ANDERSON: Let me just pause, because we're skipping ahead here too much.

PHARR: We're talking too much? (laughs) OK.

ANDERSON: Stick with the Women's Project a little longer and –

PHARR: They're all running simultaneously is the problem.

ANDERSON: I know. But I want to back up even before we talk about the Women's Project at great length, because I want to put some closure to the decade of the '70s by asking a couple more questions before we get into the '80s.

PHARR: OK.

ANDERSON: One of my questions is about your relationship with your family at this time — they've sort of dropped out of the narrative. So tell me about your relationship with them, from your return back [from] New Zealand and your coming out and engaged politically and living so far from home.

PHARR: Well, I remember writing my family a letter and saying, at one point — this was early '70s — and saying I didn't think I could come home for some family holiday because I couldn't take the behavior of, I guess, my brothers. And my mother wrote me a letter back and said, "Your father says, 'Have you lost your mind?'" (laughs) They didn't throw me out by any means, but I was having a hard time figuring out how to do a relationship with them with the feminist analysis I had and the feminist politics I had. A lot during that time — I wrote them every week.

ANDERSON: Wow.

PHARR: Yeah. So there was definitely a relationship there. That was during the period of time in which my father had his leg amputated. I gave him a dog during that time. I was in relationship with them, but we weren't having really serious conversations about my work. They knew what I was doing, they felt threatened by it, scared by it. They were very happy when I went to Head Start. I didn't have big conversations with them about all of the lesbian-baiting. Anything that affected me economically was the most terrifying to them. The second most terrifying to them was that I would be outside of society, that I would not be socially acceptable in the places where decent people (laughs) were. A real Southern and, I think, Southern religious point of view of both wanting you to be honorable and have integrity and to not disturb the status quo, that conflictual place — I think so many southerners struggle within that — those things running against each other.

ANDERSON: How'd you deal with the sexuality piece with them?

PHARR: Very poorly, I think. (laughs)

ANDERSON: Really?

PHARR: Very poorly. (laughs) I started coming out to my family in the late '60s, and I chose to do it through the people that I knew loved me the most and were the most accepting of me. So I did it first with my Uncle George and my Aunt Mary, who — well, he just died. This is 2005 and he died at age 96 last year. At that time I guess he was about my age. And they were terrific. Then to my brother, my oldest brother, and then just gradually worked my way, bit by bit, through the family. And I don't think I was fully out to my family until I wrote the book on homophobia, which is 1988. That's when everything was fully out.

I always took people home. I always talked about, This is who I live with, this is what we're doing — but the word lesbian was not always the word that was thrown about. I mean, they would see it in things written about me, but I would not be sitting in the room with my elderly parents saying, Well, as a lesbian, but instead I would say, Well, Kerry and I, or Ann and I, we're getting this house together, or We're doing this. And they would be there. It was that sort of being out. My family history's being rewritten as we speak. Now, people talk about how totally understanding and accepting my parents were. Of course no one can refute that because they're dead. You know, they died in '82.

But mostly during that time we were struggling with their declining health and old age, and so I was more open with my other members of my family than I was with these people who were struggling so hard to maintain their lives. I was in, I guess, the — I don't know what you would call that. I wasn't closeted, but I was not in their face. They knew who I was and what I was doing in terms of my love life and my relationship life, but there were not intimate details. You know, (laughs), it's hard to know how much of this on my part was political and how much was just familial, in that nobody in my family talks about intimate details of their relationships, and nobody is very overtly affectionate with their partners, of my seven heterosexual brothers and sisters and my 25 or 30 nieces and great-nieces and nephews and great-nephews. Some of that was familial. Some of that was the tenderness around their health struggles, because my father was in a nursing home for many of the last years of his life.

ANDERSON: But it sounds like you were able to find a place of integrity with yourself about it so that the intimacy was restored with your family.

39:42

PHARR: Right. Yeah. Well, I wouldn't say intimacy. I don't think I got intimacy until after — probably not until the '90s.

ANDERSON: Huh.

PHARR: Yeah.

ANDERSON: OK.

PHARR: It took writing that homophobia book, and there were several changes, but I would say most of it has come since I went to Oregon and worked there, and since I've been involved with my current partner. And I think she in many ways has facilitated some of that. She has helped to normalize me within my family, which has a lot to do with femme presence. But that's a whole other subject.

ANDERSON: It is, but we can talk about it a little here, too, because one of my other questions was about the gender stuff, and we hadn't talked about that yet today, about where you were in your own process around gender identity and if that was a struggle, coming out in the women's movement, in terms of whatever style or presentation that you had, and how you were thinking of yourself and –

PHARR: Well, you know, I came out, and you know how the women's movement was. The lesbian feminist movement was so we-don't-do-butch/femme-because-that's-about-roles-and-we're-trying-to-figure-out-this-gender-role-thing, which was both good and bad. Yes, they're figuring out the gender roles and wrong to say sort of pushing butch/femme off to one side. Everybody was considered kind of androgynous, and that was more of the ideal that people were seeking. They were also trying to remove labels, and so I basically lived then as I live now. What I have on today is basically what I wore then. (laughs) And it's almost no change in style except, I guess, my –

ANDERSON: Your sneakers are more modern. (laughs)

PHARR: My sneakers are a little more engineered and high-tech, (laughs) but — a lot of my partners were — if you have people, you should talk about the butch/femme scale. They would be much closer to me on that butch/femme scale prior to my engaging the relationship that I'm in now. My first relationship was with someone who was much more femme. With Ann, the girl I went to New Zealand with, that was a very closeted relationship. That was painfully closeted, and I think it had a huge effect on us. But in terms of dealing with gender relations in my family, they were so accustomed to me being three girls, four boys, and Suzanne, you know. I mean I had my own carved out space for gender and it's in the South, and for eccentricity. So maybe I should just tell the story of Anne real fast –

ANDERSON: Sure.

PHARR: – because it's a really, really important story. I said I probably wouldn't talk much about girlfriends, but this is important for many reasons. When we went to New Zealand, she was just putting together that there was a strain of a terrible disease in her family — a disease called Marie's [spinocerebellar] ataxia — and that her father had, just a few years prior, had begun to show symptoms of it, which is stumbling and falling down at first. She and her brother were told it was a 50/50 chance one or the other would have that.

Anne was a wonderful feminist and came back from New Zealand and worked at the public library in New Orleans and did huge women's exhibits and programming and that kind of thing. And around the time I was at Head Start, she called me and said that she thought she was showing symptoms and that her current partner would not go with her to check — to [the] Mayo [Clinic] — to be tested. And I said, "Well, I'm coming." And I got on a plane. We went to Mayo, and she was tested positive as having Marie's ataxia, a very rare disease. The cells of the cerebellum die off, and as they do, all the messages going to your muscles are interrupted, and so you lose your balance, your ability to walk, and eventually virtually everything, including your eyesight, speech — really dreadful.

And so we made a pact at that time that when the time came that she could no longer live on her own, if she didn't have a partner that she should come and live with me. That was the late '70s, and I take pacts really seriously. That's not a small word. And so in the mid-'70s she came to Arkansas. When she first came she was walking with, I guess, just a walking stick. And then she moved to the crutches that you put on your arms, and then she moved from that to a walker, and then from that to a wheelchair and/or an Amigo, a scooter.

So when I went to Oregon in '92, we really couldn't get services in Little Rock and Ann was falling all the time. She would get up in the night and fall and I was trying to lift her and get her back into bed, and she was very engaged in disability rights. She was engaged in the ADAPT [Disabled for Accessible Public Transit] and all the radical forms of disability rights. And working for passage of the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act], she was going in a wheelchair on a plane with other people in wheelchairs, many of whom who were paralyzed almost totally. And Ann, who couldn't get herself up if she fell, could hardly be understood when she talked — [they] were going to places like D.C. and closing the Department of Human Services by putting their wheelchairs in the streets. It was just wonderful, wonderful, radical direct action work.

