wrote letters to our base and met with people, and asked them for money. For years more than 50% of BCA's funding has come from individuals, the rest comes from foundations, honoraria, and events.

To raise money that way, your member list has to be very accurate. You don't want to send letters to people who are uninterested or who have moved with no forwarding address. When I started at BCA, the mailing list was 3500. When we removed the bad addresses it was only 1750. We had been wasting a lot of money sending mail.

I get unsolicited mail now from lots of cancer organizations, but they claim part of the cost as part of their education program, which is a bad joke.

PLUSS: So, during your time at BCA, it seems like the base grew by a lot. Can you tell me how you engaged so many people?

BRENNER: The organization did grow a lot under my tenure. When I left the mailing list was 50,000 and we had about 16,000 email addresses for people. We used many strategies to grow the organization. We asked our members to help us by telling their friends. We were very savvy about using media to get our name into the press, and people found us that way because we had a comment on almost every controversy, which always resulted in some more fans. We also began a focused fundraising campaign, and when we met with donors asked them for names of people who might be interested in our work.

PLUSS: What were the demographics of people and communities who participated and (still) participate with BCA?

BRENNER: During my tenure, we were never systematic about collecting demographic data, but I'm convinced that several things that characterize our members: they are mostly white, mostly female, they are split between women of middle years and young women, and mostly middle class. The demographics of most breast cancer organizations, at least racially, is decidedly split between white organizations and organizations of color. BCA tried to bridge that divide by working with women of color organizations on issues of concern to them.

At least in the bay area, breast cancer organizations had one of two reputations among communities of color: either what I call "hit and run"—coming in to work on one issue, and then claiming all the credit and funding for themselves—or "do what you say you will do." BCA had that reputation.

PLUSS: Do what you say you will do? Yeah. So tell me about what organizations and movements BCA collaborates with?

BRENNER: I'm not sure I'm good on listing all the organizations, but we did a great deal of work with Our Bodies, Ourselves, the rBGH coalition, a group of grassroots groups focused on the importance of breast feeding, and a lot of environmental and reproductive health organizations.

The breast-feeding work arose out of our environmental work. The Breast Cancer Fund was promoting a law to monitor breast milk for environmental toxins. We were concerned that the bill, as written, would discourage breast-feeding. A lot of community groups were too, but they didn't have much clout. So we used our position in the movement to open up the discussion for those groups, and the bill was changed.

PLUSS: Ok. I'm gonna turn off this tape.

END TAPE 6

TAPE 7

PLUSS: Ok, this is part two of the fourth interview with Barbara Brenner. I am Zaylia Pluss, and we are in San Francisco on April 29, 2012. And you had a list of things you wanted to talk about in regards to BCA.

BRENNER: When I started at BCA, the staff consisted of me and a half time administrative person. My first hires were a development person and a media person, because I knew that BCA had to be in the public's mind if we were going to get funding. BCA is a very small organization with a big presence largely because of our media work.

I also figured out pretty early on that there were 3 types of calls that I should always return, and not necessarily in this order: a call from a board member, a call from a donor, and press calls.

The other tactic that was important for me in my work at BCA was to go to cancer scientific meetings, sit near a floor mike, and be first in line with a question for the presenter if I had one. I always introduced myself by my name, and BCA's.

One year, at the San Antonio Breast Cancer Symposium, a presenter said twice during his talk something about patients failing treatments. But patients don't fail treatments, treatments fail patients. I got to the mike and said that to a scattering of applause. The presenter, whose first language was not English, asked me to repeat it so I did. What was astonishing afterward was that my comment was a topic for discussion for the next 24 hours. Some of the advocates thought I was being rude. Please.

I will talk about Think Before You Pink, but there was another effort that presented a great challenge to BCA. We did a patient survey on the use of a new class of drugs called aromatase inhibitors. We published the results, but there was an error in what we published. By the time we figured out the mistake, the report had been widely distributed. We went into crisis mode, pulled the report off the web, contacted everyone we had sent it to, and held a national conference call to field questions about the mistake and how we were handling it. While the event was a really unhappy one, I think we presented a pretty good model for dealing with it.

