# Voices of Feminism Oral History Project

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

# SUZANNE PHARR

Interviewed by

KELLY ANDERSON

June 28 and 29, 2005
Knoxville, TN

This interview was made possible
with generous support from the Ford Foundation.

Narrator

The youngest of eight children, Suzanne Pharr (b. 1939) was raised in Lawrenceville, GA. A self-described "white, queer, southern, anti-racist worker," Pharr has been a social justice organizer since the 1960s. She was the editor of the women's newspaper *Distaff*, co-founder of the first domestic violence shelter in Arkansas, and founder of the Women's Project in Little Rock, AR. Pharr was the first female executive director of the Highlander Research and Education Center.

In addition to her organizing work, Pharr is an accomplished public intellectual and writer. She is the author of two books: *In the Time of the Right: Reflections on Liberation* (1996) and *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (1988). She currently resides in Knoxville, TN and is working on a new project with Southerners on New Ground.

Interviewer

Kelly Anderson (b.1969) is an educator, historian, and community activist. She has an M.A. in women's history from Sarah Lawrence College and is a Ph.D. candidate in U.S. history at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Abstract

In this oral history Pharr recalls her childhood in Hog Mountain, Georgia. She explores the nuances of class, race and gender in white rural and working-class communities across the South. Pharr describes her introduction to the civil rights movement during college and her discovery of the women's movement and lesbian community. Her interview is particularly strong on the connections between anti-racist and feminist work, the anti-violence movement, and the politics of sexuality within the women's movement.



Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Five 60-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Jessica Hitch. Audited for accuracy by Kate Mitchell and edited for clarity by Revan Schendler. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Suzanne Pharr.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

**Bibliography:** Pharr, Suzanne. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Video recording, June 28 and 29, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Suzanne Pharr, interview by Kelly Anderson, video recording, June 28, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

**Bibliography:** Pharr, Suzanne. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Transcript of video recording, June 28 and 29, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Suzanne Pharr, interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, June 28, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23–24.

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Transcript of interview conducted June 28 – 29, 2005, with:

SUZANNE PHARR
Knoxville, Tennessee

by: KELLY ANDERSON

ANDERSON: So, this is Kelly Anderson and Suzanne Pharr, and we're at her home in Knoxville, Tennessee, doing an interview for the Voices of Feminism Project with the Sophia Smith Collection. And it's June 28th. OK. So we're going to start by talking about your family background. I mean, as I told you, this is meant to be a full-life history – 00:17

PHARR: Right.

ANDERSON: – versus just your experience in the women's movement. So let's talk about both sides. Tell me what you know about your mother's family and your father's family, as far back as you have information about them.

PHARR: So, I come from two large families. My mother's family had seven children. She was the third girl of six girls and one son. And they were Irish, Irish Protestant, a certain kind of Southern — it was kind of Scotch-Irish. People might call themselves Irish, but they were a mixture of British Isles folks. And they came from very poor roots, where they worked hard, worked on little farms. My grandfather did odds and ends. He drove a wagon for Coca-Cola, he ran a little bakery. Today he would be considered a ne'er-do-well, in that he never made lots of money. I adored him. He was just the joy of my life, which is, I think, such a statement of what success is. Is success having made lots of money or is success having your grandchildren think you're just the best thing that was ever created on earth, that you gave those children joy?

ANDERSON: What are your specific memories of him? Why did you love him so much?

PHARR: He always talked with me — well, one, he adored me. That's always a good thing. (laughs) But he talked with me in this particular, personal, sort of peer level. He was a little man with asthma and had what's called a pigeon chest, so he had none of the attributes that you think of for what we're supposed to admire in big men, men with power, men with

great physical strength. He was a small man, pigeon-chested, and he would come to see me, or my family — of course, I was a little kid: I thought he came to see me. And he would tell stories, and in the South we live for stories. Stories are probably the most important things in our lives, in every kind of way. And he made up stories about animals, and one of my greatest loves also was animals. We would go fishing, and he and I would sit on a creek bank, and he would talk about what we saw, or he wouldn't talk much — or he would talk, always making up stories about things. I think I was so fully recognized by him, which is what everyone wants. Everyone wants that full recognition of who they are as a human being and a full recognition of their humanity.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

PHARR: I think that's what social justice work is based on. My grandmother was a recluse, which may sound a little bit odd since she had seven children, but she basically didn't leave her home. She kept a pad by her bed and would awaken in the night and write poems, and she worked on those poems in the day time and once a week she wrote a little newspaper article for the local paper, and so she was a poet. And she published — one of her children, her son, published a little volume of hers. Great poetry? No. But interesting commentary from the poetry and interesting commentary from those little articles of a very, very fine mind.

I think maybe she had had minimal elementary education — studied what everyone used to study from, I think it was called *McDuffy's Reader*. And she loved words. She loved language. And she loved the natural world. And she was closer to my sisters than to I, because they were much older, but there are memories of her walking through the woods and having her identify flowers in the few times that she would get away from home.

So they were interesting people. My grandfather didn't read [much.] My grandmother read, she wrote poetry, and she never worked outside the home. She was a worker in the home, raising these children.

PHARR: And where did they live? I mean, what region did they settle in?

ANDERSON: They lived in a little town called Elberton, Georgia, and lived in a tiny little house. I don't think my brothers and sisters and I know whether they ever owned it or not. My grandfather was a huge gardener. That was his passion, to have a very large vegetable garden. That's one of my great loves, so that comes to me from both sides of my family. So that's my mother's family. They were the Irish of the sort that loved to tell big stories, close to lies. They loved to sing and have fun and laugh outrageously. If you put them on the temperature range, they had a very warm temperature. Women were all sort of slightly round-bodied, and short, (laughs) short like myself, and had great fun — great, great fun. My mother had a harder life than some of the others did, which I will talk about later, but they always had this great humor.

And then my father's family, also Scotch-Irish, had very cool temperatures — farmers, highly, highly, highly regarded in their community. My grandfather Pharr was — I think of him like Job, a righteous and upright man. How righteous he was, I don't know, but that was my sense of him as a child. I was nine when he died. But his affect was of someone who wore white working pants and a white working shirt, did not tolerate any profanity, did not tolerate injustice, did not tolerate laziness, lack of cleanliness — who sort of kept his family with, as they say, with an iron hand. And I don't know where or how he was educated, but was a very big reader. All of the people in that family read tremendously.

My mother married into that family. They all lived on this farm, my grandfather and several of his sons who helped him farm. So she moves from a little town out into the country, where she's accustomed to — this is 1919 — and she's accustomed to running around with her friends, and she's also worked very hard. Her mother had an accident where she tipped boiling lard off the stove onto her legs, which took the meat — the flesh — off, down to the bone, and my mother became the person who provided all the care for the family. So she had already had great responsibility.

So she marries into this family where — she's accustomed, though, to this work, but also this great fun and laughter, and they had this very cool intellectual temperature. Their idea of fun on a Sunday afternoon was to sit on the front porch and read. (laughs) Her idea of fun — I guess in 1919 — her idea of fun was to get into an old car or wagon, buggy, go somewhere, do something. And so she raises, gives birth to her first seven children, all except for me, on that farm. She told stories of when her first child came that thunderstorms would come and she would be so terrified she would take my sister in her arms and run to the fields [to find my father.]

But she learned how you work, in a particular kind of way, from my [paternal] grandmother, who was a very, very sweet woman, very loving. [She was] known all of her life for never saying anything unkind about anyone. You have these simple stories about people's lives. Well, she was known as someone whose central story was that when someone near her was commenting about someone who was really a rough character in our community — someone I think who had done great wrong, maybe crime, I don't know — she said, "But you know, he was quite a beautiful baby." And so I think that was the defining story of her character and personality. That was that family. In that family there were four boys, four girls, and then my mother and dad had four boys and four girls.

11:07

ANDERSON: What did your father's father do for work — farming?

PHARR: He was a farmer. He dabbled a little bit in real estate. He went down to Florida for that land bubble. I don't know quite how that happened. Came back, had a farm of some size. I think it was about 300 acres,

which today is not very much, but I think at that time it was. And they all worked on it. They all worked like dogs.

ANDERSON: All eight of the kids? The women, too?

PHARR: Yeah. I mean, it was in the times where everything was done by hand; you made all the clothes, you washed by hand, you made butter by hand — same as in my childhood. My family lived the same way all the way up into the ’50s. There was this huge, huge work ethic that you work hard, you go to church, you try to be as upright as you can. And of course everybody had their wild side except — let me just say, some of the children, (laughs) certainly in my family they all had a little bit of that. I don’t know so much about them, but every family has its stories. But they raised cotton. They raised corn, they raised wheat, they raised beans, that kind of thing. And then they produced everything that they ate within the family. An aunt of mine lost her husband. She became the person that did all the cooking, caring. She took in sewing.

ANDERSON: What was your dad’s mother like?

PHARR: She was the one whose central story was that of never saying anything bad of anyone. My memory of her is of sort of a sensual sweetness, kindness. Of course, as a child, I thought she was old. She was probably about my age, (laughs) as I am now, but I thought she was quite ancient. And when we would go to visit her, she would take us into the yard and hold our hands and walk and talk about what flowers were blooming. She had these sort of marvelous — in the South, we didn’t call them flower gardens. We called them your yard. “You should really go see Granny’s yard.” It’s really great, where she planted rows and rows of jonquils, and somebody brought her this kind of rose and she had stuck it over here and they had no shape or form to them. It was just banks of different kinds of flowers that, as she would say, “I stuck in the ground.” And they were quite beautiful. She sewed, and she would knit, and all of those women did a lot of handcrafts. They knew how to do a number of things, and they were, I don’t know, ten miles or so from the nearest doctor, maybe more.

So my mother — I don’t know if she ever had a doctor in attendance with any of the children being born. We were all born in our parents’ bed. That’s the reason when I tell people I’ve never been in a hospital, as a patient, they say, Well, certainly you were born in one, and [I say,] No, I haven’t (laughs) from day one. I mean, that’s my good luck. It’s my great gift in life. They had pretty tough lives, but good lives, I think.

ANDERSON: So when you say it was cool, in terms of temperature, it was very –

PHARR: Inte llectual.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

PHARR: And emotional. They didn't display very many emotions.

ANDERSON: OK.

PHARR: In fact, it's been interesting me all of my life to see kind of the juncture in myself between those two families of, on the one hand, being reserved as my father's family is and then on the other hand, having this slightly outrageous side where I love to laugh and carry on. But probably the reserved part and the being private part — that takes a little bit larger play. But it's always been this kind of conjunction of fun and expressiveness, and actually being somewhat introverted and reserved — which also, I think, speaks to living a little bit of a contradiction all of my adult life, of choosing a public life when I'm a private person. Making speeches as a great part of my life when I hate to be on stage. I hate to be the focus of people's attention. It comes out of that flow from those two families, I believe.

16:20

ANDERSON: Yeah. So how did your parents meet, then?