She and I decided that we would move to Oregon, where I had made so many friends doing the campaign there, which we'll get to later. She lived out her life with me and died in '96 while we were together in Oregon. All during that time we were — what were we? Were we former partners? Were we — it was the continuation of a very, very deep and long relationship of two people who had discovered their feminist politics together, explored their love and sexuality with each

other, and remained — I think as often happens in maybe lots of people, but among lesbian feminists I know — these deep, deep, deep commitments to one another.

So that's a little bit of a sideline to this piece. But when we went to Oregon, because of the organizing that I had come from, we were able to put together a whole team of people. And we also had learned that, of course, from the [women's movement and the] HIV/AIDS movement, of putting a team of people for care. And one of her things that she had worked on all during her time of disability was to be able to keep people at home rather than have to go in nursing homes. We basically changed a house to be wheelchair accessible and she was able to live there except for the last six months or so of her life and ended up in hospice.

But in many ways, I think it's a story of feminism, a story about the depth to which women are committed to each other beyond sexual commitment. And it's the story of the involvement of community, and it's the story of political activity up until the time that you can't engage in life. You know, it's all of those things. And it's about the absolute essential worth of women, that the level of commitment comes out of the most profound belief that this life of this human, this woman, in whatever form, of moving from the most extraordinary beauty, in terms of how the conventional beauty's perceived — people are so affected by disability — and to see that whole range is beautiful. And it's meaningful that rather than seeing disability as incapacity, as seeing disability as stages of what happens to a human. So all of that's happening simultaneously.

ANDERSON: Maybe we should break there.

PHARR: OK. (laughs)

ANDERSON: OK.

49:36

END TAPE 3

TAPE 4

PHARR: Well, we had talked about gender and my family and – 00:05

ANDERSON: Yeah. That was such a wonderful and beautiful story with Ann, and I think you're right that it's such a testimony to feminism, but also to how we make lesbian families or queer families.

PHARR: Absolutely.

ANDERSON: That that's something that –

PHARR: Maybe I should talk about that for a minute.

ANDERSON: Yeah, creating our own families. Sure, why don't you talk about that?

PHARR: Well, I think throughout the '70s — from the '70s onward, that was so much of my life, was creating family. Not in a kind of sappy and sentimental sense, but creating these very deep commitments with people. And then in the '80s, I began doing what I call "making family" with people, where it was actually conscious and thought out. I think about that so much in queer life — of how we do that.

In fact, what I think is going on right now with the Right, all of these issues around marriage have about this much to do (gestures one inch) with marriage and about that much to do (gestures two feet) with how we define family. And I think that's what we have to be terrified of right now, is that under this push toward authoritarianism and the push toward the merger of church and state is a narrowing definition of family, of family connected both to — not just to benefits, but family connected to whether you have standing in any kind of way in a community. And I think that particularly affects women of color and low-income women, in general, because of the vilification of women of color regarding family through the welfare system.

ANDERSON: Right. And the imposition of marriage.

PHARR: Starting with the welfare queen from Reagan, moving all the way up now to this whole marriage promotion, and beginning more and more to say who really is a legitimate family, and moving it through the gay marriage thing that marriage is between a man and woman. And then immediately within that they move to the next step, that healthy families are a man, woman, and children. So it moved a whole category — huge categories of people — over into unhealthy families. And then that comes to who then can keep their children, who can adopt children, who can foster care children.

I think what we have done in terms of building lesbian families, or queer families, has been really wonderful. And it marks, I think, how we should live in society, that families should be bonded, not just by blood,

but by commitment and by a sense of responsibility for one another. And –

ANDERSON: Did you have responsibility for Ann solely, or was that a community-wide effort?

PHARR: It was organized as a community-wide effort, yeah.

ANDERSON: So you had a lot of support in caring for her.

PHARR: Uh-huh. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Right. And then as time, as her physical condition worsened so dreadfully, she came to the point [when] she had tremendous needs. She had to hire in care as well, because it had to be a little more trained than most of us were.

ANDERSON: So how did that impact your intimate relationships with other women? Were you able to have intimacy and sexual relationships and lovers during that time?

PHARR: I had three during that time. One, it ended in large part because of the relationship with Ann, in that when the relationship began I said, "You have to understand at some point, my friend Ann will probably come and live with me, and you need to be prepared for that and know that I am absolutely committed to that." And of course it was the beginning of the relationship, and my partner said, "Oh, that's fine. That's fine." And then when it happens it's far more difficult, and it becomes either me or her, kind of, very easily. Then I was involved with someone else that was a long-distance relationship.

And then my current partner, Renée, who was entirely engaged in caring for Ann and loving Ann — she had enormous appreciation for her and probably provided as much to her as I did. My partner and I were not living together at that time, but she was constantly in the house and always on the other end of the phone ready to come if anything happened, and providing care when I was out of town because I traveled a tremendous amount.

ANDERSON: So let's just wrap up the conversation we were starting to have about androgyny and then into butchness –

PHARR: OK.

ANDERSON: – and then we'll go back to politics a little bit. So, you said there's some peace and some closeness in your family that came as a result of bringing Renee into your family and the different orientation that you had around butchness versus androgyny or some things, so if you could just talk a little bit about that.

PHARR: Well, I think — several things. One, I think my family always loved me — always has, always will. I think they love their baby daughter, their baby sister. I think that has just been there, even though it has been hard for them. I brought new things. I brought scary things, not only politics but my sexuality — all of that. My going off and living other places and coming back, all of that, all of that was there.

I have tremendous appreciation of them for that, and have always loved them, even when it's been really, really hard. But I think with my other relationships, people, as I said, were much closer to me on whatever that butch/femme scale is, but then with Renee, she is both femme and very outgoing, and she's lived much of her life as a heterosexual. And, you know, she loves cooking. She loves sewing. She loves all those things that the women in my family love. And she loves to talk and she's very affable. When we're there, she seems to them, I believe, not only as who she is as a very lovable person, but as a person who would be acceptable anywhere. And so it moves me over into this category, I think, of eccentric. (laughs) So they could kind of get together with Renee and talk about my eccentricities.

It opens up this space, because they've always thought I was eccentric — that would not have been the word, but peculiar, or outside the norm of what the family was. But now they can embrace it within a framework. And most of them are pretty outspoken now about LGBT issues — not in big, public places, but within their own lives. And part of that was brought, too, by — when I started working at the Women's Project, I sent them every publication from day one, every newsletter I sent my family. Because I thought, I'm not going to be able to have conversations with this great big family, but I will let them know me, because I wrote for all of them. And so they got to see all of my politics laid out in that way. So that, I think that was a helpful thing, too.

Once my parents died, I was the person who said, "In order to have family, we have to come together in family reunions," and I was the organizer for those. We had one very painful moment in that my parents died in '82. I wrote *Homophobia: Weapons of Sexism* in '88. And I said, "Anybody in the family wants a copy, I'll give you a copy." And some asked for it and some didn't. (laughs) But the family reunion that I had planned was cancelled as soon as I sent this stuff out. And sort of a false reason was given for canceling it. I think it was felt as something that went too far — not so much as its content, but the fact the name Pharr was on it. That pride of, you know, who we are in the world, and here it was, not only homophobia but sexism on the title of this book, and the family name on the top. That has not been expressed openly. And now they're proud of it. But I think at that time there was — my sister who carries a lot of power in the family — I think it was a big thing. So they canceled it in September and had it at Thanksgiving, which was the one day when I say to all of my family, "I can't be with you because I'm with my chosen family." That was a piece in there.

But I've tried — I mean, in my teaching life in the '60s and — I've tried to dress appropriately for whatever it was I was doing. It was like

asking my mother to put my pockets low on my skirts and that kind of thing. So there have been times when I taught, you couldn't wear jeans, I wore skirts. I did what you had to do to be able to have that job. But in my at home life, I have looked as I look today. So, if I look butch today, I did then. If I look androgynous today, I did then. It's been pretty much a constant line. I mean, the things that have been constant are my love of reading, my love of gardening and the outdoors, my love of animals have been who I've been from the time I was a very wee child, you know.

ANDERSON: So when the sex wars were causing so much trouble in the Northeast, did that have any ripples or implications for you down here, in terms of the controversy over butch/femme or any of that stuff?