PLUSS: Mhmm. Were there other things? Ok, that actually ties into another question I had. In your role as executive director at BCA, what were your philosophies and thoughts around leadership and decision-making, and how did you make sure you were accountable to the staff, board, funders, and communities affected by breast cancer and health disparities?

BRENNER: Leadership is a privilege. If I wasn't doing a good job, I expected to be removed from leadership. I always encouraged my staff to express their views and argue for their positions, and made it clear that I would take the heat when decisions were made. We were a team at BCA, I was just the

most public person, and I made sure that the staff knew that I knew that and appreciated all their work.

Accountability to funders was just a matter of spending time with foundation officers and answering their questions. That was easy. The board required constant vigilance, figuring out who had issues about something, and then devising the best way to address those issues. Sometimes by getting other board members to talk to them.

PLUSS: Ok, um so we have about 8 minutes, I think we should save that big question for next time. Before this interview, we talked a little bit about the connections between breast cancer, HIV, and health issues in general, along with social justice issues in general. Can you share your thoughts on those connections?

BRENNER: The comparison is often made of HIV/AIDS to breast cancer, and there are certainly similarities, but not that many. HIV/AIDS was a completely new and infectious disease. It affected at first in this country a very specific group of people. Breast cancer is as old as at least ancient Greece, and the demographics of who it strikes are certainly broader. So a lot could be accomplished in AIDS because of the type of disease it was and the fact that researchers and activists were writing on a clean slate. Not so in breast cancer. But I think what has happened in HIV AIDS, where the passionate activists who were willing to get in the streets have disappeared, has a lot of parallels in breast cancer, mostly highlighted in *Pink Ribbons, Inc.* I think there was more to your question?

PLUSS: Um, I asked about the connections to health issues in general.

BRENNER: I think a critical analysis of breast cancer can be translated to any illness, and most of health has become a matter of corporatization. You can walk to cure almost any disease now. I do wish that worked, but it doesn't.

PLUSS: It said, "I do wish that worked, but it doesn't." Yeah. So we're about out of time. Did you have more thoughts on that, or should we? All right, turn the tape off.

END TAPE 7

TAPE 8 May 4, 2012

PLUSS: Ok, this is the fifth and probably final oral history interview with Barbara Brenner. My name is Zaylia Pluss. We are in San Francisco, California, at Barbara's home, and it is May 4th, 2012. So I had actually given you this question ahead of time because it's a very long question, so I will read it and then you will be able to just respond with what you had already written.

We're gonna go through one campaign that Barbara has done with Breast Cancer Action, one that can teach us lessons for political mobilizing more broadly. We're gonna start with overall strategy and how the campaign fit into the overall goals of BCA. What were the goals of the campaign itself? Then we're going to go into tactics, challenges during the campaign, outcomes including unexpected outcomes, and lessons learned, and probably anything else Barbara has put in there. So go ahead.

It's thinking.

BRENNER: Breast Cancer Action's mission is to carry the voices of people affected by breast cancer to inspire and compel the changes necessary to end the breast cancer epidemic.

For me, that statement has two important elements. One is that BCA listens to its constituents and hears and articulates their concerns. The other is we don't promise to end breast cancer, because that's impossible. What we work for is changes that ultimately lead to fewer people being diagnosed.

Because BCA doesn't fund research, the best way to achieve the organization's mission is through education and activism. Through those means, supported by a savvy media strategy, Breast Cancer Action can and does change the conversation in breast cancer, influencing other organizations to move in the direction we lay out.

Breast cancer, like all political movements, is a spectrum. Breast Cancer Action holds the left flank of that spectrum. Susan G. Komen for the Cure holds the right flank. While moving Komen more towards the center is very difficult, organizations that are not so far right have begun to move. And the conversation has certainly changed.