PHARR: Hmm. I think through — people visited back and forth a lot. They lived a considerable ways away from one another, but there was some way of visiting. I don't know if somebody in my mother's family was teaching school in the town where my grandparents lived. My grandparents were very engaged in school and church, as were my parents, and so they would board teachers, and they were always engaged in how the school was working. At one point, long before I was born, they gave a piece of land to build a school on their property, out in the country. They had this great sort of sense of community engagement. I grew up with a very strong belief that you are engaged in that community, that you and it are one, not that you are this community over here, and you're over here, that it is your life and you're just engaged in it. So I don't know. I know that there was some. I've heard the story, but I can't recall the story of how. Somehow they met through visiting.

ANDERSON: And then married and your mom moved to your father's family farm.

PHARR: They courted by buggy over this long distance, and my dad would drive over and visit her. My grandmother used to tell the story of how handsome he was and how he would come and my mother would not be there, and he would be sitting on the porch with his brown eyes flashing, and of course we as children loved that, because he was so reserved. (laughs) It was delightful to think of his brown eyes flashing. I would've liked to see that, because to think of my father with sexuality (laughs) –

ANDERSON: Well, they had eight children.

PHARR: Right.

ANDERSON: So what were the years like, do you think, when they lived with your grandparents? What are your mom's stories or your siblings' recollections about living in that home? Since you weren't born there –

PHARR: No, they had a separate home on that farm.

ANDERSON: OK.

PHARR: Yeah, they had a separate home there. I think they remember working hard. They worked very hard. My older sister, who is now 84, told me just recently that they felt like they were probably not much enjoyed by my grandparents — not that they disliked them, but they had a cool temperature. It wasn't like, Oh, come in! Let's eat. If you went to my maternal grandparents it was, What can I serve you? — and that was not the case with my father's parents. But she said they used to go down to their house all the time and get their books and lie on the floor and read their books, and that was close by. And they remember my grandfather's kind of uprightness, and their love of my grandmother. But they talk a lot about what fun they had with themselves, and they tell great stories about that, but in particular they talk about how much work there was to do.

ANDERSON: Were they the only children living there? Did other siblings marry and settle on the farm, too?

PHARR: I think there were two other children living there, but they were the primary children, and so they were out in the fields. And in my family you start to work as soon as you can carry water. You have these little jobs that you do immediately. You get three, four years old — as soon as you can do this little thing.

ANDERSON: What were your jobs?

PHARR: Well, I started by carrying water to the people working in the fields. I brought in, I guess what would be pronounced stove wood, but we always called it "stow wood," which is the wood you cooked in the kitchen stove, not the kind that's used in the fireplace. I cared for the chickens, the hens. I was the person who fed them and brought in the eggs. And you know, you graduate.

ANDERSON: Yeah. Those were your youngest jobs, then?

PHARR: Yeah. You take a little can of kerosene and pick bugs off the potato and tomato plants and drop them in the kerosene. One of the central stories about me and my childhood is the brother just older than I am being afraid to go into the barn loft to throw the hay down for the mules, and so I would have to go because he was afraid of things like that, and I

was — yeah, I was who I am. I was fearless then. I don't know why. Who knows why that happens. I always say I turned him into a Republican anti-feminist. (laughs) I don't know. I don't think I made him love women. (laughs)

So I go with my sisters and my mother — it was a big thing at that time — I go with them to Rich's in Atlanta. It was a very big thing to go into Atlanta to shop — wasn't something you did very often, and you dressed up for it, and that was true for all of the South. Atlanta was this Mecca. One of the stories was, I was in an elevator with my mother and I guess one of my sisters and several women in their fur coats. And I look at my mother and I say, "What are we going to do? I'm not at home. Who will feed the mules tonight?" (laughs) This is very big in the family history. And my mother's [horrified], of course. This little child who's exposed to these people — abusive child labor is happening in her home! (laughs) [It was also a horror over the revelation of her class status.]

ANDERSON: So how far would you have been from Atlanta then?

PHARR: Somewhere between 35 and 40 miles.

23:00

ANDERSON: Yeah.

PHARR: Yeah. It was considered a big trip.

ANDERSON: Yeah, sure. So why did your parents move off the family farm and into their own –

PHARR: Well, they didn't do it very fast. My grandfather, I think, for being so authoritarian, and for that farm being so complete — it had a cotton gin — it really was quite the place in terms of putting together what you needed to have for a farm. I think they were reluctant to pull away from him. So my dad was 45 when they moved. They moved the year I was born, 1939, and my mother was 39, I guess. Waited quite a while, and they bought this little farm, little 80-acre farm, 85-acre [farm], about 20 miles away.

ANDERSON: So a totally new community then, 20 miles [away].

PHARR: Yeah. New community.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

PHARR: And who knows? My mother may have just said, you know, Cecil, it is time to move. We need to have a life of our own.

ANDERSON: Yeah. Right. Right.

PHARR: You know?

ANDERSON: Yep. So what did they grow on their own farm?

PHARR: People call it either a dirt farm or truck farming later on, and they started out by plowing with mules — all the ways that you see in those old pictures of the South — and plowed with mules up through the ’50s. And they did small crops. Some cotton for awhile but that was never very much of an income. We raised butterbeans — what might be known to you as lima beans — for a long time. Took them to the market. Raised a lot of wheat and corn. A little bit of cattle. Mostly raising our own food and enough to sell a little and barter some. It was pretty low income. You’ll hear, I guess, other people in the South say this who grew up in this particular way — we did not have the sense that we were poor. And I don’t say that out of some denial of poverty. We certainly were poor and when I wanted to go to college. I tried to get my dad to sign the papers for student loans and I couldn’t get him to do it.

ANDERSON: Because he didn’t support you going to school, or was that about –

PHARR: No, no. Because of, I think, shame around the amount of money that he made.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

PHARR: And I finally got him to sign them, and that year he had netted six hundred dollars — that’s 1957. My mother –

ANDERSON: Yeah. They owned the farm that you moved to?

PHARR: Yeah. I think they paid it off 30 years later. You know, it didn’t cost very much, and then up in the ’50s they began raising chickens — had these small, not very large, poultry houses when that first started in the country, before there was Tyson and all the big, big, big companies. Was still under the same system, where you raise for a company and you make very little. And all of us worked in the fields. Both my parents were working night and day. They just worked so very hard. Sometimes I feel like they wore their bodies out.

My mother, for example, had a very large garden. My dad would plow it and she would raise it. She raised that garden. She canned all that we ate. She made all the clothes that we wore. She did all the washing. She did all the housecleaning. She did all of the care for the yard. She was responsible primarily for all of us kids getting all of our work done. She was also the disciplinarian in my family, because I think sometimes children who grow up under fairly authoritarian parents don’t like to do discipline. They either mimic that or they go the other way and say, Uh-uh, I’m not –

So my dad — he modeled behavior for us and gave us tremendous values. Always said to us very, very clearly that character is the most important thing. That what you wear does not matter, that what your character is and how you express that character through behavior is the most important thing. And it's the way he lived his life. He was a very, very honorable, respected man. She was constantly working. She took in sewing. She sold butter and eggs. Just for these little bits of money. She would make the butter for us — this was hand churning — and then she would sell the remainder of it.

But in all of that, we had the most wonderful food. I think when you've really experienced poverty, it's when you can't have enough to eat and when your shelter is so inadequate. That's when you [know] in sort of your deepest sense that we are so poor. Not just when you can't buy something that you yearn [for] — and we had those things. We had adequate shelter. We had that land. We had food. It was very different from urban poverty, when you don't have the option of growing that food or being in control of your shelter unless you have the right amount of money to pay for it, often where you might be homeless.

So while it was poverty, it wasn't poverty on that level — I think it's dishonest to sort of talk about poverty in one's childhood when you've had so much good, in terms of the basic needs of life. And we had those. Could they buy everything they wanted and needed? No. Did they have to watch every penny that went out? Yes. Was that hard? Absolutely. But had all these other great things, which also may have seemed a bit greater from the standpoint of a child than it did for the parents, who were having to worry about [money], and who were having to have anxiety about it.

I got from them a great big work ethic. (laughs) I like to work. It gives me tremendous pleasure. My family, sitting in a room, looks for something to do — we'd look for something to do with our hands and we always don't know what to do with our hands because we want to pick up something and work on it. We're in three states, I guess. We're either looking for something to do with our hands or we're reading. And we'll often be in each other's company and reading. That's how we are with one another. Or we're telling stories.

31:09

ANDERSON: What was your relationship with your siblings like, as a child?

PHARR: There's a huge span of age. My oldest sister was, I guess, 18 when I was born, so I have three older sisters and then four brothers. It took me a very long time to understand this, but my family used to always introduce us by saying — and then my siblings, as well as my parents — There are three girls, four boys, and Suzanne. (laughs) We always laughed about it. After awhile it became clear to me that that was true, (laughs) that they had three girls, four boys, and whatever, whoever, this is.

ANDERSON: That's interesting.

PHARR: Yeah. You know, because families have these ways of — especially if they have lots of joking and talking — these ways of signaling things. But it took me forever, despite being in the women's movement, despite all these things to think, Well, yeah, that's right. And now, they get that as well, what they had said, and so there's much laughter every time they say it.

ANDERSON: So it was really just you and the boys in terms of –

PHARR: Yeah.

ANDERSON: – the kids closest to your age and that you played with and –

PHARR: Basically grew up with the boys, but didn't play with them much. I mostly played alone and with my animals. The boys were there. They played with each other. I played some with the brother just next to me. But as I said, we had that little bit of conflict about my being this kind of tough customer, (laughs) and my sisters were what used to be known in the '40s as working girls, which is different from what is meant now, but that meant that you went off, you got a secretarial course or you got a little bit of college or some kind of training, and you went to Atlanta and you worked as a secretary or in some position. And then you lived in a boarding house, and you went out, and if you could — once the war was over, you got your nylons and you'd get your manicure, your fingernails –

ANDERSON: Right.

PHARR: You know, all of that. Working girls. It was something to aspire to. When you go home, it's that period between being at home and getting married and when you're kind of free and –

ANDERSON: It was very glamorous.

PHARR: It was glamorous, yeah. And no matter what level of the income scale you were, it was glamorous. I was talking with a couple of African American friends of mine the other day and they were talking about when they were working girls and they went to New York and what fun they had. And I said, you know, "What kind of income were you on?" And they said, "Not much." And I said, "That sounds like what my white sisters were." They didn't have much income, but they were free — it's just, add a little glamour to it. You followed fashion the best you could, and some people [could] go buy their outfits, but you go home and imitate them and make them. And so they would –

ANDERSON: And so they lived in Atlanta and would come back on weekends or something.

PHARR: They would come back to the farm, and that was always a big thrill to me as a little bitty girl, because they opened up a suitcase and they would have something like Lifesavers for me. So that was a big deal. And I got to go to Atlanta and visit them, and that was very big stuff, because I just thought they were glamorous beyond anything. Now, I don't know how glamorous they thought they were, but I thought they were really glamorous.

But there's a piece in this that I've left out which is probably the most central, core moment for my family. After they moved to this little farm up in Hog Mountain, they had been there I guess, two years. I think I was just about two. My grandfather, besides having a farm he owned a mill. It was a grist mill. It's the kind of mill where farmers take their corn and have it ground, and you have a mill pond with what's called a race that shoots the water into a very, very large wheel that turns — it's stone machinery inside — inside the mill. Very old. It had been in our family a hundred years. And so my grandfather ran it. As these farmers would come and bring that corn, he would keep a portion of it. Then he sold that and that's how he made part of his living.