11:05

PHARR: Yeah, everything trickled down. We had a lot of controversy over butch/femme. We had a lot of controversy over SM — electrifying conversations, you know. I wouldn't call them wars so much, but great debates in our communities. But a lot of that was a little bit removed from us. Part of that I think had to do with class. A lot of the folks in the South were coming out, and we were engaged with people who came through who were not from the South, but a lot of the people were coming out in the South were working-class folks who weren't necessarily talking very much from an academic perspective.

I think a lot of us felt that a lot of the things that were going on happened within a university context — a lot of the great debates — which, for us, was good and not so good. Sort of the way a lot of people feel now about some of the trans issues: that there's trans folks that are working-class folks that have been struggling with this for years, decades. And then there's a university kind of a movement, and people sort of sway back and forth in trying to understand how those go back and forth, in terms of influencing each other.

ANDERSON: Let's go back to starting the domestic violence shelter, and tell me about how issues of sexuality impacted that group, that collective, and your organizing efforts, including getting funding and space. It's beginning that you're working this movement — you've talked so much about the lesbian baiting, so what was your experience as a worker in forming that shelter?

PHARR: I think this is where I have such love of feminism. When you take periods like that, where you have these strong heterosexual feminists who are both at home in their sexuality and understand the kind of flow and fluidity of sexuality, that are working eyeball to eyeball with women they knew last year as heterosexuals who are out this year as lesbians, and have loved them as friends through all of that. I felt like in Fayetteville that we did extraordinary things in terms of understanding one another and working side by side. For example, when we would be lesbian-baited, it was always, always clear statements by women who

were heterosexual in leadership. And almost never anyone saying, "I'm heterosexual, but," or "I'm heterosexual and," but allowing themselves to take the brunt of what was happening and instead providing an analysis of the necessity of working against violence. And just being clear that people have different sexualities. It's great. I loved it.

ANDERSON: How did you guys get funding?

PHARR: We got funding through the city and county and little bit of government funding, but a lot of yard-sale type funding. A lot of real church — a lot, a lot, a lot of church funding. Now when I started the Women's Project, it was under the umbrella of the United Methodist Church.

ANDERSON: Oh, I didn't know that.

PHARR: Yep, for five years. I was working as a VISTA and I went to the man who was in charge of the stuff, and he said, "You know, you should go over to the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation" — in Arkansas — Rockefeller had been a governor of Arkansas — "and talk to Tom McRae about funding this." And I did, and this was a very bright man. Started my long relationship with funders of coming to understand that the way you get funding is you sit down and you have political conversations with people. You don't go in, manipulate people, you don't do facts and figures, you just have — you talk the politics of the day and what might happen. And Tom said, "You know, Ronald Reagan's about to be elected, and you need to get a church to umbrella you. Don't get a 501C3. With the small majority and the way things are rising, we're about to enter a very rough decade."

I went to the district superintendent of the United Methodist Church, because they had been such supporters of the battered women's shelter, and said, "Would you umbrella this women's project?" And they said sure. And that's what started, really, my work against the right, was because immediately we came under attack by what's called the Good News Methodists, and that's the internal right wing of the Methodist church. And the attack against the Women's Project was for lesbianism, because of my being an out lesbian.

Our first grant was from the Women in Crisis of the United Methodist Church — Peggy Halsey. Then the United Methodist Women, who are quite the group. I mean, they're wonderful, they're just extraordinary. I guess it's the largest women's organization in the country, other than the rightwing ones. And they are very, very strong on educating their members in a progressive way. And every four years they have a huge conference, and they have such politics around that conference that it's very hard for them find a city where they can have it, because they require that the hotels have good labor practices. They require that the hotels don't discriminate. They require that they have good environmental practices, they don't serve you on Styrofoam and plastic. They're just really extraordinary, wonderful people.

And so within the church they stood with us. They took it on. They took the battle on for us. And so, for five — not just for those five years, all the way through, because it built with different — as the '80s progressed, there were attacks against feminists everywhere and there were particularly attacks against lesbians in leadership. And the United Methodist Church and its national headquarters was terribly baited as being lesbians and Communists, so they fought those battles alongside us. The Women's Project was always heterosexual and lesbian, and always African American and white. It was founded on the belief that 50 percent participation of women of color and 50 percent participation of white women is not equal, that we have had such a history of racism, there has to be a tilt toward larger numbers of women of color in order to overcome just what exists in the room at any moment.

And so it was formed on that belief, that we'd have leadership of women of color, a majority of women of color on the board and on the staff, and that that would only be cosmetic — that to make that real that money was about equality, that people would have to be paid the same, and that decision making was about equality, that everybody would have decision-making power over how we spent the resources and what the agenda would be. That's what made it such a progressive, radical organization — not radical so much in the way that people think of radical today, which is how far to the edge can you go, but radical in how close to the cause can you go.

ANDERSON: What models did you have for creating this? Tell me what those conversations were like among you founders in coming up with those guidelines and practices.

PHARR: I don't know what models we had. It came from different people. I brought a lot with me from the work I'd done over the last decade and observing injustice within the women's movement.

20:27

ANDERSON: I mean, you really were creating a new one, weren't you?

PHARR: We were trying. We were trying to really create something. We didn't even call ourselves a collective because we based the idea not on collectivity, but on overcoming injustice, which is I think a little bit different. I'm not sure. I'm not 100 percent sure. But it came out of a racial analysis, was how it came, rather than out of analysis of just fairness among any set of women who happened to sit down together. That was the difference in it, I think. Because we did that, we had a different agenda from what primarily white organizations did. We took on issues and took positions that were awfully hard sometimes, because we were working not to just come at that from some white and middle-class perspective. I loved working there. There was such enormous joy. It was small. I still believe in small organizations.

ANDERSON: How many staff were you?

PHARR: At tops, we would have five. Sometimes we'd get an intern. We had a board of about eight or nine, sometimes ten.

ANDERSON: Did your position change while you were there, or did you go straight into a directorship?

PHARR: We had not intended to have a director. Foundations were adamant about that. We said we'll have a director in name only, and that'll be according to task, and that everybody has legitimate, certain tasks, and everybody shares tasks across. And everybody knows each other's jobs. And everybody's a public face of this organization. So if we have someone called director, that's not who gets called forward for the press conference. That would be mostly for funding. I did that only until about '88, I guess, and we transitioned that title to an African American staff person, Janet Perkins, who was wonderful, and continued on to that. Now the person who carries that title, the one that's part of the Project, is Judy Matsuoka.

I loved that, being small enough that we could turn on a dime. We could deal with what came up. We could have projects, but we also had this flexibility and we weren't just constantly overloaded with fundraising, because we maintained a small budget. Now, we didn't get paid a huge amount of money. We probably would've had to fundraise quite a bit more in order to do that. But it made us able to have large impact. And one of our methods was to do local work, and take our local work and talk about it nationally. So it would take actual on-the-ground work, pull analysis from that, and then take that analysis out to the region or to the nation.

An example with that would be, we were watching the fact that the Klan was meeting around the state, the posse comitatus, the various rightwing groups, some of them pretty rough, the rise of skinheads, and we thought, Well, no one is watching this. No one's observing this and documenting this, so maybe we should step in and do that. And so we did. And as we began to do it, we realized that for people in Arkansas, our constituency, their primary issue was not whether the Klan was around or not, it was whether racist violence was around. It was not whether there was any direct persecution through the Klan, of talking about Jews or doing direct action toward Jews. It was more about the general acts of violence to religious minorities, both verbal and physical. Same with LGBT folks, and we included women in that. And we called this a Women's Watchcare Network and we engaged with the United Methodist Women to fund it and to be part of it.

Then we went around the state and met with groups, and in the room we would bring people who'd experienced homophobic violence, religiously motivated violence, racially motivated violence, and sexually motivated violence. And then we'd have them tell their stories, and of course what would come out of that is people would realize that their stories were very similar — certainly in their sense of being attacked,

and the impact on them was similar. And many times the actual circumstances were similar.