Think Before You Pink is a campaign that advances BCA's mission and has certainly changed the conversation about breast cancer. It is the result of what I call the organic process of activism. Before this was a formal campaign with a name, I wrote a column for the April, 2000 BCA Newsletter, which is now called The Source, entitled "Exercise Your Mind." It encouraged people to ask questions about the money they raised that enabled them to walk in what was then the 3-day Avon Breast Cancer Walk. I had written that column because Susie had met someone at a meeting who, finding out what I did for work, volunteered that she was walking in the Avon walk. When Susie asked her where the money she raised went, she didn't know.

When Susie told me this story, she accompanied it with what came to be one of my favorite phrases during my tenure at BCA, "you know what you guys should do?"

I did a little investigating, and found out some interesting things about the Avon walk. I published the results of my investigation as the newsletter article. People who read the newsletter started contacting BCA with their concerns about breast cancer walks and products purporting to raise money for breast cancer. At the suggestion of a BCA board member, I submitted my newsletter column as an op-ed to the San Francisco Chronicle. It was published widely through the paper's syndication. More people contacted BCA with their concerns.

We came to realize that there were many people concerned with how money was being raised for breast cancer, and that there was an analysis that might help people direct their funding more thoughtfully. That was the beginning of Think Before You Pink.

We hired the services of Fenton Communications to help us frame the campaign because we didn't have staff resources capable of doing so. We worked with the brilliant communications strategist Lisa Witter, who coined the phrase Think Before You Pink.

Initially the goal of the campaign was to capture public attention on the ways companies used breast cancer to raise money, and to get people to ask questions before they purchased products just because it had a pink ribbon on it. One of those questions was whether the product being sold might be contributing to the breast cancer epidemic. Taking our inspiration from environmentalists who were concerned with companies trying to cover up their environmental records, we called the companies that engaged in this behavior "pinkwashers."

Because our financial resources were limited, we couldn't afford to advertise our campaign widely. So we placed a quarter page ad on the op-ed page of the New York Times. This is a spot usually devoted to advocacy of some kind. Because of financial constraints, we were only able to run the ad one time. We knew that we had to direct readers to more information, so we set up the Think Before You Pink website. On the site was a copy of the print ad, a list of critical questions for consumers to ask before they bought a pink ribbon product, and examples of products illuminating the questions being asked. We called the examples Parade of Pink.

We got a huge amount of free media from the ad placement. Reporters saw the ad and called as they were working on stories. This was the first time there had been public questioning of pink marketing, but it was clear that we had touched on something that concerned a lot of people.

Two of the pink marketing efforts that we highlighted on the website—Eureka vacuum cleaner, Clean for the Cure, which only gave \$1.50 from a \$150 purchase, and American Express, Shop for the Cure, which only gave a penny per purchase—ended their programs after 2002.

We believe that that was a direct effect of Think Before You Pink; the negative publicity was far more than the companies bargained for.

One result of the 2002 effort was that people started sending to BCA their least favorite examples of breast cancer cause marketing. We also had companies calling us to tell us about their cause marketing efforts. We knew we had a campaign that could have a lasting impact if we stayed with it and made it appealing every year.

In 2003, we did two things differently. We focused the New York Times ad on cosmetics companies, a class of pinkwashers that sold products to raise money for breast cancer but used carcinogens in their products. To support the ad, we developed a list of companies that were selling personal care products without the offending chemicals, and posted the list on the website. And we recreated the Parade of Pink as an extensive, but not exhaustive list, of pink ribbon products for the website, identifying in each instance the answers to the key Think Before You Pink Questions.

The campaign effort in 2003 was again hugely successful in terms of media coverage. It got people thinking about what's in their personal care products, especially those sold in the name of breast cancer. It also stimulated an effort that grew into the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics.

The Campaign for Safe Cosmetics is an example of something that recurred throughout my tenure at BCA. BCA would make public an issue that people effected by breast cancer cared about, and then other organizations would get involved and work on the issue without consulting or involving us. Environmental groups started the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, with funding from foundations that funded enviro issues. They invited one breast cancer group to be on the steering committee, but it wasn't BCA.

For several years after 2003, we returned to the theme of cause marketing for breast cancer in general, continually updating the pink products list on the website. The campaign in 2003 became web-based. We stopped placing print ads because we thought the campaign was well enough known to the press and the public that the expenditure would not have a significant return.