And there had been a very, very terrible ice storm at that time — we have ice storms in Georgia, but really it's only occasionally we have these really bad ones, and almost never get snow. This is northeast of Atlanta, towards the mountains, kind of in the rolling hills where you could see the Blue Ridge off in the distance. My dad went up with two of my brothers to take a load of corn to be ground, and when he got there the wheel was frozen. And so he said to my grandfather that he would go out and chip the ice off the wheel, so he went out and was chipping the ice and my understanding is the wheel was turned on. And my grandfather, who was pretty deaf — I mean, seriously hearing impaired — couldn't hear my dad screaming.

A local teacher that my family loved — he and his wife both taught us— had one of those moments that you hardly know what to make of, but people talk about them all the time, where he had this deep sense that he should go down there. He went down there and found my dad on this wheel, turning. And so he took him off the wheel. And my brothers, who were quite small at the time, tell the story that they knew that something very terrible had happened, because my grandfather said, "Oh, my God." And that, in our family, was profanity. I mean, you didn't use anything in vain. You couldn't say darn. My grandfather was really quite stiff on that.

They went by my mother's house, where I was just this little baby, and my mother was down across the dirt road helping a woman give birth to her baby. They drive up with my dad in the back seat. He's cut from here to here, from one side of his neck to the other. His ribs are crushed. His leg is broken. Maybe his pelvis, I don't remember. And they take him to the local doctor, which is six miles away, and he says, "All I can do is patch you up." And my mother is in the back seat of the car with my dad's head in her lap, bleeding, blood everywhere. And so

they put him in the ambulance and — he was a veteran from the First World War — they take him to the VA hospital in Atlanta, and they say, We don't think he's going to live — that his lungs are crushed and he's in such terrible shape.

39:24

She stays there at his side for six weeks, waiting for him to die, or live, but with basically the prognosis being that he would die. My sister comes home, and there are two of them who come home to take care [of us] — so we're basically taken care of by my sisters. And then my dad comes home from the hospital and he has a huge recovery. He can't farm. My mother, during that time, takes my brothers — my oldest brother would've been maybe 12 or 13 — to the fields and farms. And does the cooking. And does the canning. And does the washing.

When you think about women and women's work and women's lives, she didn't have that role in society as being seen as someone with full authority and full capacity, because no woman did, but there she is, carrying on that farm and sustaining it during that time with what knowledge she has and these young boys to work with her. And I think it's really quite an extraordinary story.

My dad, because he couldn't farm, took a job in the saw mill. He was disabled in a particular way, because when he was at the VA they thought that if they set his leg, that it would just kill him, that he was so fragile. They hung this weight on the end of it, to stretch it out, which basically cut through his Achilles heel. So thereafter he not only had a leg that was shorter than the other, he had a hole in his ankle — in his heel — that every day bled. One of my memories of my father is his walking with a limp, and coming in every night and washing his wound and dressing it, and the next day going to the field.

After he stopped working at the saw mill and went back to the fields — working in fields that are plowed rows, where he's walking on uneven ground like this, and still walking, and still working from six o'clock in the morning till six or seven at night. When I say work ethic [this is what I mean]— and these are the same two people who, then on Saturday, went to the church and cleaned the church, and on Sunday brought the preacher home and fed the preacher.

When I went to my dad's funeral — at funerals you always have these moments of revelation, sometimes good and sometimes bad, and one of several for me at that time was when someone who I thought I had never seen who came up and said, "You know, you look just like your dad." And he said, "From what I hear from you, you're just like him." And I said, "I don't know what you mean." He said, "Well, you know, when the church would be just faltering, your dad would walk across the fields to house after house and get 50 cents from them to keep it going." And he said, "Ain't that what you do?" And I said, "A little like that, yeah." So our family in great ways is shaped by that accident that hits him at age — I guess he's 47 at the time. He ends up eventually in his seventies having his leg amputated, because it becomes cancerous. But the shaping of what they could do and not do came out of that accident in that mill.

Just for an interesting jump to the future and how the South has gone under the bulldozer: after my grandfather had the mill, my Uncle George, who was the youngest person in that family — I have several men that I adore (laughs) that are family members. I have men that are not family members that I love, but these are men who just had extraordinary meaning in my life. My Uncle George was one of them. And he was my dad's youngest brother. He worked at the mill, and then, I guess in the early sixties, I-85 was placed right beside it. He was a man of great individuality and independence, and he said he didn't want to live that close to a freeway, so he sold the land. The mill went out of our family for the first time in however many years — a hundred-something years. Now, built all around that is the Mall of Georgia. And real estate there runs for sometimes two million and sometimes three million an acre. My family farm is only five miles, I guess, from that Mall of Georgia. And as the emblem — [the Mall's] symbol — outside it are mill wheels.

ANDERSON: Are both those farms still in your family?

PHARR: No, just the one that I grew up on. The other one –

ANDERSON: Yeah. OK.

PHARR: – is now resting under a Home Depot and a little mini strip mall.

ANDERSON: Right.

PHARR: My Uncle George moved to Florida, and he died this last year at age 95, and one of the things he said many times to me over the last years was, "I think every footprint I made in Gwinnett County has been wiped out." That's sort of the story of the South, the sprawl from Atlanta and from development, so that farms don't exist. My oldest brother owns half the farm that I grew up on.

ANDERSON: Including the house?

PHARR: Uh-huh.

ANDERSON: And he lives there?

PHARR: The house that I grew up in has been torn down. My mother had fulfilled a dream and they sold half the farm and built a red brick house that she lived in for the last ten years of her life, which was a really big thing. But he's there.

ANDERSON: So.

PHARR: So anyway, [how] did I get along in my childhood? I had many mothers: two of my sisters — my sister Virginia, my sister Phyllis [acted as parents to us younger children.] When my mother had my brother and me, she was not in good health — I think from working so hard and having already had six children — and so each of them sort of took one of us on to raise. And so I had my mother Peggy and my mother Virginia. Both my parents have been dead since 1982, but I'm in this very odd position where, in most political gatherings, I'm either the oldest or close to the oldest in the room. I go back to Georgia (laughs) and I am the baby forever and ever. I will never be anything but the [baby] sister — I mean, they'll even say, So, don't you think you should do something a little different with your hair? I'll have it spiked or something, and they'll say, I don't know, if you grew it a little longer and just put a little color in it. (laughter) They have to warn me about Medicare. All of my business is their business. It's very funny.

ANDERSON: So tell me about school for you guys. Did you go to school, and starting what age, and what was it like?

PHARR: I went to school at age six. There was no kindergarten. I went to school out in the country, a little school house through eighth grade called Sunny Hill. It wasn't much education. I was dying to go — already knew how to read and all of that, and so I couldn't wait to get there, because I thought it'd be great to be around other kids. I really didn't have anyone to play with, and I was kind of a loner. So I liked the social aspect of it. I had great fun.

I remember I got spanked the very first day for talking so much because I was so excited to be with all those people. You had to put your hands out and get beaten with rulers. It was all still into physical punishment of children. But we were taught by wives of farmers who had had a year or two of college. It wasn't much those first eight years — I'd say it was pretty hit and miss. I had one teacher I thought was quite wonderful. But I was saved by coming from this family that read. I mean, what we did, every night, was my mother sat on her chair and sewed. My dad sat on a chair and read, and my brothers and I lay on the floor and read. That's what we did every night.

ANDERSON: Don't you write about the bookmobile, the traveling — and that's how you got books? 50:05

PHARR: Yeah, the bookmobile came by with this little skinny, skinny woman, Hazel Baleu, who drove it. And I met it and I would get stacks of books. I still — every Friday, I go to the library. I bring back a stack of books. That [traveling library] was a great gift, and people in our families that had a little bit more money than my parents would give us magazine subscriptions. Some of the worst fights I had as a child were fighting to get the *Saturday Evening Post*. I remember we had all these little rules

among my siblings, because there weren't always enough chairs to go around. If you got up and didn't say, "Nobody take my place," then anybody could get it. I mean, there were all these little rituals and rules — so if you had the *Saturday Evening Post* you had to say certain things to keep in it in your hands. And if someone took it, it was a vicious fight. That was good. And then the people who owned the saw mill where my dad worked for awhile gave us books.

And so there was always something around, and this bookmobile was a great thing to come out on that little country road. I can smell it today. The books were so old. The books I had in school were old second-hand, third-hand books. I don't know where they came from, and the trays we ate off were those leftover from the Second World War, and we were still eating the commodities left over from the Second World War. I remember it with great pleasure, though.

I played lots with boys. I played with both girls and boys. If anybody had a little car, we'd play forever on these [dirt banks] — we had no playground equipment. We had a ball and a bat that we could play softball with. We had no swings, anything like that. We had this [red clay] playground. So we would run. The girls would make hopscotch squares and the boys would play with these little cars, and I spent a lot of time playing with those little cars. Then in sixth grade I started playing basketball, which was my life. That was on a dirt court at that school. Several of us were really good and really bonded with each other.

Then I went from there into high school, and the three of us went right into playing high school basketball, which gave us kind of an entrée into high school, which was in town — which we wouldn't have had otherwise. We would've had much more struggle. There wasn't as much education in the area. It was pretty limited.

ANDERSON: Yeah. I loved reading your anecdote about the *Reader's Digest*, and that was the –

PHARR: Yeah. I don't know if they put it out anymore.

ANDERSON: – substance of your –

PHARR: [Instead of studying literature and grammar, we studied the Reader's Digest] educational supplement. But at home I was reading everything I got my hands on. And still do. I mean, it's true of my family. They can't sit in a room like this and not pick something up. If it has print on it, it's going to come up before their faces pretty, pretty fast. And so I think that was a huge, huge gift, that gift of reading. I don't know what my life would've been like otherwise. But I worked all during that time. I worked in the fields. It was very hard to play basketball because I was six miles out of town and had to figure out how to get rides. The girls in town could –

ANDERSON: Right.

PHARR: – they could play and walk home.

ANDERSON: Right. Right.

PHARR: And so we were always trying to find rides — my brothers — one was working at General Motors, and I would often wait until he came and he could take me on home. And then to get to the games — all of that was complicated. But I loved it. I don't have very many complaints about my childhood –

ANDERSON: It doesn't sound like it.

PHARR: I've worked for years in the women's anti-violence movement, and I've just been in the presence of so many people who have suffered so much in their childhood. Mine was not perfect, but I was so fortunate not to have abusive parents. My mother's theory of relationship was that the parents should put their love for each other first, and their children second. And I remember hearing her advise my Aunt Mary, who married my Uncle George, to do that, she said, "because this is what makes children secure." She said, "It will make you happy, the two of you happy, and it'll make the children feel protected." Where she learned this, I don't know.

ANDERSON: I don't know. It's such a controversial idea right now. I mean, it's –

PHARR: Isn't it controversial?

ANDERSON: Right now.

PHARR: Yeah?

ANDERSON: I mean, there's a lot of debate amongst women particularly right now about which comes first, the husband or the kids.

PHARR: Yeah. I'm not sure she said it in terms of putting her husband first, but to put that relationship first. And it was true for us. Now, would we maybe have loved a little more attention sometimes? I don't know. But we also were kids who didn't want to be around adults.

ANDERSON: Right.