We decided to monitor racist, religious, homophobic, and sexist violence. In those little groups, we would get them to monitor their town, so if the Klan was putting a flier on a car in front of the Wal-Mart, to send us that flier, to read their newspaper, to cut out the clippings about the acts of violence, and then we would put it in a document, a log. And we would document how many women had been murdered and what it was motivated by — gender. It would be anecdotal, so in those we would tell what weapon was used, what the circumstances were, whether her children were present, where she was found, whatever, and all the way through.

And what we found in doing that is that we would have this many documents about women, this many documents about race, this many documents about religious folks, and this many documents about the LGBT people (gestures decreasing size of documents.) And part of that had to do with who would report, because you have a closeted LGBT community, and I don't want to talk about homophobic violence. But what was startling in it was this enormous number of women being murdered. And we were able to analyze it and say how many were murdered. We didn't even do rape and incest and all the other acts of violence — though in racial violence and religious violence and homophobic violence, we did verbal violence as well as physical violence as well as murders, so that we could talk about the climate of violence in the state.

But with women we were able to analyze — we started this in '87 or '88, I think — and we were able to analyze whether they were in relationship with the person who killed them, whether there was any sexual act involved, whether there was any acts of violence against their body, like drawing things on it, cutting things on it, that kind of thing. We were able to analyze all of those pieces. And so we kept these horrible logs, wonderful and horrible, with these huge numbers of women who were killed. And we've had them now 18 years.

And saying that we were using them for all kinds of things. One of the things we used — but let me finish that sentence. We would use them for all kinds of things, but, if nothing else, that we would be witness during this period of history. We would be there to say, This is the racial climate in the state. This is the climate of homophobia. This is the climate of religious oppression, and this is the climate of murder of women. And though we may never change anything, people will know that as many women were killed each year in Arkansas as were killed in Vietnam at the height of the war. And who is speaking out and who is crying about this?

29:55

We also used it to say sexist violence should be considered a hate crime. We were among the first to say that. And what made it so powerful was we would say, What is it about this that's not the same as acts against people of color or acts against religious minorities? So we did a lot of national work, taking that local evidence. Then we did a lot

of just consciousness-raising, and we still do that. It's kind of gotten [to be] a popular thing now, but we would put tombstones out on our front lawn with a bio of the woman — this was around 1990 — and call press, and the families would come and lay flowers next to them and you would see the picture of this woman and read this heartbreaking story of why and how she was killed, and often, what didn't happen to the perpetrator. So that's one of the kinds of things that we did.

We'd train women in non-traditional jobs and then we would draw analysis out of that and talk about it. We would take on really, really hard issues. An example would be at the University of Arkansas, it had a great winning basketball season. They were heading to a tournament. And the basketball players, who happened, that year, to be African American, took home to the dorm a young — I don't know how young, maybe college-age — white woman, who was very drunk and dancing on the tables and that sort of thing, and all raped her. And it was a huge, huge thing in the press because it was going to take them out of the tournament. That was what the primary press was about it. We jumped in the middle of that. And it was fierce. It was really fierce. We thought that this was what our job was, that we had to jump in the middle of that and talk about both race and gender.

ANDERSON: So did you have differences of opinion with other feminist organizations and leadership?

PHARR: The feminists were furious with us, and the African American community was furious with us, and the sports community was furious with us. Eventually I think people came to understand what we were talking about. But we did a gender analysis about rape, and we did a racial analysis about sports and African Americans and the use of African Americans and tossing them away, out of the school. We put those two things together. We gained someone here. We would lose someone there, but gosh, we were attacked in the newspaper. We received hate mail, all kinds of things.

But we thought that this was our work. The work was not to lay back and say, Well yeah, you know, she was drinking. She deserved to be raped. Well yeah, you know, these African American men, it doesn't matter that they were poor young men in southeast Arkansas who were recruited to play basketball and are not given an education while they're there, and the second they have an injury are tossed out and back in poverty. We're not going to talk about race and class, we're going to talk about all of that. So that was our work.

ANDERSON: Did you have any engagement with the Clintons through the Women's Project? None? No demonstrations of support for your work or receptivity to your findings, or –

PHARR: We criticized him a lot. I guess we were uppity women.

ANDERSON: I think they said that about Hilary, too, but I guess you were more uppity.

PHARR: Yeah. I think we had some admiration of Hilary, but when Clinton appointed — the time that we were working at our strongest, Arkansas had more millionaires in northwest Arkansas than, I think they said, were in the Upper East Side of New York. Wal-Mart came out of there. Tyson came out of there. There were all these people that were just loaded, top of the *Forbes* line in Arkansas. And Bill Clinton created a committee to advise schools out of those guys. We were furious.
We were some of the first people to analyze Wal-Mart in the '80s. And we said, So, OK, we've got this huge corporation that hires mostly women, that cuts their hours just short of full time. They get no benefits — many of whom are people of color, almost all are working-class women. And who have to go on welfare in order to survive and who don't have medical care.

These are the people that you want to advise our schools? You have Tyson, who's running a chicken industry in which farmers are suffering and in which chickens are receiving horrible medications under cruel conditions in a time in which he's flying people in from Mexico to work — this is before anyone was concerned very much about legal/illegal — to work in the plants, because he can pay them so little money, and is known as a woman abuser: this is who you want to advise our schools? These are people who want people for their factories. These are people who are not working to build an economic system that benefits everyone. These are people who want people who can actually just be go-to and do what they say and never have quite enough in life. It was foreshadowing what we have today. So we criticized Bill pretty heavily on that.

ANDERSON: Is this also the time when you're starting to do the workshops around homophobia and –

PHARR: Yes.

ANDERSON: OK.

PHARR: I started those –

ANDERSON: Was that under the auspices of the Women's Project, or was that connected to your work with the [National] Coalition Against Domestic Violence [NCADV]?

PHARR: This project was that kind of organization, where everything we did was under its auspices.

ANDERSON: Right. So you were going out as Suzanne Pharr or –

PHARR: Yeah, as the Women's Project and chair of the Lesbian Task Force of NCADV. And the way I came into that in '83 was, they wanted an open lesbian who was doing the work openly in a battered women's program from somewhere around the country, and so they asked me to come to one of the big conferences. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence had big annual conferences, every two years –

ANDERSON: And had you been involved with that organization before as a result of the shelter stuff?

PHARR: Uh-uh.

ANDERSON: OK.

PHARR: No, I was just doing my work locally. And they wanted me to come and to consider doing that. I went to a conference and, by some way they — I think I was kind of anointed, but anyway, I was elected there to chair this. I went then to my first coalition meeting and it started extraordinary growth for me. It was interesting. I drove from Arkansas to Colorado, and I picked up a woman in Oklahoma who had just been fired for being a lesbian in a shelter. Went to this National Coalition meeting, had my first meeting and understanding of the Women of Color Task Force, which was just such an extraordinary, powerful, wonderful group led by Catlin Fullwood. And in that meeting, talked about what lesbians and battered women have in common, and it went from there.

At the conference where I was elected — it was a very small Lesbian Task Force. At that time, I bet they didn't have ten people. And they had decided at that conference that they were going to wear a pink triangle for visibility, and they were going to ask their allies, other women, to wear pink triangles. Also at that conference, they were going to have a women of color institute. So these two things were happening. So you had people walking around with pink triangles and you had this women of color institute that about 100 women came to, and I think there were 1,500 or so people at the conference itself — wonderful conference.

What happened is the women of color came into the conference powerfully, because they'd just had a full day of talking with one another, and you know that heady feeling it gives you when you find all these others who think like you and experience the same thing as you: it gives you a sense of power and a sense of collective strength. So they come into the conference and all of us are just astounded, and we just think it's just the most wonderful and extraordinary thing we've ever seen. Well, the fallout from that was that women went home to their local communities and said, There's no room for white women in this movement any more. It's been taken over by lesbians and women of color. Now I would suspect in combination we might have represented 150 people out of 1,500.

ANDERSON: Ten percent.