In 2007, we tried to focus on another group of pinkwashers—car companies. While the campaign did a good job of educating the public, the car companies to whom we had people send emails had very slick responses on the environmental safety of their products. Our resources were not sufficient to out-flank them.

The 2007 effort focused on cars was not the staff's original choice. We wanted to focus on the rBGH in Yoplait. But the BCA board was concerned that we would alienate consumers and our base if we focused on Yoplait, and would not agree to that direction for the campaign.

This was an internal challenge that we met the following year by providing more information to the board about Yoplait, rBGH, and the support of our allies. But it was a reminder that the staff of an

organization, the people doing the day-to-day work, are often ahead of the volunteer board in thinking about the direction of the organization. That may be one of the biggest challenges an Executive Director—and an organization—ever faces.

By 2008, BCA had done extensive work with a coalition focused on removing rBGH from the U.S. market, and there was considerable scientific evidence pointing to the fact that rBGH might increase the risk of breast cancer. The BCA board approved, and we launched a web-based, e-mail, and postcard campaign urging consumers to explain to General Mills (the manufacturer of Yoplait) their concerns about rBGH and breast cancer. The communications were sent directly to General Mills' CEO. The post cards and emails all explained that the company was pinkwashing, and should make its businesses practices consistent with its commitment to the breast cancer cause.

The campaign was completely successful. Not only did General Mills agree to stop using rBGH in its products, but, two weeks later, the yogurt company Dannon, which engages in breast cancer cause marketing, announced it would also go rBGH free. The campaign won a first place award for a corporate campaign from the Business Ethics Network.

One of the lessons of the Yoplait campaign was that partnerships matter. By enlisting the support of other breast cancer and environmental organizations, we made our demand stronger. One other lesson is that consumers have enormous power to change corporate behavior.

After the Yoplait success, we decided that we needed to add BCA's voice to chorus of those calling for the end of production of rBGH. Since the product had been sold by Monsanto to Eli Lilly, a company that makes breast cancer drugs, BCA had a unique perspective to add efforts to stop rBGH production. We understood that taking on Eli Lilly was a harder challenge for Think Before You Pink, because the company doesn't do cause marketing with rBGH. So while we launched Milking Cancer (the Eli Lilly rBGH campaign) as part of Think Before You Pink in October, we set up a separate website to drive that work.

Since then, Think Before You Pink has become a more opportunistic campaign. Since cause marketing is no longer limited to October, BCA has taken opportunities as they arise to get people to question and act on cause marketing. The best example of that is our "What the Cluck?" campaign against KFC's partnership with the Komen Foundation.

Two other things are worth noting. One is that other organizations started picking up on the Think Before You Pink questions, and even tried to claim the phrase. But, maybe because of my legal background, we had taken out a trademark on the phrase so it would protect BCA's intellectual property in the campaign. The other is that during the years we were doing the Parade of Pink, reporters always wanted us to identify what the "good products" were. We always refused, explaining that what is "good" is in the eyes of the beholder, but it was a challenge.

PLUSS: Ok. So, um, you were the Executive Director of BCA for 15 years, which is quite a long time, and I'm sure held a lot of institutional knowledge and relationships. Before our interview today, we talked a little bit about leadership transitions in feminist organizations. How did you—when you realized you had to step down, how did you go about transitioning?

BRENNER: I had decided some years ago that I would step down when I reached 60 years of age, because running BCA required energy and the leadership of someone young that people can look up to. So the organization started planning for that transition three years before I left. We did a succession plan, and I began delegating a lot more of what I did on a day-to-day basis to other staff.

I was concerned that BCA, which was so identified with me, thrive after I left, as was the Board. But it's impossible to transfer all the knowledge and relationships made in 15 years. One thing we set up was a fundraising campaign called the Barbara Brenner Rapid Response Fund as a way of encouraging people who were committed to me personally to continue to support BCA.

Since I left several months before my expected departure date because of my ALS diagnosis, some transition time was lost. But I have continued to make myself available to staff, including the new ED, when they have questions.