PHARR: Our idea of a horrible time was a Sunday afternoon when adults would come and visit and then we'd sit in the living room. The last we wanted to do was be in there. We had to be called in. We hoped they would bring children with them, and then if they didn't, we were all out [of there, playing elsewhere.]

Let me just say one other thing about my mother and her hard work and her taking my brothers to the fields. One of the statements she made — I think it's a strong statement related to how we've come to understand women and how we've come to understand feminism, and she used to say, "If I had a choice — if I had life to go over and were given a choice, I would be a man." Now this is a working woman who [was happily married.] She didn't finish high school because she came out of high school to care for her mother when she had that terrible burn, and what she so clearly meant by that [statement] had nothing to do with sexuality. What she meant about that was that she would have some authority and power. But she said it dozens and dozens of times, that if she could have it all over — and it was one of her not teasing times.

But she also used to tease. I would say to her, "Oh. You had a lot of children. So, did you decide to have this many children, or how many would you really preferred to have had?" And she'd always just look at me and say, "Four." (laughter) That's something to me. That's why I don't know whether it was true or not, but she would always laugh, because it meant I wouldn't be there.

ANDERSON: Right. That's interesting. Alright. We're going to have to pause right there.

PHARR: OK.

57:48

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

ANDERSON: OK. Why don't you just go back a little bit? I want to get to the sexuality piece in this segment, but I also want to talk about race and sort of the demographic makeup of the region that you were living in, your town, your school, the conversations that you had in your family about race and your understanding of it as a young person. So, tell me how — just when I throw out that big, large, contested word, what comes to mind from your childhood?

PHARR: Well, my childhood was a little different from, probably, some of the Southerners that you've interviewed in that I grew up in a white community. I don't know that I was around any African Americans except when I went to town and I saw people. I didn't actually have experiences with them. We were enough northeast of Atlanta — there was a small black community, but it hadn't been the place of slavery, and so there was a different number. I was aware that this part of town existed, but I wasn't aware of anything except hearing what people said, things like, Don't put that money in your mouth because someone — they didn't say black, but Nigra— may have had it in their hands: those racist things that you almost didn't even note as part of consciousness. [This is one story of my lack of race consciousness and unexamined privilege. I hope it shows that people can change, regardless of where they begin.]

ANDERSON: It was just in the air?

PHARR: It was just in the air. It was just like someone saying [about] this white guy who used to walk by our house all time, that he's an old drunkard — these things that I would, as a child, would hear, but not have the full consciousness of what they meant. Also knew that on the farm that my grandfather had that there was a black family that lived there that worked for him. And so, they had all these pictures of him, [a black farmer] — particularly with my older sister, and the family with her, and this relationship they seemed to have. I've heard stories about what they said and what they did, and all of those sounded like folk stories. On the one hand, someone would be reading me Uncle Remus stories. On the other hand I would hear about this family that lived on that farm. My dad and mother lived on a farm, that family lived on a farm, my Uncle George and his new wife lived on the farm, and then my grandfather –

ANDERSON: So it was like a tenant farming situation, relationship, no?

PHARR: No, I think they just were provided housing and paid rather than actually having their own land and raising it. I think they were hired help, which is basically what my father was. As I understand it, he did not get a share of the profits. He simply got some sort of –

ANDERSON: Right. Right.

PHARR: – pay. Makes me wish now I'd found all that out of how did he get money from my grandfather to raise us — at that time, seven children. For the longest time, I didn't know anything much. Of course there were no black children in my school, and even if there'd been integration there wouldn't have been because I was way out in the country. Certainly was nothing taught in the schools. So I had, for someone who lived in the deep South, limited experience. I began to, in the late '40s — or probably it isn't the late '40s, probably closer up into the '50s — began, of course, to hear all the rumblings of the civil rights movement. The place that that was expressed the most for me was in our church, a little Methodist church that I went to, which had an explosion over it when there wasn't even a black person knocking at the door to integrate. But the church split.

ANDERSON: How so?

PHARR: Over whether we would allow –

ANDERSON: Uh-huh. So it was just –

PHARR: It was theoretical, I guess. (laughs) But yeah, I guess the times themselves were so intense.

ANDERSON: Yeah. And where did your parents fall on that spectrum, in the church?

PHARR: My father fell on the states' rights side, so the conversations at our dinner table were always placed out as, People should not be told what they have to do; I've always been good to black people. The framing was constantly the same: I would never do harm, but people should not be told what to do. I think that was probably a lot of framing for people who considered themselves kind of church folks, I don't know.

ANDERSON: Which is most of the South, right?

PHARR: Right (laughter). Right. Exactly. And so, he was not an integrationist. They were — I remember that we had some heated, heated arguments about what all of that meant, but I just didn't have political consciousness. I just didn't have it.

ANDERSON: Yeah. How did your parents vote?

PHARR: Yellow dog Democrats, yeah — until Goldwater. And then I think my dad — of course they would never tell — but I think he began voting Republican. I know a couple of my brothers did.

ANDERSON: So they voted for FDR? They were in Roosevelt's corner?

PHARR: Oh, yeah. When Roosevelt died, my parents cried. They were not crying people. I saw my dad cry twice, once when FDR died and once when his own father died.

ANDERSON: He was probably the only president you both would've agreed on, right?

PHARR: Probably. (laughs) Probably.

ANDERSON: You would've cried, too, if you had known.

PHARR: Probably.

ANDERSON: Did your mom vote? Did she?

PHARR: Oh, yeah, absolutely. And she was quite engaged in church. She was a community person, on top of all that work, you know. You know how class is so weird? Like right now, the majority of the country defines itself as middle class. You can make 20,000 dollars a year and you can make 250,000 dollars a year and you think of yourself as middle class. And it's one of the ways that has been a great organizing tool for the right and the conservatives, is to get lower-income people to identify with higher-income people and think that their issues are the same, thinking that Wal-Mart, that business, is the same as your little storefront.

Your class identification is kind of odd — in the South, class identification often went this way: People who were the lowest were black, then there were poor white trash, and then there were the clean, equally poor people, who [called themselves] lower-middle class, who would never call themselves lower-class, because lower-class meant basically just poor white trash. Poor white trash meant that you didn't go to church. You had maybe shady morals, whether you did or not, and you didn't keep your place clean, your kids and your place clean. I thought that was (laughs) –

ANDERSON: It's pretty straightforward.

PHARR: – that was it. (laughs) You just knew. It was there. My family, I think, if you had asked them, probably would've thought they were lower-middle class. And I told you what my dad made. So were they? Were they not? What was it?

ANDERSON: I guess they owned property and they had white-skin privilege.

PHARR: They had a farm, they had white-skin privilege, and they went to church, and my dad was a trustee at the school. They were elected local people. They always had this role in the community. My mother was

part of the WSCS, Women's Society of Christian Service at the church, and she had leadership in that, and then she was part of the — what do they call that? It's an arm of the agricultural department, anyway, where they teach homemakers all these skills.

ANDERSON: Like the extension and stuff?

PHARR: Yeah. [Home Demonstration Club] And so she was part of all of that. We were in 4-H club and we didn't have two nickels to rub together. [Yet it was important to me that we were separate from poor white trash.]

ANDERSON: Right. Right.

PHARR: I mean, she made everything I wore all the way through graduate school. She made my brother's pants when he was going to Georgia Tech on the co-op system. So I don't know where class is, but back to race.

I think that being out in that white farm community, we just didn't have that [same consciousness,] so I think I grew up with the same racial prejudices that everybody grew up with with similar inexperience to me. Maybe people grew up with some different ones who actually lived among African Americans, I don't know. But I think for me, I think mine were probably pretty standard, that these are the standard prejudices [of white privilege and ignorance]: these were people that might need to be free someday, but they're not capable of being free, or have to be brought along, or all of that. And also that sense of superiority, that sense of, Well, clearly, white people know what to do, because haven't we created this world? That we were clearly more skilled, more civilized, I mean, all of those things. It wasn't until I went to college that I saw the Klan.

ANDERSON: So you didn't have any awareness of Klan or Citizen Council activity growing up?

PHARR: I'm sure it was there, but I didn't have any awareness of. But you know, I was off in my own little –

10:42

ANDERSON: Yeah. It doesn't sound like –

PHARR: Who knows what that little world was. I was either on the farm, working in the fields and playing with my animals. Animals were central to my life. A couple of years ago, my older sister — you know how when you get over 80, in my family at least, and most the families I know, people tend to start taking the things you gave them and giving them back and separating out their stuff and getting ready for passage.

And she gave me two sheets of paper that were the first drawings I ever did, and my mother had sent them to her. And they're on front and

back. It was one picture after another of things like the cat in the barn loft with her kittens, the pig and its babies, the chickens eating little worms, pictures of snakes, pictures of a mule with the bridle on it, pictures of the dog. Mother had written around all of them describing what each of them was, because each of them was a part of our life. And I looked at it, and for what it's worth — a couple years of therapy — I looked and I realized, it's still who I am. There was not a human being in those pictures. So as this child, I lived with a tremendous internal life, which I still have — a very strong internal life. And in relationship with animals, both domestic and animals we raised to eat. I used to sit in the woods and lure squirrels and rabbits to me and that kind of thing. So I had this sort of intense relationship. This is the fourth generation of rat terriers named Jiggs in my life. I think I was in that internal world, and then I played basketball and I was in that teenage self-absorbed world –

ANDERSON: And still all white?

PHARR: All white, yeah. I had the opportunity to be in sort of whiteness, I don't think it ever occurred to me that there was anything I should do in terms of being in relationship with people who lived in this little section of town I went to once a week. Then I ended up going to school [in that town, but absolutely segregated.]

ANDERSON: And then what happened when the *Brown* decision came down? You were still in school then? Yeah, you were in high school.

PHARR: Oh, yeah. That was my high school years.

ANDERSON: So, tell me about that.

PHARR: I heard very little about it. There was controversy at my dinner table about it, in my family, but other than that it was not discussed in our school. You know how today, if you had a social studies course and something like that came down, you'd be talking about it. Not us. We had a teacher sitting in the front of the room reading from an old textbook, every day. There was no sense of, Here's something that happened that is threatening to us.

I knew that the Klan was around, though. And the way I knew the Klan existed was occasionally on your windshield or somewhere on your car would be a piece of paper, which would be propaganda from them. I remember having once thought while I was in high school, Well, I wonder if my dad's a member — because you didn't know. You didn't know.

ANDERSON: Yeah. What do you think now, in hindsight?

PHARR: I don't know. I don't know. He would never have told. It would seem shocking to me if he were. It would also seem complicated. It's sort of

like I can't imagine my dad ever being able to kind of slip out to do the things that they did. We always knew were he was, we thought. He and my mother went places. He didn't go places on his own.

ANDERSON: Right. Right.

PHARR: And I've had people ask me, Did your father ever have affairs, or your mother? I say, Well, who would they have had them with? (laughter) I don't know. They went to church together. They went to meetings together. They went to town together. We lived way out in the country on this little farm. I'm sure it could've been possible, but it wasn't in my little teenage pea brain, (laughs) though. I was too busy trying to figure out myself, I think, my sexuality and how to be a better basketball player.