PHARR: Yeah, at tops. And so my first job as chair of the Lesbian Task Force was to build a strategy within NCADV for us to go out into these communities where they were going to drop out of NCADV — the state coalitions were, which would've been devastating — and to meet with them. And so the plan was for me to go with a heterosexual member and that we would talk about the importance of having lesbians in the movement and the movement itself. So we did. We went to places like Louisiana and Mississippi, and it was life changing.

40:17

ANDERSON: And you were talking to other workers in the movement? OK.

PHARR: Uh-huh, their state coalitions. They were shelter directors, mostly. And in some places they ate us alive. One of our agreements before we went in is that the heterosexual woman would not say that she was heterosexual. And so for the first time, they had to hear what it felt like, and feel what it felt like, to be totally dehumanized, be talked about as the scum of the earth. We did well in some places. Some places stayed and a couple withdrew. But out of that came the commitment to do the homophobia workshops, and in the Lesbian Task Force we said, We're not going to do that without also doing work on racism. And so we would combine the two of those. In the beginning, I did them. And then I and Catlin Fullwood did them together as a biracial team. And we did them everywhere.

ANDERSON: You went to every state?

PHARR: Oh, yeah, place after place. Little place, big place, all over the country. Sometimes I was alone, sometimes with her. And that's what provided the material that's in the homophobia book. It was wonderful. But being part of NCADV and working — usually we'd have 40 people, one person per state, and then the organization that was women of color and white women, lesbian and heterosexual, rural and urban, doing consensus decision making that was quite extraordinary, and it really built my politics.

What I always say about this movement, it has given my life and my best friends, my very best friends, the people that have the deepest meaning to me. That was a great time, because in the women's anti-violence movement, every issue is there. There's not an issue that we have in society that doesn't appear on the table in that movement. To do that on a consensus format where everyone speaks, you actually get to hear all the different perspectives on that movement. And we had some terrible struggles in it, the worst of which was when we had the potential for funding from the department of justice.

ANDERSON: Oh, yes. You write about this briefly, right?

PHARR: Yep. And they were going to give us a very large grant. I think it was about $600,000 for publicity regarding battered women. We insisted in that if we were going to do it, we were going to talk about race and we were going to talk about sexuality. They said no, and it came down to whether we would accept it on their terms or not. And we refused it.

ANDERSON: But that was a very controversial decision, I'm sure.

PHARR: Hugely. Hugely.

ANDERSON: You must've had huge fights about that.

PHARR: And with tremendous agony, we talked and worked and debated. And people were broken-hearted. I was broken-hearted, though I was in leadership to refuse it. But it was heart breaking. Then another group formed that said they would accept it, and that had enormous impact on the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and it's never been quite as strong.

ANDERSON: So they broke off and formed a different organization? Which organization was that?

PHARR: You know, I can't remember the title of it now. I don't think it exists any longer, but I can't remember what it was called.

ANDERSON: So where did lesbian battery fit in to all of that?

PHARR: In 198 –

ANDERSON: How did people start talking about that?

PHARR: Yeah. Right after I became the chair, we were hearing people talk about sadomasochism. We were hearing people talking about battering. We were hearing — these things were rising up around violence. There was a woman who was part of the Lesbian Task Force named Barbara Hart — a great attorney for the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence. And she and I cooked up this idea to have a meeting about it, and she's a very strong-minded, tough customer. And I thought I was, but we didn't have the courage to say it was a meeting on lesbian battering. We called it a gathering on violence in the lesbian community.

We just sent out a letter to all of the state coalitions off the NCADV mailing list, and we set up to have it at the 4-H Center, outside of Washington, which is a place we often met, because it was pretty inexpensive. Much to our surprise, over 100 women showed up. We really had a lot on our hands — here we were, in the middle of this, with more people than we ever thought would have interest in it. And we spent most of the time having people tell their stories, and it was the

first time that I know of [that] there had been a national public moment for that, and it was devastating. Women I thought of as some of the strongest, toughest people I'd ever seen were crying their eyes out to hear it. Not because it happened to them, but for many in the room, they had been engaged in the battering, had experienced the battering — but because they were hearing women say, My batterer is a feminist leader in my town; these are the ways in which this happened to me.

I know this wonderful woman from Mississippi, Gail Martin — came back to the dormitory after the first night. And she was standing out in the hall, and she's a big strong woman. Tough. Great politics. She was just crying. She said, "Suzanne, I built all of my politics on the belief that lesbians were different from other women." And we did. There was a kind of essentialism — a belief that people had, all through the '70s and certainly up to that point in the '80s, and thereafter probably still — I don't know if people have it any more — but the belief that we were somehow different. We did not participate in the things that the heterosexual world participated in, not just that we were feminists, but there was something about — we were more loving –

ANDERSON: Being women.

PHARR: Yeah, like that. We were women with women. We knew that was going to reshape our definition of male violence. And out of that we thought, Well, what can we do with all this we learned? We decided as the Lesbian Task Force to publish an anthology and put it right out. We asked someone who wasn't a member of the Lesbian Task Force, we asked Kerry Lobel to work with a team from the task force and for her to edit it. And we put out a book called *Naming the Violence*, and that's what broke open the subject, which is now much broader than that, of course. It's violence in the LGBT community and it's much, much broader than what it was.

Then there began to be groups created to work with that. We developed a strategy to go into shelters to figure out — not so much beforehand, but how to make shelters places where lesbian workers would not know discrimination. And now we had to develop a strategy of how to create shelters where lesbian workers were not discriminated [against] and where women who were lesbians felt safe to come into them.

ANDERSON: Did you have fear about putting this information out there and what the right would do with it, in terms of lesbian hate –

PHARR: We didn't just have fear about the right at that point. I mean the right wasn't capital R for most of us. It was fear of everybody.

ANDERSON: Using it against –

PHARR: It was fear of the mainstream feminists. It was fear of our funders. It was fear of the people we work with in churches, it was fear of our coworkers, it was fear — it was devastating news for everyone. We knew homophobia would up lesbian baiting. Everything would move in a different way from that day onward, and that things would have to be reshaped in our minds, everybody's minds.

ANDERSON: So were there some then that advocated keeping this within our own — Let' s not make this public, it'll be used against us –

50:38

PHARR: Not very many. There was that conversation, but not — Jean Grosholtz was there, and I know she took a strong lead on how to make this public, and helped edit this statement to the Lesbian Nation, as we called it in those days, which is in that anthology. But it was quite amazing. So the workshops then became more complex as well, in talking about homophobia and racism and trying to figure out how to do that. But I think that was great work.

When the day came for me to write the book on homophobia, my idea was that I had been given the privilege of this information from doing all these workshops — I had done probably 20 or 30 a year for a number of years, some of those with Catlin, and lots and lots of them alone. And I thought, I should write this down and give this back to people. My idea was I would take it and have it copied and I'd send it to the state coalitions and they could do what they wanted to get it back to these groups. And then this wonderful feminist fundraiser came to my house, Kim Klein — extraordinary person, probably is known as the best progressive fundraiser and teacher about fundraising in the country. And at that time, I think she was living here in Knoxville, where she worked for the Appalachian Community Fund.

She came by, and I was telling her about it, and she said, "Well, why don't you publish it?" And I said, "Publish it? I don't think so." And she said, "Sure. I could raise the money for that." She said, "In fact, I have my own little imprint. It's a press." But she said, "Send it off to someone, others, and see if they will." And I sent it to a couple of feminist presses, and I remember one of them was run by a good friend of mine who said, "Suzanne, you know, we can't publish this. This is not theory. Marilyn Fry is theory." I said, "Oh, OK." So I went back to Kim and she said, "We'll publish it." So she raised — I think out of Boston — I think it was $3000 or $5000 — $5000 I think it was.

And we published 3,000 copies, and started selling it to benefit the Women's Project. And it just went from there, and I think now it's up to, I don't know, 45,000 copies or so, you know, and it's taught in various classes and that kind of thing. Though I would say, had I known, before I wrote it that it was going to be published and it was going to be reviewed and that people were going to teach it, I never would've written it.

ANDERSON: Because?