The feminist community has something of a reputation of eating their young, of trashing departing leaders and setting up a toxic environment for the next leader. I think we escaped that phenomenon at BCA because of the culture that I had worked for many years to establish of respect and support. And I have made sure to stay out of the new ED's way. It's hers to run now.

PLUSS: So, um, in 2010, you were diagnosed with ALS. Will you share with me your feelings at that point, and what's happened since?

BRENNER: ALS sucks. It's a terrifying diagnosis not only because how it affects people physically, but also because there are no treatments and it's always fatal. So first I cried. Susie cried. And then we began to confront what needed to happen for me to live as fully as possible. I will die of ALS, but before I do that, I'm still living. I started writing a blog called Healthy Barbs so I could keep expressing my thoughts on health issues, and I have a lot fun posting my political thoughts to Facebook. Susie and I are very lucky to have saved money over time so that we could adapt our house so we can stay here even as my mobility declines, and we have the support of a wonderful community of family and friends. So, while ALS sucks, I know that I am very privileged to be able to handle it as I do, and I wonder how people without these kinds of resources manage. I just realized I haven't been saving my answers since the first question. Oops.

PLUSS: We'll figure that one out. Um, ok. You have written a lot about, and you just mentioned, how supportive your friends and family have been, throughout the years and since you've been living with ALS. Can you tell me the ways that your community has supported you, and how you feel that you have supported your community?

BRENNER: I think we get back what we put into the world. We – and I – have always been there for our friends, in good times and bad. And my breast cancer work is well known among my friends who know that even now they can ask for help on breast cancer issues and I will provide it. Many of our friends have mentioned that one reason it's so easy for them to commit to helping us and me now is that we have both been so committed to our community for so long. We first felt this outpouring of love and support from friends when I got breast cancer, and we've stayed connected over many years. We've lived long enough and in such a way that we have a community, chosen family, which I think is what many people, particularly lesbians, end up with as they age.

Though there are some people I don't want to see now for a variety of reasons, I know that the connections I have made with people over many years of living a public life are the most valuable resource I have other than Susie's love and commitment

PLUSS: So you, throughout your life, and still, have been very busy. How have you figured your prioritizing your time between Susie, your job, activism, friends, family, and personal time?

BRENNER: I think the priorities have worked themselves out as I live a very full life.

When I was working, I never went to work before I practiced piano. Leaving work at 5 whenever possible was important so we could have time with friends or each other, or the symphony or a play. While I don't have that early a life anymore, because I don't have work to frame it around, we both still make sure that we have time and things that matter to both of us. And I always took three-week vacations with Susie.

I think if more people made sure to do what they love, and be open to how what they love changes as they do, more people would be happy.

PLUSS: Hmm. In some of your writing about living with ALS, you have brought up themes about optimism, managing as opposed to surrendering, and self advocacy. Can you share your share your process and feelings on managing your health and enjoying life in the face of this illness?

BRENNER: I think who we are doesn't change because we become ill. I have always been a sort of cranky or cynical optimist, and I bring that to living with ALS. I know a lot of people who just give up, moan about what they are losing. I certainly am aware of what I'm losing, but that drives my desire

to find ways to keep doing whatever I can, as long as I can. I'm amazed how many people with ALS don't know about or use this speech technology, who want to avoid a feeding tube because it feels too invasive so they risk pneumonia or choking when they try to eat. It's just not my way. I'm not a health activist for nothing.

PLUSS: What roles have spirituality and Judaism played for you throughout your adult life and specifically in the past couple of years?

BRENNER: I have always identified myself as a Jew, but my activities around Judaism have really developed in the last 10 years or so, since we found Rabbi Margaret Holub at the Mendocino Coast Jewish Community, and started attending High Holiday service there. Margaret has become a good friend, and has been in many ways a touchstone for me as I explore Judaism. I was not Bat Mitzvahed, so I didn't have a tallis until Susie gave me one for a birthday several years ago. Since I've become ill and stopped working, I've taken a Hebrew name because that was important to me, and it's also a Jewish tradition to change one's name to try to fool the angel of death. And I have started studying Torah, which is a fascinating study for an intellectual person like me. We now do Shabbat on Friday nights, and I listen to CD's of people singing Jewish prayers. It feeds a part of my soul. Every morning when I wake up I say to myself the prayer that thanks God for returning my soul to me.