ANDERSON: Yeah, let's go back and talk about sexuality a bit. You've written that that was — it sounds like it's something that you knew about yourself at a fundamental level, that you were somehow different. So describe those early feelings of difference, from your peers and your family. And is that one of the reasons that you think that human relationships were more complicated for you and you preferred the world of animals? Do you think sexuality played a role in that?

PHARR: Mm- mm. Mm-mm.

ANDERSON: No?

PHARR: I don't — well –

ANDERSON: In terms of feeling like a loner. You've described feeling like kind of a loner.

PHARR: I think it's a family trait. (laughs) I do. We're all pretty eccentric and we're very self-reliant. We're as happy when we're alone as we are with people. In fact, most of us are happier. And we like solitude. That's what we like. I have a great uncle that I've never met whose name was Shea. My father's side of the family came from Ireland, I guess in the 1700s — so we're told. I don't know if that's true or not. So they have names like Shea. People used to say when I was a child, You're just like your great uncle Shea. And he had a wife and a number of children, and he would load a bag, one of those big cloth bags, full of books and go off into the woods and stay for a month or two, and then come back. It wasn't very reputable, but –

ANDERSON: You don't know how the wife felt about it.

PHARR: No. Oh, I can imagine. (laughter) I can imagine.

ANDERSON: It's romantic on the one side –

PHARR: I mean, it's not a very attractive story, except for the idea of reading. In my days of following Henry David Thoreau, it was a little more attractive than not. I didn't have a consciousness that I was separate because of my sexuality. I certainly knew as a child that I was very attracted to girls and boys.

ANDERSON: Both?

PHARR: Mm-hmm. I knew that from the time I went to school. I think I knew — see, I didn't know any of the language. I've written about that some. I had never heard the word homosexual. Of course I had never heard of the word gay or lesbian. I never heard the word queer. I hadn't even heard the epithets. But I think I knew enough not to let anybody know that I was attracted to girls and messing around with girls. But I didn't do the boy part as a cover. First, second, third grade I just played with these little boys and hugged on them. Whatever anybody was doing, I was. What I knew and I didn't understand was gender, more than sexuality.

Sexuality is such a different thing, as I understand now. It's certainly possible to be attracted to males and females. I never thought myself to be a bisexual, but I have often thought, and I've talked many times with many different people about this: if the world were free, if there were no constraints, I think sexuality would be very fluid. It's pretty fluid now, but it's secret. You know, except for people who are willing to try to go more public. I don't even know if we would have any of the categories we have now. I don't know if there'd be such a thing as gay and lesbian or bi and trans. People would be sexual. I don't think we can even envision that. We don't have a language to talk about it. It's a big thing to imagine, what that would be like. Gender and gender roles put such pressure on sexuality, so that you get those exclusively. I knew that gender wasn't quite right with me. I knew that earlier –

ANDERSON: Right. Three girls, four boys, and Suzanne. That was pretty – 20:48

PHARR: Exactly. (laughter)

ANDERSON: Everybody knew that the gender wasn't quite right with you, it seems like.

PHARR: Before I went to school I was begging for my next door neighbor's boy's hand-me-downs. We all had hand-me-downs, and I didn't have sisters to hand them down. They had little girls that could have them, that were friends. But I wore his clothes lots and lots and lots. My father was always fine with me working in the way a boy would work, and I basically did a boy and eventually a man's work on the farm.

When he, after my freshman year in college, had to have his disc operated on, his back [was injured] from this uneven walking, I ran our farm for the summer. We had two houses of chickens. I ran the tractor. I did everything. I went to the farmers' market in Atlanta. I carried a gun with me. This was 1958.

ANDERSON: Why the gun?

PHARR: Because it was dangerous and I was by myself. Had to go out in a pickup truck full of butterbeans and sell them, and my uncle said, "You should take my gun." So I took his gun. And back in that time I also used to hunt. That was the first time where I'd ever been in relation to a gun where I thought it would be for self-defense. We had a houseful of guns. Nobody ever talked about them or used them in that way. We never locked our house. They all hunted. My brothers hunted. I hunted. I know there's a very changed world around that, but it was very much a part of the culture I grew up in. And then, you know, now, in my adult life: I've been in situations far, far more dangerous than that, and I would never have — well, I say never — I don't have a gun and I don't believe in keeping guns.

Anyway, so I ran the farm. I would go to the hospital and take instructions from him and go home and do them. It was tremendous physical work, and I was very strong physically. And he couldn't stand it. He just couldn't stand it that I was a woman doing that. And often when I was in high school, I would be doing some job that would be particularly a hard job, and he was always [saying], "Girls shouldn't do that." And I was doing it and it needed to be done. He struggled on that, and my mother and I struggled mightily on gender. But I didn't understand that. I thought we were struggling, probably, on sexuality. This whole movement around gender has been very helpful to me.

ANDERSON: So what were some of your struggles with your mom about gender? Was it dress, or the hair –

PHARR: Oh, I'd say a starter would be (laughs) that she used to make all my clothes and I didn't want her to make me all these little dresses. I wore my hair as she wanted me to, down to my shoulders, and she plaited it each day. Then in the third grade, I came home — did two things that were very bad. One, was I took her sewing scissors, which you never use on hair, and went out in the yard and cut all of my hair off. I mean, all of it off. So, the punishment: she took me to the barber. How happy was I? (laughs) That would be one of them. I had asked her if she would cut it and she'd say no.

ANDERSON: Wow.

PHARR: It was longer than yours. I just came home, I cut it off.

ANDERSON: That's so much courage for a — you were eight or –

PHARR: I've always been so rebellious. I think it's the basis of my social change work that I rebelled against all authority from the time — in the same year, they showed us in school some kind of little film. They used to bring occasional films, and this was on the crucifixion of Christ. It wasn't such a big subject back then in the '40s about whether you had religion at school. So here we are — we played every day, you know. We did all this stuff. Sang church songs, did it all. (laughs) You can see what a great effect it had on me. I saw that film and it had all of the crosses and the great thunder and this and that. So I go home. I just go up to my mother and I say, "That couldn't have happened. There is no way that could've happened." She says to me, "I don't want ever to hear you again, 'I doubt Jesus. And I doubt God.' Never." Of course, you know where that sent me. (laughs) Lost it all right there. (laughs) It was like, Uh-uh, I don't believe this. This is phony. It's made up.

That's off the gender thing, but that would be the kind of gender battle. When I got in college, it was interesting. We didn't wear pants to school or to college. She was making my skirts, and I asked her if she would put pockets down on them just above my knees, where, if you put your hands down, they would be almost all the way down. She did that. I have a picture of myself somewhere here with these pockets way down. Nobody had pockets down on their skirts like that. So she made that effort. She struggled with me on the sewing to make these things — she made me some real femme things and I have pictures of myself in those, that I wore because she made them for me. I did a lot of things to compromise with her because — we all rebelled against her because she was the person who had to discipline us.

It was those kinds of battles. More around clothes and the fact that — I didn't have this as a conscious concept, I don't think, but I was so determined to be free. I was so determined to be. It both terrified her and excited her, I think. I went to a workshop once by that great theater group, At the Foot of the Mountain.

ANDERSON: I don't know that one.

PHARR: Oh, they were from Minnesota, I believe, a great feminist theater group, really worth doing a little research on. They worked with a whole group of women where they wrote the plays, and then they would do workshops and they would really get inside it. They were doing this play on their mothers and un-mothers. I think we were at that national music festival that used to be in Indiana, [at] Indiana University. They were doing this workshop, and they had us do a session in it where we entered the bodies of our mothers, starting with our feet and going on up, and then we were to imagine in our minds the place that we most often saw her. And then to think about being in that body, what those feet were feeling like, those breasts, or whatever — wherever she was.

Mine, it was washing dishes. Then they led us to this point where we were in the bodies of our mothers reflecting on us as their child.

Well, the whole room just boo-hooed. Everybody just cried and cried and cried and cried and cried. But for me — and I was in my thirties at least, maybe forties — it was such a revelation of why my mother had been so fearful about my doing so many things. She was so terrified I would be harmed. It wasn't just about her and wanting me to be a lady or that kind of thing, that she was in such clarity, thinking back over her [life, saying] "If I could be born differently, I'd be a man." To think about the things that she'd wished I wouldn't have done, that I just had to do. I think when I picked up and went to New Zealand –

ANDERSON: (coughs) Excuse me.

PHARR: – she was horrified of that idea. (pause in tape)

30:32

ANDERSON: OK, back on. Sorry to have interrupted like that. Before I turned it off, you were talking about how your mom was so afraid of you going to New Zealand.

PHARR: Uh-huh. And my brothers were. One of my brothers took me to one side and said, "The only thing that I'm really worried about is that you don't have enough fear. You know, I don't want you to take chances." And I heard that from him. But I don't think I realized that my mother — I thought maybe that she was wanting to box my life in, whereas I think she was just so desperate — one, she wanted to live through me, because she would have loved to have traveled and done those things and she did have her life kind of boxed in, and the other was that she was just terrified. When I talk about her being the disciplinarian — me and my brothers, we weren't very disciplined. We worked hard, but we basically just ran free. We ran free in our play. We ran free when we dated. We didn't have a time set when we had to be home. We didn't have lectures about how we were going to behave or –

ANDERSON: Yeah. Did they treat you differently, in terms of the boys and girls, with that stuff — different expectations?

PHARR: Yeah, for sure. My mother was endlessly worried about pregnancy and that kind of thing with her girls, and always said that it's way easier to raise a boy than to raise a girl, and clearly that's what that's about. Not that boys are these pieces of cake, but it's that whole fear around sex and sexuality and sexual harm, I think.

ANDERSON: Did they talk to you about that stuff?

PHARR: Are you serious? No. (laughter) No, no, no, no.

ANDERSON: So that was just implied but never explicit.

PHARR: They talked a little about the not getting pregnant, but not even preparation for getting your period or anything like that, no.

ANDERSON: But you had older sisters, so probably learned something from them.

PHARR: And I played under the quilting frame where my mother and her friends quilted, so I learned a lot about women and women's ways there as a little, little, bitty girl, because they would do that as a community. They would come and quilt each other's quilts. Spread the frame out and there would be probably six or eight of them around it, all talking. I'd be down by their feet. But also, I think my playing basketball — I was the only one in the family that played basketball. They never came to see me play, so I don't know if they would've known how it was. They were accustomed to me being always strong and very hard-headed and strong-willed and that kind of thing.

ANDERSON: Were you sexually active with girls when you were a teenager, when you were in high school?

PHARR: Mm-hmm. My first real girlfriend was a cheerleader when I was a freshman in high school. I was a basketball player and she was a cheerleader. That's kind of classic, isn't it? (laughter) And then we double dated with the two stars of the football team, and then we would go home at night together, she and I.

ANDERSON: OK. So you had a cover.

PHARR: Uh-huh. We liked them, too, though. We thought they were great guys. (laughs) But yeah, we were the ones in love with each other. Yeah.

ANDERSON: And how did you understand that love at the time?

PHARR: Well, here again, that's where I didn't have language. So you knew, but you didn't tell anybody. You knew that girls could spend the night with each other and boys couldn't, and you're not to let any of that out. That's all we knew. We knew it was illicit.

ANDERSON: And you didn't — did you know anybody else who was doing the same thing?