PHARR: It was way too public. It changed my whole role in life. I became a writer. I became more of a speaker. I had much more of a public place. I mean, because of it I've received tremendous regard and respect and kindnesses, but it shifted me so much from this community organizer to this more public, public place. Once you have writer behind your name, it shifts who you are in the world, which is interesting.

ANDERSON: And then you were called on to do public speaking and performing in a way that was uncomfortable to you?

PHARR: And was separated off from people in a way. It moves you to a little bit of a place of — stardom is not the right word, but regard that's not totally earned in the way it's earned when you work on the ground, you know?

ANDERSON: OK. We're going to have to pause there.

54:38

PHARR: OK.

END TAPE 4

TAPE 5

ANDERSON: I guess we'll kind of say that we're wrapped up with NCADV and the Women's Project and move into the 1990s and start talking about Oregon, which I guess in certain ways marks your entry into the LGBT political world. I mean, NCADV and Women's Project, to my mind, still fit squarely into lesbian feminism, and it's where you call — I mean, I'm assuming you were calling yourself a lesbian feminist while you were doing that work –

00:05

PHARR: Uh-huh.

ANDERSON: – and really identified with that community and that movement.

PHARR: Yeah. Still do. Still call myself a lesbian feminist.

ANDERSON: Yeah. Right. But –

PHARR: Kind of old style. (laughs)

ANDERSON: Doing the work in Oregon means that you have a very different community of folks to work with and a different politic that includes gay men and –

PHARR: Right.

ANDERSON: Right. So why don't you talk about that?

PHARR: Now, during this period of the '80s, I was doing things like going to Creating Change, so I was engaged with the movement and –

ANDERSON: So you were feeling like you were also part of the gay and lesbian movement as well?

PHARR: Yeah, yeah — and doing a lot of organizing around LGBT stuff, through the Women's Project, and had done some in the '70s, of course. So, I was always part of that, but I've always been absolutely set on a multi-issued, multiracial, broad-based movements. That's been my life work. I've never been able to be single issue. And it is just –

ANDERSON: Which is not the gay and lesbian movement's strength.

PHARR: No. It's not –

ANDERSON: So. Especially at that time –

PHARR: Yeah.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

PHARR: And so if it's not multiracial and multi-issued, I try to find a place for that. So I was still working for the Women's Project when I went to Oregon, and the way I was called to do that is because of the work that we were doing monitoring the violence against women and people of color. We were also — we were going and standing up against the Klan and we were really monitoring those really hard far-right groups in Arkansas as well, and going to conferences regarding that kind of far-right violence.

And so I was under attack by the right, the theocratic right, and I was also monitoring the far right, and I was coming to have this greater and greater understanding of it. I went to a Creating Change conference — I don't know what year — anyway, one year. And Donna Redwing and Scot Nakagawa from Oregon said, Suzanne, we have this video we'd like for you to watch, because they knew me from my working against the right, and so we went down in the basement of the building that we were meeting in, and I looked at it and it was by the Oregon Citizen's Alliance. I watched it and this has been — probably my greatest skill is to be able to sort of see themes and patterns and connections and put that in language that people can understand. If I have a gift, I think that's –

ANDERSON: Yes, your books are hugely successful because of that.

PHARR: I think that's probably just connecting dots, as they call it now. So I looked at this and I said, "Oh, you know, this is so much more than an attack against the LGBT community, or what we called the lesbian and gay community at the time." I said, "You know, this is an attack against really democratic principles, an attack against democracy." They wanted me to come to Oregon, and it was beneficial for the Women's Project for me to go there at that time because they were going to pay me to come and we needed the money, we were always up against it with funding. I agreed to go out for a few months and work to help people in the state to understand this in a broad sense, rather than in a narrow sense — sort of like the marriage issue today — to understand this in a broad sense, not in a narrow sense. I spent, I think at first, six months there, basically working on analysis with people and spreading that. I worked for some people, Scot Nakagawa and Marcy Westerling, to start this rural organizing project that was modeled off the Women's Project, and did that kind of work. And got people to understand how to frame this in this much larger way.

And then I left. I don't know, it was June, and the election was in November. I got back to Arkansas and I realized, Well, this is crazy, so I turned around and went back and went for the campaign. And I did the national press for the campaign, and then the international press for — my job was to take the local and spin it to the state and spin the state to the national, or the national to the international, which we did, and

raised lots of money, and I think, really, really expanded people's thinking. And we won.

Then it was after that that I decided to actually move there, because of getting services for Anne. We basically just moved an arm of the Women's Project there and I did national work. So at that time I was called to go back and forth across the country to talk about all the issues of violence against women, talking about civil rights. I've spent much of my adult life as — you know, certainly in the Women's Project onward — identifying as an antiracist worker. That was always work to be done in workshops, really, regarding that. There were workshops to be done regarding everything that the Right was bringing up. I just traveled, almost all the time. Then I returned — I wrote the book on *In the Time of the Right*.

ANDERSON: Yeah, how did you end up writing that second book when you were so reluctant to receive all the attention from the first one?

PHARR: Because I was terrified. And at that time I was doing things like organizing meetings of — for example, we did a four-day meeting at Blue Mountain for people who were researchers of the right wing, and pulled together — which was always my goal in meetings, was to bring people who weren't the usual mainstream people, but — because most of the researchers were white and were men, and so we held a meeting where we brought also women and people of color to the meeting and talked about what the right wing was up to. As I got deeper and deeper into it, from just being attacked from it and observing it and monitoring it, I was now getting more eyeball to eyeball. I was chasing the Promise Keepers. A group of us went inside one of the Promise Keepers' meetings. I was moving deeper and deeper into my investigation of the right, my knowledge of the right, and my understanding of what the future was going to look like.

There were a few of us running around, basically saying, The sky is falling. I thought it was really important to say to people in 1996, You think life is one way, but the right has already occupied this country. That's why the book's called *In the Time of the Right*. That it's no longer this particular kind of battle. And people actually thought I was kind of a conspiracy theorist, I think. And so, what you had was, in that period of time after so much of this came from the campaign of Barry Goldwater onward — but the big time was during the development of institutions in the '70s, and then Reagan and that huge move to anti-taxation and privatization. And then the first Bush, then Clinton pulling the Senate to the right.

And then when George Bush wasn't elected but put in office, that the right really became institutionalized. They were getting a little bit iffy at that time, but they were still very strong and still in control of the country. But this institutionalized them, in a certain way. Many of us thought, Well, we've elected this idiot. He's laughable. And yet we also knew that he was meeting with the Heritage Foundation every Thursday

morning at 8:30, we knew that the right was in his cabinet, that it was institutionalized in a different kind of way in government.

Then you have September 11th, and you have the infusion of fear, which I thought was an incredibly important situation the right has known — as Richard Viguerie says, from the first, that there's nothing that raises money like fear and there's nothing that motivates people like fear. You have the infusion of fear and a shift in our politics that gives the right the opportunity to put something in place they've had pieces of for years, and a plan of for years — the USA PATRIOT Act. They have a clamping down and a repression, and I don't think people really awakened until the 2004 elections, where people understood that the right had been consolidated, now, not just institutionalized, but consolidated. And so now you have all kinds of people who are running around, writing books about the right, talking about the right, being authorities on the right, who have never studied the right, and thank goodness for them, but no longer do people think that we're saying the sky is falling. In fact, people are acting as though they'd known this all along.

10:19

But it was very hard to get an audience in, and that's why I wrote that book, because I felt like we were a country that was moving toward fascism, and that there was a political, moral, social obligation to write about what is happening and what we might do to fight that. I would write a little bit of a different book now because we see and understand and know so much more, and so many other factors have come in. I would keep that book, but I would add to it in terms of what we need to do and the different ways we've seen it become institutionalized since 1996.

It's probably the center of my political thought now, is how do we resist, not just reactively, but how do we resist and how do we create vision and action that is connected both to resistance and vision. Two pieces I've done — well, there are several pieces. One is I worked for five other Southerners to create Southerners on New Ground, which is to work with LGBT people in the South to take on race, class, and gender, and to work with civil rights organizations to take on LGBT issues. So that's an effort to build a broad-based movement, and it's very much needed now. Out of that has come a certain positioning around the marriage chaos (laughs) that we're in — to try to understand that in terms of the right and to understand that in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality, to understand that, as I think I said earlier, a small portion of this is about marriage and a very large portion of this is about the definition of family. And then to try to help people to think through what it means to be — for the left or for progressive — we don't have language any more for who we are — but to be funded through 501C3s.