PLUSS: We actually – I'm gonna turn off the tape right now and you can keep writing.

END TAPE 8

TAPE 9

PLUS: So this is the second tape of a fifth interview of Barbara Brenner at her home in San Francisco, California. My name is Zaylia Pluss, and it's May 4, 2012. And I just asked Barbara—she's written a little bit about how, and this is just for real, in the mainstream media in the United States, and many communities, people avoid talking about illness and dying, and people living with disabilities, elderly folks; and people living with illnesses are often marginalized and invisibilized. So what's the importance of talking about these issues, and what are your thoughts on that?

BRENNER: I think people who become ill often disappear from public view, either because they are uncomfortable in public with a bald head from chemotherapy or can't walk because they have ALS or MS or Parkinsons. But the invisibility of people who are ill lets the world think that the needs of these people don't need to be addressed. One of the functions of my blog is to keep these issues and people in public view, and I still do all I can do to make sure that issues I identify, like accessibility, are addressed to the responsible institutions. I noted just the other day that I have never seen a supposedly accessible bathroom with a push button door opener. That's nuts.

PLUS: Ok. We're gonna get into just a couple questions about your overall vision of the world and how you move through it. The first one I want to ask you is, on a day-to-day basis and in your work, how have you thought about yourself in your specific social location in relation to other people, and what considerations do you make in terms of your actions because of your location?

BRENNER: For a long time I have thought of myself as enormously privileged—by training, by education, by resources, by my position in the world. From that privileged position, I think of myself as needing to act on and articulate whenever I can the needs and ideas of people who don't have my privilege.

PLUS: Ok. What is your vision for a functional and just healthcare system in the United States?

BRENNER: Single payer universal health care, where the needs of patients come before private profits. Simple.

PLUS: Should be. Um, and this one's even more broad and maybe a tough question, but I think we should continually ask each other this.

What is your vision for the future of your communities, and really the world?

BRENNER: Are you asking what I would like to see, or what I think is coming?

PLUS: Um, what you would like to see. If you want to share what you think is coming, that's great too.

BRENNER: I would like to see a world in which everyone can follow their hearts desire, where that is not problem for anyone else, and in which people understand that they have more that connects them than separates them.

Every social justice issue is connected to every other social justice issue. You can see that if you open your mind.

PLUS: And do you have ideas for how we can get there?

BRENNER: I think it's starting to happen, because people working on one issue see an analysis made on another issue as relevant to them. I think in many communities, people and groups are working across issues to advance their common concerns. I think it has to happen in community.

I have often said that there are grass fires of social change burning in many places, and that sooner or later these fires will come together to create the conflagration of revolution.

PLUS: So, looking back on your life this far, what are you most proud of?

BRENNER: I'm most proud of my relationship with Susie and our friends, and of my work at the ACLU and BCA.

PLUS: Is there anything else you want to discuss? No. Since we have four minutes, I wanna ask you one other question that I was gonna skip because of time, and it has to do with technology. Seems like technologies, which are just such a vast category in this 21st century, can have life-changing effects both positively, such as the NeoKate app we're using to speak right now, and negatively, they have, they can have really bad health effects. What are your thoughts on that, on technology?

BRENNER: I think of technology as a tool, which is only as good as the person or organizations using it. When technology is used in a way that harms or might harm people, then we can use other technology to try to stop it. Technology is not always good or always bad.

PLUS: All right. Any other last thoughts now before we turn off the tape?

BRENNER: People ask me now what they can do for me. I want to tell them that what they can do for me is to live lives that matter.

PLUSS: “Live lives.” Yeah. All right. Thank you so much for—Ok. Oh—I was just going to say thank you so much for your time and sharing with me.

BRENNER: Thank you for doing such a good job at asking questions.

PLUSS: All right, I’m gonna turn off the tape now.

END TAPE 9

END OF INTERVIEW

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