PHARR: Uh-uh.

ANDERSON: Because you never talked about it, so you –

PHARR: But you know they were. (laughs) I do now. I've met some of my friends who said they were involved with folks in high school, but I

didn't have a clue. I was much more engaged with friends of mine who were getting pregnant and not knowing what in the world they were going to do. Disappearing to go visit their distant aunt — that was in the day of the Florence Crittenden homes and just broken-hearted people.

ANDERSON: Yep. Did you imagine after high school that the two of you could have a life together?

PHARR: It never occurred to me. No. I've been a marriage resister since I was a kid. Now I don't know why, but I've said all the way from the time I was young I would never get married. I still stay with that. (laughs) I'm still holding strong. (laughs) I think I'm going to down with that one. I'm not going to do it. I'm going to take that one to the grave. But I always thought it was a really bad idea. This is before I ever knew anything about anything close to feminism. Yeah.

ANDERSON: So tell me how you ended up in the college that you did.

PHARR: How'd I end up in the college?

ANDERSON: Yeah. You –

PHARR: Being where –

ANDERSON: First of all, was it a given that you would go to college?

PHARR: No, not at all. Being rebellious (laughter) — my high school had its first ever college day — you know these days where you have the colleges come over and talk? It was over at the Methodist church, and I was there with one of my girl buddies, and we thought, this is too boring, and we were going to slip out. Here's living in contradiction again. We were both the bad girls and the good girls in our same bodies. I think many people carry so many different things in their same being.

So we're slipping out the back door and here comes down the stairs from the Sunday school room, what we thought was an old gentleman — again, probably 50 or 60. And he said, "Oh, you were coming up to see me." And we said, Oh, yeah. So we go up, because we couldn't bear to say no to him. And also, we were about to be caught from (laughs) slipping out. And he says, "If you'll come to the women's college" — at that time it was Georgia State College for Women; it changed its name right after we got there — "if you'll come to GSCW" — then in Milledgeville — "I'll give you a scholarship." And it's like a hundred dollars. It sort of entered our minds, Oh, maybe we should do that.

And I had thought before I might go up to North Georgia College, which is this old military college up in the mountains where this boy I was going with was going. My aunts had gone there [to GSCW.] My grandfather on my father's side educated his daughters and not his sons

— very unusual. He said he did it so that they could care for themselves if they didn't have husbands.

ANDERSON: Wow. That's very forward-thinking.

PHARR: And backward, because you have a man like my father who should not have been a farmer. Had such a fine mind. Would've made a great mathematics teacher or history teacher or a pastor, and instead he was kind of a very so-so farmer — struggled to be a farmer. Would've been great if he had educated both. That would've been very forward-thinking, saying that my daughters need an education as much as my sons. But anyway, they had gone there.

So I go home and I tell my mother and she says no. You know, "We can't afford to send you. You should go take a secretarial course and go to Atlanta, and that way you'll meet someone. You can get married." She was very much on you meet somebody nice. It doesn't matter whether you love them or not, you can learn to love them if they're nice, and then you raise a family and you try to move up the class ladder to be middle class. That was pretty much her thing for me. And I said, "No, I think I'm going to do this." That's when I went through the struggle with my dad to get the loans.

So I went to this little college of 600 in Milledgeville. It was a women's college. Set up mostly for the daughters of shopkeepers and farmers, and so it was sort of a lower-middle-class [college]. And most of the faculty was female, of course, lots of it. It came from being the old Georgia Normal that so many places had, where women went to learn to teach or nurse, and then became Georgia State College for women, and then became Georgia College before I left, and now is — no, and then it became the Women's College of Georgia, and now it's Georgia College, which is co-ed. It was filled with these strong women and closeted lesbians. I didn't know that. I had these great English faculty members. I went thinking, Well, I'll major in P.E. I'm a basketball player. Or I'll major in psychology. I didn't have a brain in my head. I'd been kind of a fair student in high school, because I was just bored to tears and mostly got in lots of — I get there and I'm so rebellious that I'm almost thrown out two or three times, and doing –

ANDERSON: For doing what?

PHARR: Oh, talking back. Refusing to do things I'm asked to do. Refusing to fill out forms I'm told to fill out. They made us all do this money class and I was supposed to talk about — this was part of your orientation — to talk about the money your family had and your own personal — and I refused to do it, because I was this country girl. I had all this pride. You didn't do this. Then I'd be sent to the dean and the dean would talk to me and say what I had to do and the rules I had to follow. Then I got involved with a teacher, who was part of the lesbian network there, that

I didn't know was a lesbian. And so everything I did was observed, seen, whatever, and it was indeed –

ANDERSON: How'd you get involved with the teacher? She was one of yours? You were a student in her class?

PHARR: She took me on — I guess, deliberately — as a work/study. I worked as a secretary in the day time and then a waitress at night to go to school, which was, you know, like two hours in the day of secretarial and three hours at night waitressing. She took me on as that and started with flirting. She was in her thirties. I got in this whole life of secrecy and slipping off campus, taking trips. My sister somehow got wind of it, I don't know how. We had a very big blow-up around it. She told me at a family gathering that there wasn't room in the family for me. There were some rough spots like that, but it was interesting. There were lots of lesbians on that campus, but nobody was open. I didn't even get a –

ANDERSON: Well, what years is this?

PHARR: Fifty-seven through '61, so you're kind of making your way through this and that –

ANDERSON: Yeah.

PHARR: And all of these P.E. teachers, in particular, and some of the English, these women would live together. They had apartments in the dormitories, and they lived together as big old couples. Like my favorite teacher. I just adored this woman. The story that's passed down, class by class, was that she had been so in love with this man and he'd been killed in the Second World War. Well, how many people have told that story? (laughs) Clearly she was involved with this older woman she lived with.

ANDERSON: Right. Right. It sounds like it was somewhat prevalent, the amount of lesbian relationships on campus. So you had a social world.

PHARR: No.

ANDERSON: No, you didn't.

PHARR: No, no. No, I didn't have any social world with lesbians.

ANDERSON: So it was just the two of you in isolation.

PHARR: I had heard the word homosexual then, my first year, when someone called me one, and I was horrified. I also was threatened about it. I got letters that were anonymous letters. I got anonymous letters that threatened my status in school and then I got anonymous letters that

made contributions to me being able to stay in school financially. Never knew who any of them were. I was always feeling like I was within a second of being found out. I finally kind of pulled away — managed to pull away from this one teacher, because she had so much control over my life. She was friends with and socialized with the dean and all these other people, whether they were all lesbian or not, but it was very clear that my well-being was not in my own hands.

ANDERSON: So you managed to end that relationship while you were still a student without any repercussions?

PHARR: Well, no. I didn't get thrown out of school, but it was dicey. It was definitely dicey. So I have a lot of feeling for closeted people. What that made me feel like was I didn't want to be in any relationships with anybody. By then it was increasingly clear to me that I was a lesbian, and I felt like I was so filled with torment and emotion and danger, so I just thought, I'm just not going to do it. I'm not it. I'm not going to do it. Of course that didn't last so long, but it lasted awhile, where I just held myself distant from everybody. I just put my sexuality back in and just held myself distant, which meant distant in every way, because what you give up is being able to be authentic.

So it's this whole different level of being this enormous loss. It's not just you're not out having sex or you're not having a girlfriend. It's that you can't talk about yourself. I added that on top of being fairly reserved. It diminished possibilities for genuine human connection, and it extremely diminished possibilities of real connection with my family, because what did I tell them about my life? I spent years writing them letters. I was really good about communicating with them, but I'd tell them two inches out of a 12-inch day.

I was also in terror during that time. I represented so much, a lot of the hopes and dreams of my family, because I was going to school and I was going to be a university teacher. I got into graduate school. I stood to lose that great big family. I stood to lose that whole farming community. I stood to lose everything that I knew.

That's when I started the practice of keeping 500 miles between me and my family, as a zillion queers in this country do and have done. You miss, then, all of the major events of the family, unless you can travel back there. When you travel back there you're not an intimate, because you can't really talk about your life. And people, I'm sure, kind of know about your life, but they don't know about your life. I would've lost my job in a second.

I come out of there and I teach at a community college, Young Harris, which is a Methodist college. That's after my first year of graduate school. Then I go back to another year of graduate school, come out of that. I finish my master's, come out of that, and teach at a women's college, Mary Washington College. I started teaching at these high danger places. It's a lot of stuff. The story of my twenties is a story of raging everything — raging rage, raging emotions, raging hormones,

raging ideas, activities, and the effort to suppress my authenticity as a lesbian.

ANDERSON: What did your experience at college add to your understanding of sexuality? You said that you learned the word homosexual for the first time because it was used against you, and then you also met women who were older than you who had been living, albeit a closeted one, but life — a queer life, a lesbian life. What new dimension did that add to your understanding of your own sexuality?

49:14

PHARR: Well, it offered a couple of things: possibility — but it also wasn't super attractive, it wasn't as attractive as reading *Leaves of Grass.* Through those experiences, I found literature. I'd read all my life, but I became a student of literature at that time. These teachers were so powerful and so wonderful. They literally just took the world and opened it wide, like this. I went from being this little kid from Hog Mountain, Georgia, who's held together by basketball, to this person that had a sense that there was a world and it was extraordinary. I could travel it through my mind. I could travel it some with my body. It opened up huge possibilities of freedom. And at that time, there was a woman there who was head of the YWCA. Now I don't know why we had a YWCA in that college. I don't know if they had them in all the colleges then, or what. She's the one who moved a lot of us to get involved in civil rights. Her name was Izzie. I can't remember her last name. Wonderful woman. That's when I saw my first Klan march.

Now, I didn't get involved in the way other people did who actually went out and got involved in organizing directly with African Americans, but she organized us through study groups. That's when the state of Georgia was trying to determine whether to integrate schools or just close them down, and Lester Maddox was around and it was a very vicious time. She organized us on the school issue, and so we would go and make testimonials and organize around that. That was another place of really opening the possibility that I knew about organizing efforts through church, but I didn't know about it in this other sense, that she introduced us [to]. We had all these people opening these possibilities. It was electrifying for me. When your mind is electrified at that age, then usually your sexuality's electrified. They're just hand in hand. It's the grand thing about being between 18 and 21. People find that problematic with college students, but it is the most extraordinary time when those things have the good fortune to happen simultaneously. It becomes mind, body, and spirit. Whether you name it [or not] that is all of your emotions and all this intellectual stuff and your hormones and your sexuality on the move.

It was great, but it gave me torment in terms of thinking about my sexuality. I just didn't know where to place it. Where was I going to have a place where I could have those worlds, where I could have this sort of passionate commitment to my mind. I loved teaching. I was just wild about it and knew that I was going to be successful. I had already

had tremendous success with leadership in college and even with my iffy career.

I just couldn't figure out how I was going to put all of those together, and I hated with every fiber of my body having to be dishonest. I was in such conflict, I can't tell you. I hated it with a passion. If there was anything that I held up high, it was this notion of character and integrity that I had gotten from my family, and here was the one issue that made me unable every day to have it. I was in this kind of torment of, How do you fashion a life of integrity when you have this part of your being that is seen as — actually that's not the question. It was, How do you fashion a life of integrity when you can't have your whole life be integrated, really, was the question.