Well, I started in the early '90s asking the question, can you build a movement, a real, deep social change movement on the back of a 501C3? And I think the answer to that is no. And then Incite!, the great women of color group against violence against women did a conference called The Revolution Will Not Be Funded. We talked about that at

some length for several days. But I think that what that has done, this non-profit sector that's been created is extraordinary competition. So instead of building connections and building movement we're fighting for these crumbs of money. It's also created the kind of control of our issues and the boundaries of how far we move toward the edge of change. And it's given tremendous tax breaks to wealthy individuals who, if we had the right taxation system, that money would be in our tax base and we would all be funded to have health care and those kinds of things. And it's more complex than that, but those are the basic things — I think we have been very, very hampered by this — that we have been changed into people who are professionalized as organizers and as staff members of organizations. The organizations are very institutionalized and we do far more service delivery.

ANDERSON: How would you raise money then?

PHARR: We'd raise it from individuals. We had a labor movement that wasn't a 501C3 movement. We would raise it through people who cared about the issues. We would have to figure that out. It would not be easy. We're in a tough situation, I think, because of it. But if you talk to almost anybody at this point who works in a non-profit, they will tell you that they are not at the cutting edge of social change, that they spend huge amounts of their time writing grants and chasing money and trying to accommodate funders. And this is not to denigrate funders — I think people like the Funding Exchange try very, very hard to do social justice funding and to do that in a very democratic kind of way. But they're about this big (gestures one inch) compared to the world of philanthropy. So that's been one of the efforts that I've been working on over the years.

And another one is — started out the battered women's movement where we moved from a social change movement to a very professionalized movement, very connected with the justice department, very centrist and very service delivery — to see if we could shift that to connecting organizing and service delivery. It's kind of a very long-range goal, but I think it's that we have to have both, and that we sort of move to either/or or, once the money started coming out of the government, moved in a certain –

ANDERSON: You're right.

PHARR: – certain professionalized way that has not ended violence against women. It has put enormous amount of money into education, into service delivery, and we have just as many women –

ANDERSON: So you're working with a local organization in terms of that stuff, or that's a national –

PHARR: Uh-huh. Yeah, it's national. I did a workshop on it at an NCADV conference some years ago and had so much interest in it that I've been following up with the groups that have had interest. So, to finish this up?

ANDERSON: Well, we have to get you back to the South, first.

PHARR: Yeah, I have to get you back to the South. That's to finish this up. (laughter) So when my friend Ann died in 1996, I began looking south again, because I love the South. It was so much my home. I love the terrain of the South, I love the smells of the South. I know where my work is in the South always, because we have such big and pretty clear issues. And so I started — I was on the board of the Highlander Center, at that time –

ANDERSON: From Oregon?

PHARR: Mm-hmm. And I was also working still with the Women's Project. I was just a staff member in Oregon. So I started looking — every time I would come to a Highlander board meeting, I would look for land somewhere in east Tennessee or North Carolina. During that time, my beloved uncle and aunt had a terrible accident and my partner and I decided we would move south right away in order to be with them, and we moved to Florida for a year. At the end of that time, after they recovered their health — they were in their late eighties, early nineties — the director of Highlander left and they needed an interim director, and the Women's Project was, again, willing to put me on loan.

I came to be the interim director and was persuaded by the staff and board to accept the job as director, which was not a job I was seeking and I don't like administrative work. I mean, I have talent for it and can raise money and take care of staff, development, all of those kinds of things, but at the same time I thought, This is a critical institution in the South and the country and in the world — I mean, it's international in so many ways, that this might be the most important work. It also might be important to do what people had always challenged me to do. The Women's Project has that kind of set up where they're paid the same amount of money, they do collective decision making, whatnot. But that's a little group. Can you do it with a big staff? And so I thought it would be good to see whether it could be done with a staff of 17, whether it could be democratized in a deep sense, and also whether it could be brought very much into the twenty-first century with critical issues of the moment. And maybe I was lured a little bit by being the first woman director since 1932.

ANDERSON: And how successful were you on those two fronts, with the staff and with the change in focus?

PHARR: I think I would give myself pretty high marks on both of those. We spent a lot of time thinking and writing about what we were doing and listening to people and shifting and moving to a very strong program on working with immigrants and working with youth and setting up grassroots think tanks so that people could come in and have ways to share ideas that weren't just sitting in academic settings or big think tank settings, so — I'm happy with that. Yeah, I liked that work, and I liked being a lesbian feminist, being out, talking about those issues, being clear about those issues, holding people accountable on race, holding them accountable on gender, holding them accountable on class — I personally, and us collectively, having that high in our consciousness.

ANDERSON: Any resistance to you as a woman or a lesbian director?

20:30

PHARR: Mm-hmm. Some. Not great, but some.

ANDERSON: From the staff, board, or –

PHARR: A little from the staff, a little from the board, little from our constituencies — Highlander has eight constituencies. It's really quite a large organization, in terms of the people it's connected with. Not enough to put any of the impediment in my work. I've had a very fortunate life of people being good to me. I haven't been viciously attacked. And people have been pretty respectful of who I am as a person and what I have to say. I think part comes from the fact of having done on-the-ground work. And people respect local organizers, and it's my favorite work to do.

ANDERSON: Mm-hmm. So how long were you at Highlander?

PHARR: Five years. I went in, said, "I'll give you five years," and I gave them five years, and I said, "Y'all have the longest advance notice." Because I didn't want to do that. I mean, I didn't want to spend — I could still be there, but I didn't want to spend 10, 15 years. Plus, I feel like I love working with young people. I think I told you privately yesterday, I love teenagers. I just always have. I love that sense of rebellion, that sense of discovery and search for self, and the ones that are bad, I really love. So I hope people who don't read this account now send me all their teenagers, (laughs) but —

And I very much believe in a youth movement. I feel that our great movements all were fueled by young people, that high school students and college students — think of the civil rights movement, think of the labor movement, think of the women's movement: we were young. Think of the antiwar movement. We were young, young folks. And I think that we have not done right to young people through this kind of 501C3 and professionalization and institutionalization of our movement. There haven't been the places for young people to enter and to be

treated with great regard and respect and have real tasks and responsibilities, and held accountable.

So one of the things I really want to do — and did at Highlander — was move my gray hair out of the way so someone younger could have that position. I think this would be a great time for Highlander to have a director who's in her or his thirties, rather than mid-sixties. Also think that's a group of people that wasn't given great opportunity to be engaged in so many organizational settings that a lot of us were, in terms of doing on-the-ground work and also growing up through organizations. So there's not a large pool of people who are available in their thirties and early forties to lead organizations right there. There are way more people available who are 45 to 65. And there's a good bit of organizing with people under 25, but there's this middle ground that's, I think, not given the attention and the possibility and opportunity, and had to suffer through Reagan without support. Now suffering through Bush. So –

ANDERSON: Is Highlander a feminist organization?

PHARR: I think so. I think so. It's had great feminist leadership, and one of the great feminists who led it was John Gaventa — he and his wife, strong, strong feminists. He was director and she worked on the staff. But the founder of Highlander was not a feminist, Myles Horton, and it harmed, I think, its work. The only time I ever met him, he and I went eyeball to eyeball with that issue, sitting at a table at Highlander. I was going through with a friend and wanted to visit there. It was 1981 or 1980, I guess, and he asked me what I did. He was always great about engaging people in what they did, and I talked to him about it, and he was disparaging. And I was really challenging as well. I said, "So you've missed an entire movement. You've missed an entire movement of great possibility, and now you're missing the LGBT movement, and because of this tight focus on economics and thinking of those issues and related only economically and —"

There are always lots of women working at Highlander, but it was not a feminist organization. I think John Gaventa helped to move it in that direction, so that left some real opening. And it was moved on the LGBT front by one of the staff members, Nina Reining, who came there off of — she was, I guess, part of a union strike, came off the line to Highlander as a cook, and raised her children there. She's the person who's been there the longest. She's now been there probably 26, 27 years. Her son is gay and she raised that child there and pushed the staff, with support from other people and from me and from others on the board, to be a more open place, and that also helped to open the door for me to be there as an out lesbian.

ANDERSON: So what's next for you, then?

PHARR: Well, I don't know. Because I'm 66, people assumed that when I left Highlander it was to retirement. I can't even imagine retirement. I come from that political generation that our political work is our life, our life is our political work. What would you retire from? There's some really critical issues that I want to work with. I want to do organizing in the South. I'm about to start to work with Southerners on New Ground, half-time, but working very specifically around building and developing young people, people of color, rural people — doing some work with people of faith who have liberation theology in their world faith view, trying to lift up organizing that's broad based — work with young, white, antiracist workers.

ANDERSON: All in a half-time job.

PHARR: All in a half-time job. I'm thinking about starting a blog. You know, I don't know. I don't know beans about doing one, but people have thought that might be a good idea. I'd like to write, but I don't want to write in a way that you're seeking publication, or I don't think I want to write another book, but I wouldn't mind writing a short piece every day. I have a lot of things that I think about all the time, and I think with other people about it. And I think if I could be what I think of myself as, as a writer — as a writer, I think of myself as a translator, that taking much larger and much more complex ideas and putting them in language that George Orwell would say that you could see through. That was my goal.

If I could write that language, if I could take complex concepts and complex language — I really dislike the language of the university right now. I find it so detached and so separate from people who are living on the ground. When people talk about postmodern this and deconstructing that, I find that language not helpful. In fact, I find it harmful. It makes me feel like we need to go back to Berkeley of the '60s and do a little revolt around language. That's what I would like to do. That's what I tried to do in the homophobia book, was take what's complex — or *In the Time of the Right* — take what's complex and put it in language that I understand, that my family understands, that my neighbors understand, that the people I organize with understand. Most of it's translation for me, you know, but then it becomes –

ANDERSON: Well, it's the only way –

29:58

PHARR: – translation for others.

ANDERSON: – to come up with strategy. If you keep it at this level of conversation that is so inaccessible and so obtuse, there's no way to then distill out of that a plan of action, and because you're an organizer and because one of the gifts that both your books offer to the movement is, what do we do, that also seems like it necessitated the using of pretty straightforward –

PHARR: Yeah. And I want to do on-the-ground work, local organizing, or support people doing local organizing around the South, because I think one of our great failures is that we don't have a constituency. We have organizations that have paid staff members without constituencies of people who are changing and moving and engaged. I feel like our work now needs to be to always thinking — what is that [phrase]? There's something local –

ANDERSON: Think global, act local.

PHARR: Act local, think globally — I think that's how we should be now. I think that we should be doing local work, but thinking about how we're connected internationally, and make those relationships international. I think we have a great obligation to people in other countries to do resistance in the belly of the beast, even more than we do to male models of liberation. I think they're great models of liberation, out in the rest of the world, and that we can follow a lot of those. I mean, we can create new models ourselves, but I think we can follow those. But I think we need to do resistance because we have that obligation, and as we sit inside this world power that's doing extraordinary harm worldwide. Not just the war, but in our movements around NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] and CAFTA [Central American Free Trade Agreement], and it goes on and on and on.

I think there's enormous amounts of work available for us now. And you know I have high energy for that work. I love it, and I'm lucky to sort of have in my DNA from my family this kind of physical capacity to work hard. My family's the sort that falls down dead in the fields. (laughs) They do work as long as they absolutely possibly can. My parents ended up in nursing homes because of some conditions that happened to them, but, I mean, nobody knew what retirement was. It was not part of their lives, and that's probably why we live to our nineties. I don't know.

ANDERSON: Since you sort of entered social change work through the women's movement, I'm interested in hearing some of your reflections in terms of where the women's movement has come, from your vision of it, and what was possible for it 30-some years ago and the movement that it is today. How would you assess its trajectory compared to what its roots were when you got involved? And do you find any hope in what the women's movement or feminists are talking about and working towards these days?

PHARR: You know, I guess I have some longing for people to still use the word feminist, and who don't. I feel like the attacks the right made against the women's movement were very successful and very strategic. Through talk shows, through all of those academic articles, through that constant press, that barrage, of taking it down, of creating women's groups to

attack it — and I feel in young women a great desire to be strong, and to be in charge of their bodies and to be able to be independent. But I feel it's unorganized. I guess that would be the strongest feeling about it — but just such, such vigor and such energy and kind of in your face, don't mess with me. I mean, some are young girls in gangs. Some are young lesbians in bars.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

PHARR: Even among my great nieces and nephews that have been engaged in church-related work, where they're very organized, more evangelical, even in them I find this, despite their yielding to all the abstinence stuff, that underneath that there's this great current of sexuality and a desire to be strong.

ANDERSON: And the women's movement gave that to them.

PHARR: And the women's movement gave that to them. I think our problem now is, How do we capture imagination in organizing? One of the places where I think it's such a huge battleground — and I don't know who all's fighting it or how successful the fight is, and I myself am not in an organized way engaged in this — is this whole abstinence movement and the losses that we have suffered around sex education. I don't know how we can ever maintain reproductive rights if we don't have sex education. Everything is in this continuum, and I don't think we have that. I don't know if you saw any of the billboards in town. There are lots of them about abstinence, and it's pretty staggering. It's very, very strong in the South, as it is all over the country. We don't have those spaces for young people to have those conversations here, since it's taken out of so many of the classrooms, and then you have faulty information given to them through the abstinence programs.

So I think in all of that there's lots of potential in it as well. Now, I don't think we could pull together 10,000 or 20,000 young people the way the Pope can. When the other Pope came to Colorado, you've got all these zillion young people who show up, but I think we can offer tremendous opportunities for people to think about the ownership of their bodies, building on that sense of, I want to be in charge of my life. I think that's the capturing the imagination.

The young women that I know who name themselves as feminists are fierce. I think in many ways they're more fierce than I ever was. So I like that. I really like that. I like that. They'll just get right up in your face and talk. I like how fluid they are in their sexuality. I'm regretful for them that they are not in a movement surrounding them to get them enormous breathing space, but I think they're a movement of themselves in some way. I think a lot of the trans movement is complex. And for me, things have to be complex in order to be a movement. You can't just be one simple, single-issue thing very easily. It has complexities to it.

I'm regretful that I don't have a sense of feminism [today] in an organized way. I think other places may, maybe in academia, where you have a women's studies class or two. I don't know. But I don't think on the community level — there's not that organizational sense of where you can go and where you can be. Probably the closest to it is a battered women's shelter, and that will tell you how small that is.

ANDERSON: Right.

PHARR: So I have one other thing to say, in terms of what I would like to do. I'm very taken by people right now in the antiracist community, people of color in particular, who are working on greater study and understanding of the speeches of King's last two years of writings and speeches, and the whole notion of how to build beloved community. When I think about resistance and vision, I think we probably are going to have to go back to pick up pieces from that, and particularly to pick up, not so much the tactics of the civil rights movement, because I think we've used those over and over and over again and some of them no longer serve us, but the spirit of being new human beings — the transformative spirit — and to develop a more prophetic vision. 39:17

I don't think movements are going to come out of the organizations we have now. I think it'll come out of creating small spaces where great conversations and intellectual activity and art and then action occurs. And then those will begin to flow and create cultural change. One of the things that could be a cradle for that is this idea of beloved community that is infused, not with mushiness and not just with religiosity, but with a combination of politics, sort of the combination of, at its best, of mind, body, and spirit, and how we might create for ourselves new ways of living and new ways of being with one another, and new ways of accessing our full humanity. Is that probably enough?

ANDERSON: That's probably — yeah. That's a very eloquent ending statement. I think we'll just turn it off there.

PHARR: OK.

END TAPE 5

END OF INTERVIEW

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