ANDERSON: Was religion a part of the torment for you at this time?

PHARR: The community that I knew that religion was part of, no. I didn't care a hoot. I was actually in mortal combat with God. I was more like the dark sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins. I didn't believe in God and at the same time was in some sort of combat with that, with people, with the notion of God, and felt fiercely about it, was really adamant about it. That community that I so appreciated that had been formed out of the church and I felt that had given me my values: I had some ability to sort my love and appreciation for them and my values and the things that I disliked so much about institutionalized religion and my lack of belief in the actual source of it. I had a huge — probably through my teens and up until early thirties — had real fierce emotions about that.

But the stronger thing was how — I did not know how to be whole, and yet I had such great intellectual passion for wholeness. I read so many different people. I was in love with existentialism. I was a person who prided herself in honesty and lied every day, every day of my life. Either by omission or commission, I lied. And that was just about an unbearable state of being. If I had been in today's culture, I think — in part of today's culture, not the whole culture of the theocratic right and that kind of thing, but of the culture of drugs and alcohol and the way it is today, I probably would've been pretty self-damaging, I think. I don't know what held me back from that. I was like many people of the '60s and '70s in doing some drugs and alcohol but not much — probably because my family not having much of a tradition of being really engaged in that, but I think I was rootless in some way. That here I was, a person with tremendously deep roots. I had deep roots in my family. I had deep roots in my church. I had deep roots in the community that I came from, and felt floating out there somehow in the world because I couldn't put all those things together.

You can see why I write about why coming into the women's movement was more than just, Isn't this great. I mean, it really gave me my life. It was so weird: we talked endlessly about the personal and the political. It just like took my life and said, Here. Here's ways you can be whole. Now that was not without struggle, but to find something that

can make you make sense of yourself and your environment, in a life-saving way, is extraordinary.

ANDERSON: So many people say that, and one of the things that somebody like Minnie Bruce [Pratt] and some others have said — I think Amber Hollibaugh says this too, is that not only does it give you your life and it gives you this freedom and a new way to understand yourself, but it also allows you to go home –

PHARR: That's right. That's right.

ANDERSON: – in a way you couldn't have imagined before. Our hour's up. 59:04

PHARR: OK.

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

ANDERSON: This is day two of interviewing with Suzanne Pharr, and today, as we were just talking about off camera, we're going to really cover your movement into women's liberation and social justice organizing. I guess that starts with your trip to New Zealand. So why don't you talk about why you were — you call it "exiled" — for a couple of years, and what you came back to find.

PHARR: I think the political part started with doing some civil rights work while I was in college, but [I was] still pretty muddy politically — not having this kind of incisive political analysis and direction. But one of the things I was doing — always had instincts towards women's power and women's strength — and one of the things I was doing was that when I went to graduate school, I studied nineteenth-century literature under a particular professor, and I was also studying modern poetry and the novel. I've been terrifically informed by literature. Probably my two major places of learning are from reading novels and direct experience, as opposed to reading nonfiction or studying. Those have been my sources. You're studying nineteenth-century American literature, you're right in the middle of the first wave of the women's movement and you're right in the middle of slavery and the abolitionist movement, and so those informed a lot of my thinking. Then I was teaching in the '60s [at] Mary Washington College, and had a friend there who had come from Vassar and was very sort of tuned into what was happening in terms of feminism and was teaching Betty Freidan's book, which was out at that time. 00:25

There were conversations that were happening at Mary Washington. Of course we were a little bit on the fringe from what you would think of as the mainstream, there. I was being influenced by that and being in yet another women's college, these issues were raising up. I was involved — should we see about that sound (laughs)? (pause in recording)

ANDERSON: Record. Yep. OK, we're back on after rushing Scout to the vet, so we're going to be listening for Scout –

PHARR: Calming ourselves down. (laughs)

ANDERSON: OK. Where were we?

PHARR: I was talking about teaching nineteenth-century –

ANDERSON: That's right.

PHARR: – nineteenth-century literature at Mary Washington. Also involved in antiwar activities. But what led me out of the country was — I had two

reasons. I actually intended to expatriate,— be an expatriate — to New Zealand.

ANDERSON: And why New Zealand?

PHARR: Well, stupid reasons. (laughs) In some ways, my girlfriend and I pulled it out of our ear. We wanted some place that was very far away from home, some place were we could feel a little bit pioneering. Little did we know it was a small England. We were sort of running for our lives in order to be together. We left because [of] our deep upset about the Vietnam War. This whole country was just in a state of destabilization, and we weren't deeply involved in the civil rights movement, we were working on the fringes of it. But the war was there.

But the primary reason was that her father had discovered that she and I were involved with one another and had ripped her out of the school, sent her to another university, put her under psychiatric care, forced her to join a sorority, forbade her to ever see me again. And so we made a run for it, to have different lives. It was the only way that we could see having our lives. That was kind of the beginning to try to move together to try to figure out some way to be totally and clearly a lesbian. It was the first time I had also ever thought about having a life with someone. Before, I had been engaged with people sexually and emotionally, but not in the sense of I was going to have a life with someone. I was very much in love with her, and her with me, and so we did that.

New Zealand's a very insular place, as you would expect. Dr. King was killed and Bobby Kennedy, and it was just too far away for everything. At that time you could, for the same price of ticket, either come back through Hawaii to the U.S. or you could go around the world, as long as you stayed in a forward progression. We did that.

And going to Calcutta was a huge political changing point for me, where I experienced poverty. I thought that people I knew had been poor, and I hadn't really experienced poverty to that level. The combination of Dr. King, Bobby Kennedy, and Calcutta made me feel that I was going to come back and dedicate my life to social change. A great sort of luck or fortune is that I basically stepped off that plane in 1969 into the women's movement. You could feel it before then. I didn't know anything at that point about Stonewall or even shortly thereafter, but I came off that plane with the intention to go to Tulane to finish up my degree.

So I moved to New Orleans. It was like it was in other places, it was just moving through that campus and through that town. And there were these extraordinary women who were engaged in it. As you know from all the histories that you've taken, we were building it out of our own hands. Communication in an age in which there was no Internet and an age in which communication was mostly by newsletters and telephones and written letters — word was just electric and rapid.

I think we were doing the same things that people elsewhere were doing, which is what happens in movements. That communication just flies, you know. So we were creating a women's center. We were creating a women's newspaper. I and another friend created the first consciousness-raising group there. I and three or four other friends created our first women's living collective that we lived in, a housing collective. We began to do street theatre, all of the guerilla theater. We had all of these strategies for change. We were desperately trying to figure out race and class, but constantly in action, constantly in motion.

That for me was an extraordinary time. I think you and I talked about this briefly yesterday off camera: there's nothing like being between the age of 18 and 35 and have the confluence of sexuality and politics. I know people have written about that in the civil rights movement from a more heterosexual point of view, but in this it was women being able to have a place where they could come out and where they could discover their sexuality and discover their politics at the same time, and express their sexuality and express their politics at the same time, and have avenues for expression. So it was a great place.

We had a women's bar, a women's bar and restaurant that was a political place. There were other women's bars, old women's bars, that were there. But there was this new one that a woman named Barbara Scott created, and it was a wonderful, wonderful place. I believe, and I can hardly remember, but I think it was called the Tapestry. People converged on that. We had endless conversations, as you can imagine. The consciousness-raising group I was in was transformative for all of us. We were in it a couple of years together, and that was once a week, talking for about two hours, and –

ANDERSON: You have this very moving piece in your intro to *Homophobia*, talking about that CR group and talking about how you went to a couple of meetings and you weren't out –

PHARR: Right.

ANDERSON: – and it was the first time you said publicly that I'm a lesbian. And I think you say they were all straight women in that group, and you had a really positive, open, embracing response?

PHARR: Well, here I was, one of the people who formed that group, and I kind of mark that moment where I regain my integrity [because], after a couple of meetings, it was very clear that if we were going to talk about our lives, we have to talk about our lives. That for me was the first time ever I had said in a public space, "I am a lesbian." And I did it with trepidation in my heart. Because, as far as I knew, all of these women were heterosexuals, and I knew that I couldn't be authentic and it'd be a meaningless group. Everybody else would be having this experience of telling the truth about their lives, because that's what consciousness-raising groups were all about. They were for many people, for the first

time ever, saying, This is what happened. This is how it felt. This is my experience.

And to understand that the authenticity of one's experience is what gives us genuine politics. If you could get those genuine experiences from a large number of people and if they cut across race and class and age, then we would have a politic that we could live with. It was also in that time when we all began doing hotlines, not just for women to call in to talk about general things, but particularly for violence. And then there was anti-rape work that came out of that. There were tremendous fun things. You know, we used to do guerilla theatre around wedding fairs. I don't know if you know about wedding fairs, but at that time –

ANDERSON: Bridal fairs? 10:55

PHARR: Bridal fairs, that's what they're called — not wedding fairs, bridal fairs. We all dressed up and went out and did street theatre in front of those, and it was great fun and some of it was really fierce like that, really funny. But we were constantly in the streets. And at the end of four years of that, I was exhausted. That's because there were times when — like the newspaper, I would be sort of carrying it on my own back.

ANDERSON: And you were the editor of the newspaper, right?

PHARR: I was. Barbara Scott had started it and I was one of the editors later, yeah.

ANDERSON: And tell me what kind of material — what was in the paper? Can you give me typical columns or editorials?

PHARR: Yeah, you know, I wish I had all those papers. They would make interesting archives. Somebody must have them somewhere. One can only hope. Ti-Grace Atkinson or some of those great people out of New Orleans and out of Louisiana. We covered political issues, you know, issues of violence, issues of rape, those kinds of things. We also covered women's lives. It was much less event coverage than it was thought coverage and kind of internal-change coverage, and then how we could politicize ourselves to take action. It was a good newspaper.

ANDERSON: How about in terms of sexuality and class and race? What do you remember about coverage of lesbians or African Americans?

PHARR: You know, I don't remember much about either. I'm sure if I went back and read them, it'd be way more coverage of lesbians than it would be African Americans, although there was an effort of people trying to figure out how to move in that way, in that way meaning how it would not just be a white women's movement. It would be a movement that was related to and expressive of African American women's lives. And

there were African American women involved, but not in large numbers.

ANDERSON: Was that true for the group?

PHARR: And that was not the fault [of African American women] that was –

ANDERSON: Right. Right. Was that true for the CR group and the living collective, all the other –

PHARR: The CR — all of those were white.

ANDERSON: All of those were white?

PHARR: Yeah. Yeah. That was pretty indicative of the times as well, although there was consciousness around it and discussion, and efforts to create antiracist activities. Consciousness and activities are good, but go only as far as your consciousness goes. If you don't have the full consciousness of equality then you never move to the place where you need to be, because it takes not only the full consciousness of equality, it takes the full consciousness of the inequity of history and figuring out how to overcome that, which I'll talk a little bit about when we talk about the Women's Project.

ANDERSON: One of the things that struck me also about that brief anecdote that you give about coming out to that consciousness-raising group is that their response — I think your line is [that] they say, Tell us what that is like. And so it signifies that that was a very warm and embracing response. That's not typical for a lot of lesbians involved in the early women's movement.

PHARR: No.

ANDERSON: Does that reflect your general experience in those days with the larger women's movement?

PHARR: No. And it doesn't reflect it at all. I've used that many, many times in workshops, when I've worked particularly with parents who say, I just don't know what to say to my child. What would I do if my co-worker says I'm a lesbian? And I just say that, for me, is the best answer you could ever give: Tell me what that's like. That's true for any time that someone's telling you something that you don't know, and is counter to your experience. Instead of saying, Oh my God, or Poor dear, or whatever you're feeling about those things, just gather from them what their humanity is, what their experience is.

But no, because you know the National Organization for Women was then developing, and though it was a cover and it felt in some ways not intentionally a cover, it provided a place where women could go and

come out. It had no room really for open lesbians, and many of us were more or less purged from it at the time. So not everybody was saying, Tell me what your experience is. There was that terror that was running. But, you know, it's also at that time you're beginning, just beginning, to get the development of things like the Moral Majority and Eagle Forum and Concerned Women for America, so there're currents that you're not even aware of that are moving simultaneously.

ANDERSON: Right. Right.

PHARR: So I left there to go to Arkansas. And I went and lived in Arkansas for a summer. This seems to be a little bit of a history of my life. I go for a summer –

ANDERSON: Because?

PHARR: I am tired.

ANDERSON: Why Arkansas?

PHARR: I met a couple of women who had a farm there, and they said, Come spend the summer on our farm — way out in the country, old log house. You'll love it. And I thought, you know, I'm so tired, and really, when you're doing so much activity on so many different levels — also, I'd just been fired for being a lesbian at the school where I taught.

ANDERSON: Oh, well say more about that before you jump into Arkansas then.

PHARR: Oh, OK. Well, I went to Tulane to finish — I was going to finish a Ph.D. I'd been going there in the summers while I was at Mary Washington College, and I got deeply involved in the antiwar movement and was on the streets with that as well as the women's movement, so I had two things going, and they converged. I was constantly on the streets and I felt that what was happening in academia was not where I wanted to be. I didn't think it was as relevant to my life as was great intellectual and physical and emotional activity that was happening in my organizing.

So I took a job at the Country Day School as an English teacher there, and also hired some friends of mine to work there as well from the graduate school. And it was a very privileged sort of place. I don't do very well sometimes with issues of class, so it was a good place for me to learn some things. I was working to organize the faculty and also was out as a lesbian. Those two things didn't combine well for the people in charge there, so they fired me, basically said that I was not appropriate for the school.

So all of that left me — I was pretty tired. So I thought I would go to Arkansas and spend the summer and write the great American novel. I

went to Arkansas, spent the summer, packed up all of my stuff in my VW camper — it was early ’70s — and moved to Arkansas.

ANDERSON: Had your relationship survived? The one that you went to New Zealand — came back with? No.

PHARR: We were in that relationship for about eight years, but it has a longer story. It survived through her death three years ago, in many ways.

ANDERSON: So you were single and going to Arkansas?

PHARR: Right, right — which was a great way to be. (laughs) Much fun. And there was a women’s movement raging there, because it was outside of Fayetteville. It was in the time when women’s culture was rising, rising up. We had the great lesbian migration of people going back and forth across the country. Kent State had happened, and so there was that huge drawback where suddenly people who had been antiwar activists were going back to the land, to try to create another kind of society, you know, trying to figure out some other way to live, and had come to an understanding we had a government that would shoot us. In the place where I lived in Arkansas, there were many of these back-to-the-land communes or collective spaces. And so that was rising.

There were a huge number of collectives in Fayetteville from cross-country women — a women’s trucking collective called the Mother Truckers. (laughs) I loved all these things. There was a pottery collective. There was a women’s health collective. There were just so many things that were happening, and then people who were artists were crossing the country. So you could be in the church basement and we would produce someone like Holly Near or Meg Christian, all these people were passing through and playing or performing for audiences of a hundred, you know, or of 200, of 50 people — very intimate, very political. And those performers were multiracial, so that it was carrying another politic along with that as well. So that was a very exciting time.

But I stayed as kind of a back-to-the-lander for four years, doing political work in Fayetteville, and also doing work against what at that time was called 245D, which is now known as Agent Orange. I went there in ’73, and so Dow Chemical found that Agent Orange — which, we didn’t have that name at all, but 245D — was not needed any longer in Vietnam to defoliate, so it was brought back and sold to farmers in the hills to defoliate mountains so that they could have cattle. People were poor and of course they were eager to do this. There were studies that showed that women were dying. Or, people were dying, but particularly children were being born with great malformations of their bodies. So in very tough circumstances, we fought that, with getting shot at and those kinds of things. We saw it as a huge environmental issue.

ANDERSON: How were you supporting yourself? That doesn’t sound like paid work.

PHARR: (laughs) I was involved for awhile doing the printing for someone, for her etchings, and also did farming with local farmers. I worked with one farmer to raise — I worked on a turkey farm to do cutting brush and fence, that kind of thing. Just a number of things. It didn't cost very much. It didn't cost very much. It was pretty much the old back to the land.

ANDERSON: Yeah. Where were you living?

PHARR: It was outside of Huntsville, Arkansas. Was about four or five miles on 110 acres, I guess, with a big, old log house. And there were six or seven of us at times that would live there and sometimes two or three of us, and people just came through. We were part of this network where people knew that there were folks like us all over the South, and I guess all over the country. And there were women's festivals all around us and we were engaged in those. Then we were engaged in things like, when they were trying to get ready for the International Year of the Woman in Houston, and we were having meetings everywhere in preparation for that. And that's when Phyllis Schlafly starting busing in loads of women to oppose that. It's when the right figured out that the best way to defeat women is to get women to defeat women, just as now they think that the best way to defeat people of color is to get people of color to actively work against people of color and get LGBT folks to actively work against LGBT folks. It's been a very brilliant strategy on their part.

And so we were doing things like going to Little Rock and engaging with the people who were doing the preparation for that meeting, and being very out as lesbians and insisting that we be on the agenda, which was very scary for everybody, because here was Phyllis Schlafly and that crowd and the Moral Majority was rising. Anita Bryant was alive and well and getting out of her orange juice commercials and into anti-gay and lesbian stuff.

So there was lots and lots of activity and somewhere along in that I realized I had to get a job, and so I went into Fayetteville and took a job as director of Head Start, just as a job to put me back into some kind of work where I would be able to have some sort of maneuverability to get other jobs. And I liked that work. I liked that work because it was multiracial. I didn't like the administrative part, but I was able to go in and really work with poor people and poor rural people. That's been a passion of mine, all of my life. And to work with people of color and particularly women of color and their children, and to experience the joy of what can be done through a government program of giving people sort of a chance to even move toward equality. To be able to work on racial issues in an institutional setting and to really push that in settings where people were unaccustomed to talking about any of that. [It was in Head Start that I was able to become an anti-racist activist.] I was targeted for being a lesbian, and I –

ANDERSON: Say more about that.

PHARR: Well, it was a complicated story. It had to do with a former director and jealousy and a number of those things, but it sort of rose up, I think from within the organization to say that I was unfit, even though I wasn't working directly with children, except to –

ANDERSON: And you had always been out there?

PHARR: Yeah. And this was in '77, '78, and I had lots of women coming in and out of my house, and I had lots of political activity, but in the Head Start itself I was an ordinary worker, a hard worker, and carrying that family work ethic. So they campaigned. They actually lifted up a campaign against me and went out into all the Head Start programs in the county and talked with them about the danger of having me engaged, and starting this kind of campaign to get me out of the job. Did things like public hearings where I wasn't allowed to go. There was one great big one — a whole auditorium filled in Fayetteville — of people to talk about, you know, "lesbian danger." And then I had a great number of people who stood in support of me and of the idea that a lesbian can do this work, many heterosexuals — very beloved people who sort of had good politics and knew what to do.

This also coincided with my meeting with a group of 15 people to begin the first battered women's shelter in Arkansas. How are things related, I don't know. But there was political activity. We were starting this volunteer shelter that then became this collective that became one of the great kind of progressive pioneering shelters in the country. And I was the chair of the board and very out in that position. [When I was threatened with being fired,] basically I didn't have any ground to stand on, but I just went to the director of the economic opportunity agency that was the fiscal sponsor of Head Start and said, you know, "I'm willing to go public in every newspaper and magazine and TV station in this state, that I have absolutely nothing to lose. There's no one that I love that won't be spurned by them. That this is an issue of tremendous importance to me and all the people like me, and if I possibly can, I will sue you." Of course I had no legal standing, but I thought I'd say it anyway. I was willing to go really public, and I said, "If you're willing to talk about this publicly and in the secretive way that is so ugly, let's go for it." And they backed off.

28:43

ANDERSON: And so you decided to leave?

PHARR: Yeah, shortly thereafter. I spent a few months so it wouldn't be that this pushed me out. Yeah. But I just decided to go eye-to-eye with them. Who would've thought that Head Start would've been a great place for me? Because I was not an institutional kind of girl. That was an organization that got government grants, and I was so anti-government. I was all of those things from the '60s and '70s, you know. But it

pushed me into other things. I began working as a VISTA [Volunteers in Service to America]. Worked with low-income elderly people doing research about them, which was extraordinary. I loved that. And then, because of the work that I had done with low-income women in particular, which is who you work with the most when you're working with Head Start, and with the battered women's movement — that battered women's shelter — I could see what a huge need there was in the state for someone to, or some organization, to open up women's issues, so that women could figure out ways to solve them.

So it was through VISTA I had just enough stability in terms of — I don't know what they pay you, $600 a month, I think, is what we got — but enough financial stability and being able to move about in the state. I was able to take the time to think through with people the idea of having this, and then develop this organization, the Women's Project, in Arkansas, which is, I think, probably the best work that I have done, because it was joint work with other people. I mean, I founded it but it was joint work with a lot of people engaged in it, a lot of people talking about it.

As a start, it put as its goal and its mission the elimination of sexism and racism and said that those two are always linked and should never be unlinked, and they are also linked to other oppressions. I was very much influenced by — probably someone that you've interviewed — by Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde, with the work that they had done in the '70s around what was not called the intersection of oppressions then, but was that. And understood that all of these oppressions are linked, and came to understand them much better after I started that work. And then developed the project to try to figure out how you could open up the door with large numbers of women across race and across class, and felt that the way to do that was to take two commonalities, which were violence and economic injustice.

It doesn't sound like economic injustice goes across class, but one of the things I learned in working with battered women is that most women, when they are battered, they lose their economic standing like that. (snaps fingers) Lots of women who are living in positions of wealth understand it's conditional, often, on that relationship, rather than on who they are. I think more so [then] maybe than now, I'm not sure. But those two issues gave us ways to talk to all kinds of people and bring people didn't ordinarily sit down in the same room together to talk.

And so that ran for me, doing that rural work statewide simultaneously with working in the battered women's shelter as the chair of the board and as a volunteer, and doing things like developing that politic, of a collective politic and of analysis, and doing head-on politics like getting the county commissioners to give us a shelter, and having us be lesbian-baited and be able to stand strong in the face of that. Engage people across all kinds of lines. It was really important work. And then that led me into the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, where –

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 movement.the 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

*Transcribed by Jessica Hitch, July 2005*
*Audited and edited by Kate Mitchell and Revan Schendler, November 2005*